

“Spectacular... ?”

Rev. Jayneann McIntosh, Lead Pastor
First United Methodist Church of Wausau, Wisconsin
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1 Kings 19:4-13a

*Elijah has had a very public run-in with Israel's queen, Jezebel.
Fearing for his life, he has fled to Beer-sheba where he left his servant.*

⁴ But he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a solitary broom tree. He asked that he might die: "It is enough; now, O LORD, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors." ⁵ Then he lay down under the broom tree and fell asleep. Suddenly an angel touched him and said to him, "Get up and eat." ⁶ He looked, and there at his head was a cake baked on hot stones, and a jar of water. He ate and drank, and lay down again. ⁷ The angel of the LORD came a second time, touched him, and said, "Get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you." ⁸ He got up, and ate and drank; then he went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights to Horeb the mount of God. ⁹ At that place he came to a cave, and spent the night there.

Then the word of the LORD came to him, saying, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" ¹⁰ He answered, "I have been very zealous for the LORD, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away."

¹¹ He said, "Go out and stand on the mountain before the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by." Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake; ¹² and after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence. ¹³ When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. ...

Elijah is in a bad place. He's worn out. He's so inwardly focused that he's blind to all the good that's he has done. His victory in the previous chapter of the text was astounding. If they had had Marvel comics back then, Elijah would have been a superhero. He was that impressive. He'd scored one for God's team over the Baal worshipers. There had been drought and rain and fire, and the Baal priests had... well, you can read that for yourself later if you want to. God had shown Himself spectacularly, and some of that had reflected on Elijah, after all he was there, God's spokesperson, the big-name prophet of the day.

When King Ahaz reported the news to Queen Jezebel, was she ever angry! "I'm gonna kill him." But if she had really wanted him dead, she could have hired an assassin. After all, she was the queen. Instead her words were more of a vent, likely a literary ploy to explain why Elijah ran.

No one has ever threatened to kill me – that I know of – but I've had strings of bad days, and months. When the projects I'd been working on at work were going well or poorly, I was also trying to keep up with home and family obligations. Then there's making time for God, finding time and energy to exercise, planning meals and eating well... It all just seemed like too much. I'd become overwhelmed. I'd want to shut down and do nothing. I suspect we can all empathize with Elijah. He faced down those Baal priests and God performed gloriously and now he's running away, wanting it all to end.

When my son Jared was little... sometimes he'd have a friend over, or go to their house.

Afterward, he'd crash. He'd go into a mood where nothing would ever be good again. Anything I suggested was dismissed. What he needed was time to process. It showed up as moping and feeling bad. We might wonder if part of what Elijah is feeling is this same kind of letdown. The prophet's been working hard. He's faced those who promoted the popular god of the day and emerged triumphant. It's no wonder he's weary or that he panics at the queen's threat.

A heavenly messenger encourages him to eat and rest. Wouldn't it be great if we all had angels to remind us to do those mundane things we might tend to forget? Or maybe we do; maybe that's what friends and family are for. Anyway, the angel looks after Elijah until he's ready for what's next. Then Elijah hikes to Mt. Sinai – a forty day walk.

This is another of the bible's forty day stories, continuing our series. Last week, we read in Genesis about the forty days and nights of rain that Noah and his family endured. Next week, we'll be reading from Luke's gospel about Jesus' forty day fast before beginning his ministry.

When we're in a forty days experience ourselves, we often find ourselves asking the big questions. Is this what God wants for my life? Is this what I want? If not, what am I willing to do differently? Am I putting my energy and resources into things that are life-affirming? Or am I just coasting through my days?

Elijah would have had similar questions as he headed south. He arrives at Mt. Sinai, then at the right moment, he lays his case before God. And God responds. You can read about that later, too.

The word forty is biblical shorthand for transition. It's a way to remind readers quickly that life changes, often in ways we wished it didn't, and also that we can get through those changes by God's grace. Sometimes forty is a reminder that the bad stuff won't last forever, and that God will stay with us until we come out the other side. Either way, forty reminds us that we have hope.

