

Theme: God relieves discouragement

Let us pray.

Most holy, Lord God, you are ever present with us, though we often fail to listen: may we be ever present to you listening to what you would have us do, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

The noted author, John Killinger, tells a powerful story about a man who is all-alone in a hotel room in Canada. The man is in a state of deep depression. He is so depressed that he can't even bring himself to go downstairs to the restaurant to eat.

He is a powerful man usually the chairman of a large shipping company but at this moment, he is absolutely overwhelmed by the pressures and demands of life... and he lies there on a lonely hotel bed far from home wallowing in self-pity.

He worries and broods and agonizes about everything, his business, his investments, his decisions, his family, his health, even, his dogs. Then, on this day in this Canadian hotel, he craters. He hits bottom. Filled with anxiety, completely immobilized, paralyzed by his emotional despair, unable to leave his room, lying on his bed, he moans out loud: "Life isn't worth living this way, I wish I were dead!"

And then, he wonders, what God would think if he heard him talking this way. Speaking aloud again he says, "God, it's a joke, isn't it? Life is nothing but a joke." Suddenly, it occurs to the man that this is the first time he's talked to God since he was a little boy. He is silent for a moment and then he begins to pray. He describes it like this: "I just talked out loud about what a mess my life was in and how tired I was and how much I wanted things to be different in my life. And you know what happened next? A voice!! I heard a voice say, 'It doesn't have to be that way!' That's all."

He went home and talked to his wife about what happened. He talked to his brother who is a minister and asked him: "Do you think it was God speaking to me?" The brother said: "Of course, because that is the message of God to you and every one of us. That's the message of the Bible. That's why Jesus Christ came into the world to save us, to deliver us, to free us, to change us

and to show us that ‘It doesn’t have to be that way.’ A few days later, the man called his brother and said, “You were right. It has really happened. I’ve done it. I’ve had a rebirth. I’m a new man. Christ has turned it around for me.”

Well, the man is still prone to anxiety. He still has to work hard. But, now he has a source of strength. During the week, he often leaves his work-desk and goes to the church near his office. He sits there and prays. He says: “It clears my head. It reminds me of who I am and whose I am. Each time as I sit there in the (church), I think back to that day in that hotel room in Canada and how depressed and lonely and lost I felt and I hear that voice saying: It doesn’t have to be that way.”

The seeming weight of the world can get us down. But God is there to listen and God will speak to us, even when it seems that God is on the losing side.

This Old Testament story is out of place after hearing last Sunday’s story of Elijah and Ahab. It occurs some time before Naboth is murdered for his vineyard. In case you weren’t here last week, Ahab is King of Israel and Jezebel, a foreigner, is his queen. They worship Jezebel’s foreign gods and have places of worship for those gods in Israel.

Jezebel imported prophets of her gods to Israel. She then began a program of wipe out the prophets of the God of Moses. In response, Elijah challenged the prophets of Baal to a contest. It is a shame we are not doing this story, because it is a great one.

In summary, altars were set up for the gods to set on fire. The one that set the sacrifice on fire first is the winner. The prophets of Baal danced, writhed on the ground, frothed at the mouth and nothing happened. Elijah just watched. Then Elijah prayed to God. Lightning came down from heaven. The sacrifice is consumed. Elijah then rounded up all the prophets of Baal and killed them. After all of that – that is not the weird part of the story. The weird part is that Ahab watched all of this and did nothing.

What Ahab does do is go home and tell all of what happened to Jezebel. Elijah thought he had won a total victory. The foreign gods and their worship places would be gone. Elijah overestimates Ahab commitment and

underestimates Jezebel's resolve. Jezebel taunts Elijah by playing with their names. Jezebel means "where is Baal." Elijah means "Yahweh is God."

Jezebel warns Elijah that she intends to kill him and guess what? Elijah flees. Duh? If Jezebel truly wanted Elijah dead, why did she warn him? It could be that she merely wanted Elijah out of the country for good.

