

Therapy for an Elijah Complex
1 Kings 19:1-18
June 26, 2022—St. Andrew Presbyterian Church

When the going got tough,
Elijah usually got going.
Elijah was nearly always up
for a challenge—
 reading the king the riot act;
 bringing a child on his deathbed to life;
 calling down fire from heaven.
 No problem!
 Bring it on!
Elijah was some kind of a hero!
But when we meet Elijah today,
 he isn't feeling like
 much of a hero.
Disillusioned and depressed,
Elijah is one stressed out,
 burned out prophet.

Maybe you remember
 the circumstances
 that brought Elijah to this point.
There had been a showdown
 on Mount Carmel
 between Elijah and the prophets of Baal.
And the point of the showdown
 was to prove
 whose God
 was really in charge.

They built a big altar.
And they decided that
 the God who set the altar on fire
 was going to be the winner
 of the showdown.

Well, the prophets of Baal
 pulled out all of the stops.
 They danced;
 they shouted;
 they worked themselves up
 into all kinds of frenzies,
 trying to get their candidate
 for ruler of the universe
 to set the altar on fire.

Nothing happened.
 And then here came Elijah.
 Elijah stepped up to the altar.
 And first he drenched it with water....
 just to add a little pizzazz to the show.
 And then, he stepped back
 and prayed.
 And you know what happened then.
 WHOOSH!
 The altar burst into flames!
 What a show!
 What a victory!

Of course,
 after that, there was no doubt
 about whose God was in charge.
 Elijah and the God of Israel
 had defeated
 the prophets of Baal.
 All's well that ends well, right?
 Wrong!

It didn't take long
 for Elijah to find out
 that winning the big confrontation
 had not taken away life's problems.
 Queen Jezebel was furious
 that Elijah had outdone
 her spiritual advisors.
 So, she vowed to have Elijah's life
 by sundown the next day.
 Well, this was the last straw
 for Elijah.
 So, Elijah ran—
 ran through the wilderness
 and ran from his call.
 He ran, in part, I suppose,
 because he thought Jezebel's threat meant
 he had *failed*.
 But I wonder if he also ran
 because he had *succeeded*.
 Think about it!
 On behalf of the God of Israel,
 Elijah had pulled off
 one of the flashiest victories imaginable.
 A wet altar bursting into flames!

So, what would he do
 for his next trick?
 How long could he go on like this?
 It was overwhelming.
 It was exhausting.
 It was burnout!

As one of my early mentors, Ilene Dunn, points out,
 the problem with a job well done

 is that it usually leads
 to a multiplication of jobs.

Most of us know how this works.

 Usually happens kind of gradually.

 We start off juggling only two balls,
 and juggling them easily and well.
 It's kind of fun, actually,
 kind of stimulating.

The addition of a third ball
 poses no terrible problem.

 A little challenge never hurt anyone!

Then come balls four through six.

 Life is getting more complicated!

 But still, we manage.

 Oh, maybe we're not sleeping
 quite as soundly as we used to.

 We may be having a few stomach problems,
 feeling a little more frazzled than usual.

 But still,
 we're hanging in.

But then comes ball seven,
 ball eight,
 balls nine and ten.

And finally, one day, we find ourselves
 wanting to scream,
 wanting to throw balls to kingdom come—

 Who cares?!!

 Enough already!

 I can't handle it anymore!

 Can anyone else
 do any work

 around here!

 I must be the only responsible person
 left in the universe!

(Adapted from "A Time for Mantles;" unpublished sermon preached by Ilene Brenner
 Dunn at First Presbyterian Church; Austin, Texas; Summer 1986)

This, siblings in Christ,

is the point where you and I
 sit with Elijah,
 huddled and angry under his solitary broom tree—
 “It is enough, O Lord!”

This is where we sit with Elijah
 in his cave on Mount Horeb—
 “I have been very zealous for the Lord,
 the God of hosts;
 for the Israelites have forsake 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.”

I alone am left.
 Twice Elijah speaks these words.

I alone am left.
 Never mind
 the miraculous nourishment
 that God gave Elijah for this journey!
 He’s all alone in this!
 All alone!

Never mind
 that after the showdown on Mount Carmel,
 all the Israelites who watched were converted.
 Elijah can’t remember that!
 He’s all by himself.

And never mind the facts
 that appear a couple of chapters earlier—
 the prophet Obadiah had hidden 100 prophets
 in a cave.
 Elijah can’t remember those 100 prophets.
 It’s just him.