For many people, hope is something that's in short supply. Looking at what's happening in their lives and in the world around them, they struggle to find hope anywhere. We've always had disease and death. There have always been those who are poor or hungry. Conflict and war seems to have been a constant in the human equation.

The difference, of course, is that now we can know about the genocide or the bombing as it's happening. The good is that these things still make us uncomfortable. The bad is that we don't know what we can do about it. So we end up feeling angry, depressed, or apathetic, none of which help us or the situation.

Hope – the kind we find in the bible, not the “I hope I get a puppy” kind – points to the big picture. Things may be good or bad in our lives, we may struggle to make sense out of the senselessness we find when we look at the actions of our own or other governments, we cry out when we see pictures of children and families in dire need.

But because we trust in our God, we trust that things can be better. And we accept that for things to improve, we all need to do our part. First Church is doing this with the Personal Needs Closet, with the Memory Cafe, with opening up our facility for use by homeless counters, by AA, and other groups. Many of you volunteer – at the hospital, school, food pantry, or another of our communities' agencies.

Even those among us whose bodies no longer cooperate have ways to serve God by serving others. Some can prepare a meal for someone who's going through a bad time. Some can write

encouraging notes. Some can only pray. I say only, and yet what a special gift! When someone tells me they're praying for me, I don't wonder what's wrong. I just say, Thank you, and smile broadly. Thank you, God!

We're drawn to the amazing, the awesome, the superhuman. *Spiderman: Homecoming* came out ten days ago. I haven't seen it yet, but I'm sure people are flocking to it as they do to other movies that portray characters larger or at least more incredible than life really is. To a point, this is fine. Yet, hearing or watching stories about the larger-than-life can leave us dissatisfied with our own efforts. "Since I can't do it like they do, why bother...?" Or, when we do something special, we expect it to last. There's the letdown. Or we wonder sadly, "What happened? I did it so well last time!" We're hard on ourselves, or on each other, and sometimes on God. God can take it, but that doesn't mean we should put the blame there. As for ourselves and each other, life is challenging enough without us piling unreasonable expectations on anyone.

Part of what we might take away from this story is that God is ready to help us but that it might not be in the ways we expect. Or it might not be the way it was last time, or for somebody else.

Some years ago, Mother Theresa shared the story of her call to minister to the poorest of Calcutta. It was one of those stories that can be hard to believe. As I recall from listening to a retelling on NPR, she and the other young women in her order were making plans for where they would be going and how they would serve in the world. She had some idea of what she was going to do, then, while she was travelling by train, suddenly there was another personage in the compartment that hadn't been there a moment earlier. She's certain that this ... angel told her that she was supposed to travel to India and serve those who most needed it. Which she did. In the interview, she was asked if she'd ever had another similar experience, to which she replied, No, but then she had done as she had been told to do. She might have liked another experience – though the first one had quite frightened her – but there wasn't need.

Could it be that God is reaching out to you but your assumptions have gotten in the way of you noticing? Maybe you don't realize that your daughter or that coworker are speaking God's word for you. Maybe the extra energy or the pull that you're feeling to do something is God's way of pointing you to a task that would suit you better than anyone else. Maybe you haven't thought of your facility with numbers, a hammer or whisk as a gift that you're supposed to share for the good of God's kin-dom.

We all have those untapped possibilities. God as Spirit would help us realize if we'd only give her that chance. (I say her because the Aramaic and Hebrew word for spirit is feminine, and those are the languages Jesus would have used.) God is boundless. We – and I mean churches as well as individuals – tend to try to put God in a box, but there is no container large enough to hold God. We set ourselves up to believe that God only connects with us in certain ways, through particular people, or in certain locations. That's just not so. God wants to have a relationship with each of us. And God will do 'most anything to get our attention.

And once we give our attention, God offers us guidance, comfort, and hope. Whatever we face in this life, God is with us and will send total strangers as well as beloved friends to help us bear it – whomever listens to that voice whether still and silent, or roaring like an fire.

Let's each of us be those people. Pay attention for the Spirit's voice. Be open to being or doing what's asked. And in that being and doing, you will know God's hope.

Amen.