

Faithful in Failure

In the name of him who bids us, “Follow me”; dear friends in Christ: Depressed, disillusioned, feeling utterly defeated ... these words only begin to capture what the great prophet Elijah is experiencing in today’s Old Testament reading. Spiritually speaking, he’s about as low as anyone can go. Why? What brought the mighty prophet to this dark state of despair? To explain, we’ll have to back up a bit.

It’s the era of the divided kingdom. The king of Israel is Ahab, a weak and morally compromised man. His queen is the infamous Jezebel whose name is now synonymous with evil – for good reason. She was the daughter of the wealthy king of Tyre, a pagan nation on Israel’s northwest border. For Ahab, marrying her was a good move politically. It raised his standing in the world. It guaranteed peace along that border. And having a rich father-in-law never hurts. The result was that Ahab did everything he could to please his wife. And she was pleased to worship the Canaanite god Baal; so pleased, in fact, that she wanted the worship of Baal to be official religion of Israel. And Ahab, even though he recognized the Lord and worshipped him in his own half-hearted way, said, “Okay, dear, anything you want.”

Soon there were temples and altars to Baal on every street corner. Meanwhile the prophets of the Lord, the guys we would call pastors and teachers today, were persecuted, driven out, and put to death. For the most part, the people were happy with these developments. The Canaanite religion, which was a fertility cult, encouraged a lot of stuff especially with regards to sex and sexuality that the Lord said was definitely off limits. It was, in other words, a lot more fun than the religion of the One True God who, as you might guess, was not pleased with the wholesale turning away of his people into sin and idolatry. Thus he sent Elijah to Ahab with a message: “So, you all worship Baal now, do you? And he’s the god of the sky, the one who supposedly brings the rain, right? Well, here it is: you pray to him all you want. But until you give up this nonsense and turn yourself and this people back to the Lord, not a drop of rain will fall in the land of Israel.”

For some people it takes a long time for a message to sink in. And unfortunately for Israel, Ahab was one of them. Over three years later, his country almost completely devastated by drought and his people in abject misery, he still wasn’t in a mood to change his mind. Got to keep the wife happy, you know. The Lord, however, is merciful. He didn’t want all his people to die of the drought even if they weren’t being faithful. So he sent Elijah back to Ahab with a challenge. “Let’s have a contest. We’ll meet at Mount Carmel over by the coast. We’ll set up two altars; one for Baal and one for the Lord. We’ll set a sacrifice on each one. And then we’ll call upon our respective deities. The one who answers with fire from heaven, he will be the God of Israel. I’ll even let you guys go first. How’s that sound?”

Ahab agreed to the challenge. A few days later a huge crowd gathered at Carmel to witness the divine duel. On one side stood 450 prophets of Baal; on the other side stood Elijah, all alone. As he’d offered, the prophets of Baal went first. They spent the whole day chanting and praying to no avail. There was no one home to hear them. Later they became desperate, shouting, dancing around, and cutting themselves with knives to show their god how earnest they were. Still nothing. Finally, toward evening, Elijah said, “All right. You guys had your turn. Now watch this.” He offered a very brief prayer to the Lord and instantly fire from heaven fell and consumed his sacrifice altar and all in a tremendous blaze.

It was the moment Elijah had been waiting for. It was his hour of triumph. He was certain that now the people of Israel would reject the false god Baal once and for all and return to the Lord with all their hearts. And that's the way it seemed to be going. Everyone watching fell down in holy fear. They raised their voices in worship shouting out, "The Lord, he is God! The Lord, he is God!" Then, recognizing the true source of their troubles – the ones who had deceived them and brought this terrible drought on them – they turned on the prophets of Baal and slaughtered them all. That night the Lord sent rain to the thirsty land. It came down in buckets. It seemed that everything was going to turn out all right. Elijah was one happy man.

