

## **SUNDAY 28 APRIL 2018**

9am –BCP      10.30am – SOW

OT reading: 1 Kings 19 v1-9a

NT – Matthew 16 v13-16

Opening prayer - **Lord, we thank you for the gift of your Word; open our hearts and our minds to hear you. Amen.**

**“I’VE HAD ENOUGH.....”**

**“TAKE MY LIFE.....”**

*(pause)*

Such sad words spoken by Elijah in our reading this morning.

It would be nice to think we Christians didn’t have dark days. But looking through the Bible at the great saints — people we see as heroes — we find that they also had times of despair.

The classic study of such a person in the Bible is the prophet Elijah, the iron man of the Old Testament. Elijah lived and served during the days of the wicked king Ahab and his sinister queen, Jezebel, who introduced Baal worship into Israel.

Elijah was the champion of great belief, chosen by God to challenge the king and the prophets of Baal and to call the nation back from disbelief. In a contest on Mt. Carmel, he was God’s instrument to prove to Israel that Jehovah was the Lord. But after that amazing victory Elijah sank into the depths of despair.

Does that surprise you about a man of God? I hope not. We sometimes look upon men like Elijah as super saints. In reality, he was, as the scriptures say, “A man of like passions even as we are.” That means he was cut from the same human cloth

as us. He had the same weaknesses, frailties, and emotions as the rest of us. Yes, even Elijah became depressed.

In 1 Kings ch.18 it records the incredible story of Elijah on Mt. Carmel. He assembled Israel on the mountain. They were literally “limping” between two opinions. They could not decide whether to worship God or to worship Baal. So Elijah challenges the prophets of Baal to a ‘theological shoot-out’. “I’ll call on my God,” he says, “you call on Baal, and let’s see which one answers with fire from heaven. The one that does will be the God of Israel.”

Baal’s prophets accept the challenge, set up their altar and began crying to their god. But no fire falls! Elijah suggests that they shout louder. They do, but still no fire falls!

After all this, Elijah builds an altar to the Lord, and orders that water be poured over it. Twelve barrels of water in all are used until the sacrifice is soaked through and the ditch around it is running over.

Then Elijah prays a simple prayer and God sends fire to consume the sacrifice, the altar and even the water.

With that turning point, the people worshipped the Lord and shouted, “The Lord, he is God.” Then, in obedience to Elijah’s command, they killed Baal’s prophets.

Everyone knew God’s hand was upon Elijah.

Elijah is not permitted to relish the mountain-top experience for long. As soon as queen Jezebel hears what happened she sends Elijah a message saying, "You have killed all of my prophets; by this time tomorrow I am going to kill you also."

When Elijah read her message his heart sank and he began to run for his life. He ran all the way to Beersheba, the southern-most city in Judah. Beersheba was the end of civilization! Beyond it there was nothing but desert. He was getting as far away from queen Jezebel as possible.

There he left his servant, perhaps because he didn't intend to come back, perhaps because he didn't want his servant to see what he was really like. Then he went another day's journey into the wilderness alone.

When Elijah finally quit running he sat down under a juniper tree (a bush) and asked God to let him die. "I've had it, Lord," he said, "take my life for I am no better than my ancestors" (1 Kings 19:4). He felt like a failure.

These two experiences, Elijah on Mt. Carmel and Elijah under the juniper tree, are set side by side in the bible (1 Kings 18-1 Kings 19).

In 1 Kings 18, Elijah is at the height of success;

in 1 Kings 19 he is in the depths of despair.

In 1 Kings 18 he is on the mountain top of victory;

in 1 Kings 19 he is in the valley of defeat.

In 1 Kings 18 he is elated;

in 1 Kings 19 he is deflated.

We are all capable of such roller-coaster emotions.

Out of sheer physical exhaustion, Elijah fell asleep. He was psychologically wrung out and physically drained. The Lord let him sleep. After a time the Lord sent an angel who prepared a meal for Elijah, awakened him and gave him food to eat and water to drink. Then he slept again. Once more the angel awoke him and fed him in preparation for a journey to Mt. Horeb where he could get away from the people and pressures that were troubling him. Strengthened by the food, Elijah finally reached his destination, 150 miles to the south. This time he had gone as far away from Jezebel as he could go.

There he sat down in a cave, wrapped himself up in self-pity and sighed over his fate. He feels he has done his best for God and it has been to no avail, so he has a 'pity party'. All of us get down like that sometimes.