I alone am left.
 Do you think, maybe,
 that Elijah has lost his perspective?
 What started out
 as Elijah’s faithful righteousness before God
 has become instead
 angry self-righteousness.

It’s a trap
 that any of us
 can fall into—
 this angry isolation,

this perverted belief
 that we're the only ones
 who know how to do the right thing.
 When our faithful righteousness
 turns into angry self-righteousness,
 when our focus is more on
 what we think *everybody else*
 ought to be doing
 rather than on what God has called *us* to do—
 those are the times
 when we sit huddled with Elijah
 under the broom tree
 and in the cave on Mount Horeb.
 Those are the times
 when we suffer
 from an Elijah complex—
 It is enough!
 I alone am left.
 But by the grace of God,
 there is healing for Elijah.
 And there is healing
 for those of us
 who are like him.
 Notice how God handles Elijah.
 The part of this story
 that we all remember
 is the special effects scene.
 Wind,
 earthquake,
 fire—
 but God was not in any of these.
 And then there came
 “the sound of sheer silence,”
 or, as the King James Version translates it,
 “the still, small voice.”
 We usually read this passage and think
 that the sound of sheer silence
 is how Elijah finally experiences God,
 how Elijah finally gets healed.
 And maybe that's true.
 Certainly silence can be healing.
 And we need silence to hear God.
 But did you notice?—
 the minute Elijah steps out of his cave

after the still, small voice,
 he's whining the same old line.
 "I've been very zealous
 for the Lord, the God of hosts...
 blah, blah, blah, blah, blah....
 I alone am left."
 Silence can be healing.
 But for Elijah,
 and probably for those of us who are like him,
 it often takes more than silence.

I love to notice what God *doesn't* say.
 God doesn't say,
 "Well, that does it Elijah!
 You obviously can't stand the pressure.
 I guess you're just not prophet material.
 I'll expect you
 to turn in your mantle
 by 5 o'clock this afternoon."

What God does instead, oddly,
 is to give Elijah something to do—
 something new.
 Now granted,
 the new job description is no piece of cake.
 Elijah is to anoint two kings
 and also to anoint Elisha to be a prophet.
 This will only plunge Elijah deeper
 into international politics.
 And, in fact,
 Elijah will not even live to complete
 the list of tasks that God gives him.

But apparently,
 this new commission allows Elijah
 to discover once again his strength,
 and to remember that
 because these are God's tasks,
 their completion is not dependent on Elijah's success
 and failure.

But there's something else—
 something that I think is even more important.
 When God tells Elijah to anoint Elisha,
 God is giving Elijah a partner,
 someone to *share his burden*.
 And now, let's notice
 what *Elijah* doesn't say in response to God.

Elijah doesn't say,
 "Well, God, the job *is* kind of hard.
 And yeah, I *am* worn out.
 But really, I'd rather do it myself,
 because that way,
 I know the job will get done right."

And neither does Elijah say,
 "Oh, God, I could *never* ask Elisha!
 I mean, he's such a busy man,
 with twelve yoke of oxen and all.
 I'd feel just awful asking him!"

To Elijah's credit,
 he doesn't protest.
 He is obedient to God.
 And at this point in his life,
 being obedient to God
 means stepping back.
 It means letting someone else help
 for a change.

There is a place in the writings of the mystic,
 Catherine of Siena
 where Catherine is complaining to God
 that she doesn't have more gifts.
 And God's response is something like this,
 "If I gave any of my children
 all of the gifts,
 they wouldn't need each other.
 I gave each of my children just a few gifts,
*so that they would learn
 to rely on each other.*"

It's a huge task,
 the job of being God's faithful people.
 Little wonder, then,
 that when we self-righteously take
 the whole overwhelming burden on ourselves,
 we end up furious and defeated.

When we're exhausted and feeling defeated,
 we may expect the relief to come
 from escape,
 or from revenge,
 or from some spectacular
 hit-us-over-the-head
 revelation from God

But the good news in this story

is that God's healing presence comes
not in the midst of our running away from it all,
not from our finding a way
to tell the rest of the world off,
not even in some spiritual special effects scene.
God's healing presence comes
in the gift of new undertakings,
and most importantly,
in our learning to depend on others.
There is never enough of us
to go around,
is there?
But thanks be to God,
there is always enough of God—
enough of God,
offered in the gifts of those all around us.
That's how – and why- we can get on
down our mountain.
Thanks be to God.
Amen.