But he didn't stay that way very long. When word of what happened reached the ears of Jezebel, she was filled with rage. She sent Elijah a messenger with the news that he was a dead man. She was sending a team of assassins after him. And you might think after what happened at Carmel, that the prophet had become something of a national hero, and that people would rise to his defense. Certainly that's what Elijah thought. But it didn't happen. The king remained as weak and pathetic as ever. His soldiers weren't about to get involved. And having been given some time to think about it – especially now that the drought had ended – it's fair to say that people in general weren't too happy about the way things turned out at Carmel. The majority really hoped that Baal would win. They liked worshipping him better. Better a false god, they thought, who lets us get away with what we want to do than a real God who holds us accountable for our sinful behavior.

This is what crushed the prophet's heart and brought him so low: that the people of Israel, after suffering so much for their sin and idolatry, and after seeing what happened at Mount Carmel, that they would still stubbornly cling to their idols and reject the Lord – that they would choose the way of death over the way of life. And I'm certain there was some ego involved here too. Elijah took their rejection of the Lord personally. He had imagined himself as the spearhead and spokesman of a massive national revival. Now he felt like a great big failure. So it was that broken in heart, beaten in spirit, and fearing assassination, he did the only thing left he could think of. He ran away.

He fled all the way to Mount Sinai way out in the desert well beyond the borders of the Promised Land. Why to Mount Sinai? Most likely it's because that's where the Lord appeared to his people so many centuries earlier when giving his holy Law. Then he appeared to them in frightful power and terrifying strength. The people of Israel trembled before the Lord and swore to him their perpetual faithfulness. That's the kind of God Elijah wanted to see again: a God of glory, a God of might, a holy and jealous God whose manifestations of wrath were frightful and utterly devastating. That's the kind of God he thought Israel needed now. One little fireball from heaven wasn't enough to turn things around. What we needed, Elijah thought, was the God of the nuclear option.

But when the prophet arrived at Sinai, things were strangely quiet. The mountain sat silently basking in the sun as it had for ages. Still, Elijah pressed on, climbing up and up, hoping to catch a sight of a burning bush as Moses had so long before. He saw nothing like that. He only heard a question: "What are you doing here, Elijah?"

"Ah, so you are here after all! Well, let me tell you. I've been your guy, O Lord. I've been very jealous for you, and I've been doing everything you asked me to. But things aren't working out at all like I thought they would. No, your people have forsaken your covenant and thrown down your altars and killed your prophets. I'm the only one left. And now they're trying to kill me too!" Of course, behind Elijah's complaints was the accusation, "You're not doing a very good job at being the Lord God of Israel!"

But I'm pretty sure Elijah didn't understand the Lord's question. In his response, he didn't say anything the Lord didn't already know. But the question was, "What are *you* doing *here*?" Pregnant in the question are many others. "You work for me, remember? Did I tell you to come here? No. I called you to be my prophet, to speak my word to my people Israel. They're a long way from here. How can they hear you from this distance? So now you're afraid for your life. Do you imagine for a moment that I can't protect you?"

And so, to help get the prophet back on track, the Lord provides him a demonstration. He gives him the manifestations of the power he so eagerly wanted to see. "Go stand out on the mountain before me, and I will pass by." Elijah complied and was suddenly set upon by a blast of desert wind so fierce that it shattered rocks; but the Lord wasn't in the wind. Then from deep within the mountain an earthquake shook the ground nearly knocking him off his feet; but the Lord wasn't in the earthquake. Then a raging fire swept over the mountain consuming everything in its path; but the Lord wasn't in the fire. And then finally, Elijah heard the sound of a quiet whispering – and he knew he was hearing the voice of the Lord God Almighty. And he was filled with holy fear.

The Lord repeats the question: "What are you doing here, Elijah?" Again the prophet responds with the same litany of complaints; but now they sound as weak and pathetic in his own ears as they do in the Lord's. The prophet realizes that he too has been unfaithful to the Lord, that he allowed worldly circumstances to overcome his confidence in God, that he feared Jezebel and her assassins more than he feared the Lord, and that he let the failure of his own dreams of what *he* hoped would happen interfere with his work for the Lord.