Elijah's depression wasn't bound up in any one cause. Rather, it stemmed from a number of things.

The first is fear (1 Kings 19:3). Elijah, frightened by the threats of Jezebel, runs for his life. Many times, like Elijah, we become afraid of failure, of loneliness, of not getting a job completed, of not knowing how to pay the bills.

Second is failure (1 Kings 19:4). Elijah held a negative opinion about himself. He felt he was no more successful in checking the nation's loyalty than the prophets who had gone before him. It's easy to think: "I'm no good. I'm incompetent. God made a mistake when He made me."

Third is fatigue (1 Kings 19:5). Elijah was emotionally drained and physically exhausted. Mountain tops can leave us that way. He needed rest and relaxation.

Fourth is futility (1 Kings 19:10). He feels alone, hopeless and has negative expectations about the future. Elijah is paranoid. He thinks everybody is out to get him.

Elijah was looking at life through dark-colored glasses. He saw no way out.

Have you ever felt like Elijah? Perhaps you are feeling like him right now: afraid, alone, exhausted, burned-out, and hopeless. Maybe you are a good candidate for the juniper tree.

I want you to see what helped Elijah climb out of the valley of despair and go on to a lifetime of useful service. It can help you too. Through the experience of Elijah, God gives us some divine principles for dealing with depression.

The first thing that helped Elijah was to take time off so he could get physically and emotionally rejuvenated. He had been so busy taking care of the needs of the nations that he had neglected his own needs.

When we use up our physical energy we become exhausted. When we use all of our emotional energy, we become depressed.

Elijah needed rest, food, and relaxation. He needed to get away from the people and pressures that were getting to him. So do we occasionally.

Second, Elijah talked through his frustrations. While he sat in a cave feeling sorry for himself, God asked him what he was doing there.

Have you noticed in the bible that God is always asking questions for which He already knows the answers? He asked Adam, "Adam, where are you?" God knew where Adam was. He asked Cain, "Where is your brother Abel?" God knew that Abel was already dead. He asked Moses, "Moses, what is that in your hand?" God knew that Moses had a staff in his hand. Here he asks, "Elijah, what are you doing here?" God knew what Elijah was doing there. He helped him get there.

Why, then, did God ask Elijah this question? To give him an opportunity to talk, to vent his frustrations. God listened non-judgmentally as Elijah poured out his feelings of anger, bitterness and self-pity.

We all have such feelings at times; unless we rid ourselves of them they will poison us emotionally. There are some health-giving emotions like love, faith, hope.

Tears are a means of release.

Talking is perhaps the most effective way to rid ourselves of harmful thoughts.

Everyone needs someone in whom they can confide without fear of condemnation.

God didn't say, "Elijah, prophets shouldn't talk like that." He didn't make him feel guilty for his feelings. He accepted him and listened to him. Say what you want to God. He can take it. He will not be judgmental as you pour out the hurts of your life to Him.

The third thing that helped Elijah was to get life back in perspective. He felt that God had forsaken him and that he alone remained faithful to the Lord. His reasoning went something like this: “Here I am, doing my best to serve the Lord and look what happened. God has forsaken me. I alone am left. It’s me against the world.”

Depression can sometimes be traced back to some distorted view of life. In Elijah’s case, he had a distorted view of himself and a distorted view of God. He needed to know that God was there and that there were others who had not bowed to Baal.

Fourth thing, Elijah got back into the mainstream of life and went to work again. God allowed Elijah to sit in the dark cave for just so long. Then He told him to get up and get busy again. There was a new king of Israel and a new prophet to be anointed. Elijah now needed to get back to work. He needed the tonic of a new task.

*(pause)*

Many of us here this morning can relate to Elijah in one way or another. I can. I spent 3 long years travelling through that wilderness. But I sought to be a survivor...and I hung onto that. There are times when I think God has a funny sense of humour as he uses the life experiences we go through to do His work. I am now back in full-time employment, which is an achievement, working for Mersey Care NHS trust, a service provided for people with mental health illness. There have been a couple of times when I have wondered, why God put someone going through recovery in a setting like that? Part of my role is taking a lot of phone calls from distressed service users and then forwarding the calls to relevant colleagues. Despite being verbally abused every day and, at times intimidated, I like my job.

I never thought I would see the day when I would get back into the mainstream of life working for God and His kingdom. For in helping others we help ourselves.

By these means Elijah went on to a lifetime of useful service. Thank God we can be used to do the same. Amen.