

What Are You Doing Here?¹

Elijah's mood in this story is oddly familiar and contemporary. Actually, this all feels like a midlife thing to me. By that I mean that Elijah has had some dramatic success in his career as a prophet. Notably, he has just publically humiliated and slain 450 prophets of the god, Baal at Mount Carmel. But now Elijah is curiously dispirited and despairing and he just wants to quit.

I get like this. Someone told me way back in the 1980's that I sometimes "catastrophize." That means that I melodramatically despair. Okay, the computer is dead—I just destroyed it. My ministry is so over with. The Protestant mainline is toast. These people will never wake up and get committed. This culture will never "get it" and change. I may as well give up.

Do you ever get that way? Ever catastrophize? There's a little economic downturn and despair. I'll never retire. The house will never sell. We're going to have to move in with the kids in Memphis. We've failed.

Or in our jobs. You work with a business for years. It changes hands and suddenly will never be the same. You're 55 and it looks like your future isn't as promising as it was when you were 30.

¹Douglas DeCelle preached this sermon on May 4, 2008 at the First Presbyterian Church, LaGrange, Georgia.

Or with our dreams. You're a teacher and after 21 years notice that you dread the fall startup of classes. You think there's no leadership, no vision in the administration. Standardized testing and parents' attitudes have sucked all the magic out of the classroom experience. The part-time job working for Wal-Mart is beginning to look pretty good. Because you've had it with education.

Elijah is eerily familiar. And as I look at him I get the sense that he is drawing some energy out of his sense of total wipeout. Early in our story, Elijah travels into the desert, collapses under a broom tree and cries, "I'm a goner, Lord. This service for the kingdom has cost me everything. I'm ready to give it all up. Take me, Lord. Take me. I'm ready to take my place with Moses and Abraham and David.

Of course, Elijah doesn't exactly die. He basically takes a nap. He wakes up and has a snack—a cookie or something. Naps again. Then with another snack Elijah manages to walk on for 40 days and 40 nights. Pretty good on two cookies. Perhaps he wasn't quite as dead as he thought he was.

Elijah drags himself to Mount Horeb where the Ten Commandments were given to Moses. Horeb is where all the great prophets go to meet God. Elijah sees himself in that tradition. Elijah sees himself as one of the ones who like Moses goes up

Mount Horeb to meet with God. Back to headquarters. Back where the action is.

I love God's reaction when Elijah-the-last-man-standing reports to Horeb. "Elijah! What brings you here? Elijah pours on the melodrama. "We're really toast, Lord. I've been working my heart out, fighting off the forces of darkness. But it's no use. Everybody's abandoned us, Lord! It's just you and me left. Your whole movement—well, you're looking at it. Only me. And I barely escaped with my life.

I am fascinated with how God handles Elijah at this point. God plays along with Elijah's inner drama. God does this by providing the very theatrics that Elijah is looking for. It's as if God sends a message to his special effects people. "Let's have some impressive weather over here in the middle of the desert. Let's say a hurricane—I know we're on dry land, but let's go with the hurricane anyway because I think Elijah would like that. And send an earthquake. Throw in some fire. I think that's everything. Wind, earthquake, and fire. Like we did with Moses and Abraham. I think Elijah could use some old time revelation effects.

Can you see how God is dealing with Elijah? In the face of Elijah's catastrophising and melodrama and despair, God is moving in the simple little things. Elijah throws himself down

in despair and God says, "Have a snack" He just puts a little baked loaf and to jug of water in reach. And here's the curiosity. That snack and a nap goes a long way. Elijah walks for 40 days.

Later Elijah goes through his disastrous report to God on Horeb. God patiently plays along. Then when the wind dies down and the earthquake quits, God chats with Elijah—the still small voice. He says the cause still has a sizable following—seven thousand. And three leaders are in the wings ready to help out. Go Elijah and recruit them! Get some help. Delegate! Suddenly, effortlessly, the whole program is in motion. And Elijah is useful again.

Here's where all this is going. God works in the little things. Yes, he came with a dramatic flash of lightning and fire and Elijah was able to slay all those prophets of Baal. That was then. Now, God is working with a little loaf of bread baked on some coals and a jug of water. The smallest thing proves to get the job done. Wind and fire and shaking earth are fine. But what moves things forward is a little assignment—go get some help.

I wonder what God may be doing to get you and me moving down our path. Maybe a simple word of appreciation or thanks

from the right person; maybe the smallest little victory is really all you need for another 40 days of progress.

We have an interesting little expression—made my day. When something makes our day, it's usually a tiny victory or kindness that is sufficient to remind us that God is in charge and all will be well.

What the Elijah story says to me is that God is in the business of making our day—everyday. He gives us, maybe not vast resources or glorious victories, but a little loaf of bread baked on hot coals and a jug of water. Just enough to keep going. In his power, day after day we make our destination even against terrible odds.

I've mentioned before George Mueller of Bristol, England during the 19th century. Mueller was an ardent Christian who showed his faith by fearlessly opening orphanages, taking into his care thousands of children, and trusting God utterly to supply the necessities for his work. On one occasion, Mueller, as an act of faith, postponed the printing of the orphanages' annual report so that potential donors would not know the dire need that they were in. Mueller wanted to rely entirely on God rather than any appeal to donors. As the weeks passed, the supplies and solvency of the homes grew more and more precarious. Finally, on the day that they would simply have to

cease operations, a Christian friend sent a gift of ten pounds. Here's the amazing part of the story. The letter with the money did not come in the daily mail delivery. It was mistakenly delivered to another address. Later in the day someone brought it to George Mueller. The children were fed and the orphanages continued. Later that year, trusting in God, George Mueller opened a fourth house. Years later, he wrote in his journal that through God's goodness, never did a single orphan miss a meal or suffer without the necessities of life.

Look for your little loaf and jug of water.