Then the Lord explains, "Things aren't what you think. I am still in control. I will bring judgment against those who are in rebellion against me by the hands of the two kings you are to anoint. I've also got a man you are to anoint to be prophet in your place so that my Word will be heard even after you're gone. And you imagine that you are all alone; but the truth is that I have 7000 faithful in Israel who are not worshipping Baal." The point is that the work of the Lord goes on. He doesn't accomplish it with flash and bang and spectacular displays of power. No, he does his work of changing hearts, creating believers, and calling out for himself a faithful people with his quiet voice speaking his holy, powerful, life-giving Word.

The same is true today. And like it was for Elijah, it's important that we remember it. When we look around at world events and the decline of our culture, the steady turning away from the Lord and his precepts, it's easy to get discouraged. We see here in the church more and more empty pews. And we pine away for some supposed good old days when the church was strong and popular and everyone was so faithful; but the truth is that those days really weren't as good as we like to imagine. Or we keep looking for some kind of mass revival that looms in the future; and maybe we can help speed its coming by developing the right evangelism program or by changing the way we do things so that the church will be more exciting and entertaining for outsiders. That'll bring'm in! But who said this revival is going to happen? Based on what should we expect it?

Meanwhile we miss or take for granted the work that the Lord *is* accomplishing by his quiet voice. We need to ask, are people being baptized into the name of the Triune God? Is God's Word being taught in its truth and purity? Are sinners being called to repentance? Are sins being forgiven for the sake of and in the name of the Lord Jesus? Are people receiving his body and blood for the strengthening of their faith? Are we being united with Christ and one another in a holy communion? Are we receiving the Holy Spirit? Is he working in us both to will

and to do acts of love and mercy? If so, if these things are happening to even a few, then the Lord is accomplishing his work among us.

We've been called to *follow* Jesus – to follow him wherever he leads. We haven't been called to be successful according to the standards of this world. We're called to be faithful—faithful even in what appears to be failure. The ministry of Jesus is a good example of this. Sure, he drew big crowds at first. Everyone came out to see his miracles and to be healed. But when he actually got down to teaching the nitty-gritty truths of the kingdom of God: deny yourself, take up your cross and follow me; humble yourself and you will be exalted; the greatest in the kingdom is the one who is servant of all; unless you eat my flesh and drink my blood you have no life in you – none of that was very popular. The crowd thinned out real quick. In the end, they all either turned on him or abandoned him. If you had been there to see it, you would have called the ministry of Jesus a great big failure. Certainly that's the way it appeared when he was nailed to the cross, beaten and bleeding, despised by men and cursed by God for our sakes. But even in this apparent failure he remained faithful, commending his spirit into the hands of his heavenly Father and trusting in him.

His faithfulness in failure, we now know and trust, won for us the greatest triumph of all; for by his death for sin he conquered death, and by his resurrection he raises us to life eternal. And we receive his gifts of salvation always only by hearing the Lord's quiet voice by which he makes and keeps us faithful.

I don't know what the future holds. It's in God's hands. But I do know that one of the greatest temptations we have in the church is to try to be successful; to ask: what attracts attention? What draws a crowd? What makes people happy and responds to their "felt needs"? The problem with "felt needs", which all of us have, is that most of them are sinful. By nature we crave that which is not good for us either physically or spiritually. The worship of Baal was all about felt needs. It was very popular; so popular that it led most of Israel straight to hell.

I pray that it is a long way off if it ever comes at all; but should the day come that you must close the doors of this church because there are too few people left to keep it going, the question to ask is not, were we successful? But rather, are we faithful? That's all that matters. Likewise, with each of us as individuals, there will come a day when the body fails. It's coming; I guarantee it. And again, when you face the failure of your physical frame, the only question that matters will be: are you faithful? Are you trusting the Lord Jesus by whose cross and passion you have forgiveness, salvation, and life eternal? If the answer is yes, then despite what people see when they look at your lifeless body there will be no failure, and the Lord will have accomplished exactly what he planned for you.

May our gracious God and Father grant it to each of us by continuing to speak to us his quiet, faith-creating, and life-giving Word. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!