

Rise Up: From Injustice to Peace

1 Kings 19:9-13
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First Presbyterian Church
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A Midwesterner from the farm was visiting his college roommate in New York City. Walking near Times Square, the farm boy suddenly said, "I hear a cricket."

"You're crazy," said his city friend. "It's noon rush hour, and in all of this traffic noise you heard a cricket?"

"Yes, I heard a cricket," he insisted. Listening more intently, he walked to the corner, crossed the busy street and looked all around. Finally he approached a shrub in a large cement planter. Digging beneath the mulch, he found his cricket. His friend couldn't believe what he had seen.

The visitor said, "My ears are no different than yours. It simply depends on what you have learned to listen for. Here, let me show you." He then reached into his pocket, pulled out a handful of change, and dropped the coins on the sidewalk.

At the sound of the money hitting pavement, every head along the crowded block turned. "You see what I mean?" said the visitor. "It all depends on what you're listening for."¹

The Prophet Elijah spent his life listening for God so that he might bring others closer to the Lord. And finally, age has caught up with him. He's tired and fearful after years of serving the Lord only to have worldly forces stifle his efforts.

As we come alongside Elijah today, we find him on the run. King Ahab and Queen Jezebel have sent the leaders of Israel to capture and kill him, because Elijah helped them to see that the Lord indeed is God, over and above the false gods they are following.

¹ As told by Donald J. Shelby, Santa Monica, California, "Hear Here!" 8 September 1991, 1-2.

After Elijah fled from King Ahab, 1 Kings tells us that 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?”

“I have been very zealous for the Lord, the God of hosts,” he answered. “... 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.”

Here we see Elijah crying out to God in fear and exhaustion, and complaining to God about the injustice he’s facing, being criticized and attacked by the very people he’s trying to save, trying to serve in the Spirit of the Lord.

I mean, think about it. Out of all the people of Israel, Elijah is the only one who has remained faithful to God. And still, he can’t seem to get a break.

Even after showing the people that God is all-powerful, ever-present, and eternally faithful, the Israelites are still following their misguided and sinful king and worshiping false gods. And now, at the king’s command, they’re actually trying to do away with Elijah. That’s the way life is all too often, isn’t it?

A life of faithfulness and service, and still, we struggle and face insurmountable odds

We do everything right, all that we can, give it our best – whether that’s in building up the church, seeking God’s favor and blessing, working on our health, staying on the job, promoting peace and justice, and doing all that we know to be right – and still, try as you might, you face worldly forces working against you. It can be exhausting; it can leave us fearful and uncertain about the future.

And yet, there is reason for hope. People down through the centuries have faced incredibly hard times and made it through. We’re talking plagues, slavery, economic depression, deplorable working conditions, world wars, political assassinations, natural disasters, horrific terrorist attacks. This nation – this world – has faced it all, and lived to tell about it, to learn and grow from it.

And in each instance, the same spiritual principles and divine truths have applied – God will never give up on us as long as we never give up on God. Even one faithful soul like Elijah – one faithful soul like you – can make all the difference.

To show that to Elijah – and to us – God promises to reveal himself to Elijah. “Go out and stand on the mountain before the Lord,” says God, “for the Lord is about to pass by.”

So Elijah emerges from the cave he's hiding in, ventures back out into the world, and scripture tells us, "... 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; and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire...."

The world is throwing all that it can at Elijah – all the forces that blow us this way and that, all the hardships that leave us shaken and broken, all the encounters that get us fired up or leave us burnt out – and still the promises of God await us, await Elijah. God promised to reveal himself to Elijah, to be with him even amid the all the danger and chaos.

Scripture tells us that after the hurricane-force wind, the violent earthquake, and the destructive fire, there was "a sound of sheer silence. When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and ... there came a voice to him that said, "What are you doing here, Elijah?"

Elijah learns that the Lord is to be found in the space between. In the silence between all the havoc of the world, God is there for us. God is there to greet us, to embrace us, to protect us and direct us.

Oh, how hard it is to enter into that place of stillness to encounter God when all we see around us is the brutal, uncaring injustice of the world.

And yet, that's what we must do. In order to maintain our faith in God, to grow in our relationship with God, to find our way to God in the midst of all the fears and challenges of life, we have to enter into the stillness and silence that is God.

That is where we find hope. That is where we find a pathway toward peace, the universal, everlasting, glorious peace that God is bring about.

As Elijah encounters God in the still moments of all the craziness going on around him, God says to him, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" In other words, yes, the world is as the world is, but what are you doing in the midst of it?

That's a question for us all. And in that question we have the answer to all the world's problems, all our nation's problems, all our neighborhood problems, and our family problems.

"What are you doing...?" asks God. Are you doing your best? Are you part of the solution, or part of the problem?

After asking Elijah, “What are you doing...?” God sends him to be part of the solution. In the scripture that follows today’s Old Testament reading, God sends Elijah to be an instrument of divine justice, that the world might once and for all Rise Up: From Injustice to Peace.

Overcoming injustice is our pathway to the joyous, everlasting, world-encompassing peace that God brings. As we continue to put our faith in God, - entrust the future to God’s wisdom and power - we must search the stillness of our hearts for the answer to our troubles. For it is in that stillness that God asks us, “What are you doing here,” and where is that leading you – toward more turmoil, or toward peace? Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

Holy God, we sometimes find ourselves, like Elijah, weary, discouraged, and afraid. We have given of ourselves, responded to you in faith, done that which we felt led to do, and the results haven’t been what we hoped for or expected.

In these moments, we long to hear your voice speaking to us a word of comfort and encouragement. Like Elijah, we need to separate ourselves from the busyness of doing so we may be in your presence – quiet, still, open, and expectant.

We thank you that you continue to make your presence known; that your still, small voice continues to speak to us; and that you provide nourishment and refreshment while also sending us out again with renewed mission and purpose.

We thank you for those who have lived this life in faith and are now with you in glory. Be with those who grieve their loss; provide them your comfort and peace. Be with those who are struggling with health issues, and with their families as they support them through these difficult times. Send your spirit of comfort and strength.

We pray all this in the name and the power and the light of our Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ, praying together as he taught us, saying:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.

Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.