Elijah goes to Beer-sheba. Beer-sheba is an oasis in the southern Negev Desert, part of the kingdom of Judah. It is the southern most part of the world of people who worship the God of Moses. Almost as an aside, we are told that Elijah leaves his assistant there. Elijah is content to die.

Elijah travels south into the desert. He has no intention of surviving. He is spent. He is tired. His campaign to turn Israel back to the God of Moses seems over. Jezebel has won. He doesn't want Jezebel to have the satisfaction of causing his death. Elijah begs God to let him die in the desert.

Elijah fell asleep under the only plant to be seen for miles. An angel wakes him and orders him to eat. God is not yet through with Elijah. The angel tells him that he needs strength for the journey ahead.

Elijah then walks about 300 miles arriving at the holy mountain, Sinai, also known as Horeb. (It's a long story, not for here, explaining the dual names). This is the mountain where God talked to Moses. Elijah finds relief from the heat by taking refuge in a cave. It was in a cave that God puts Moses when God appears to Moses. Centuries later, Christian mystics will travel to Sinai to be with God. People will come to them for spiritual advice and counsel.

In the cave, God asks Elijah why he is there. Elijah recalls the state of religion in Israel: God's altars are torn down, the prophets are executed, and Elijah is the only one left and the government is seeking his life.

God then tells Elijah to go out onto the mountain. God wants Elijah to see God, a privilege that has not happened since Moses saw God on the very same mountain.

I want you to picture what happens. Elijah is standing somewhere on the mountain. Elijah is anticipating seeing the unseen God. Elijah is attentive. Then a wind so strong that that it shook the mountain and split open rocks

came, a hurricane. Moses split a rock to give the people of Israel water. Elijah did not find God in the wind.

Next came an earthquake. When God talked to Moses on Sinai, the mountain shook. God was not in the earthquake, either. Then there was a fire. God talked to Moses through a burning bush. Only God was not in this fire.

What happens next is difficult to translate. Different Bibles will use English in many ways to express what happens. What I think the text says, as best as we can get it in English, is that Elijah hears a still, small voice. *This* is God. All of these earth shattering events came and went, but God was not in any of them. God was only present when Elijah was still, quiet, and attentive. Then, Elijah heard God.

Elijah recognized the voice of God. He covered his face, lest he see God and die. God asks again why Elijah is there. Elijah gives the same answer. Elijah wants God to fix this horrendous situation in Israel.

“Elijah needed to restore his faith in God, his faith in himself, and his faith in others. This experience in the wilderness addressed all three. God was still there, as powerful and loving as ever. Elijah could still trust (God). He could believe in himself because he was still important to God. There was work for him to do.

“Power to overcome discouragement comes ultimately from the presence of the Holy Spirit within a believer’s life, supernaturally reinforcing that life and enabling it to overcome anything. We don’t have to rely on our own cleverness, courage, or endurance. As believers we have the invisible power of the Holy Spirit to lift us. We can be more than conquerors through (the Holy Spirit).”¹

We now pray: Gracious God and giver of all good gifts, give us the gift of holy patience: help us talk to you and help us to listen to you, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

¹ Dilday, R., & Ogilvie, L. J. (1987). *Vol. 9: The Preacher's Commentary Series, Volume 9: 1, 2 Kings*. The Preacher's Commentary series (205–208). Nashville, Tennessee: Thomas Nelson Inc.

Text: **1 Kings 19:1–15a** (NRSV)

19 Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done, and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword.² Then Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah, saying, “So may the gods do to me, and more also, if I do not make your life like the life of one of them by this time tomorrow.”³ Then he was afraid; he got up and fled for his life, and came to Beer-sheba, which belongs to Judah; he left his servant there.

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. Then there came a voice to him that said, “What are you doing here, Elijah?”¹⁴ 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.”¹⁵ Then the LORD said to him, “Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus; when you arrive, you shall anoint Hazael as king over Aram.”²

² *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*. 1989 (1 Kings 19:1–15). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.