

The Breaking Point – June 19, 2016

1 Kings 19:1-15a

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When you hear the name Jezebel, you may not remember exactly who she was, but you do know that she was up to no good. Then there's Elijah. He's one of the good guys. In the relationship between Elijah and Jezebel, there was no love lost. They didn't even try to hide their bitter hatred for one another. The only thing they had in common was their mutual loathing.

Elijah was a prophet of God during the reign of King Ahab of Israel. Jezebel had been a foreign princess. From the city of Tyre she was raised to follow the god's of her people – Baal and Asherah. When she married King Ahab, perhaps one might think that Jezebel would have been encouraged to follow the God of her new people, of her husband. But no, Jezebel was loyal to Baal – and considering that Ahab also worshipped Baal, there was no incentive for Jezebel to change. Maybe that would not have been such a problem, but when the king and queen worship foreign gods, the nation tends to follow.

The enmity between Elijah and Jezebel came to a head after a particular incident that occurred between Elijah and all Baal's prophets – 450 of them. We heard that story a few weeks ago. Elijah challenged the prophets of Baal to a contest to see whose god was the one true God.

The proposal was this – to set up two altars, each with an offering of a bull piled on a stack of wood. Without using fire, the prophets were to call upon their respective god to ignite the offering. The prophets of Baal chanted, prayed, cut their flesh – all day long they cried out to their god. And after a few hours of no success, Elijah began to mock them. Finally, they conceded defeat. Apparently Baal was not taking any calls that day.

Then it was Elijah's turn. So sure was he that God would light the offering on the altar, Elijah had jars of water poured on top, until water was pooling on the ground. He prayed to God, and fire lit the wood, the bull, and even the water on the ground. The Israelites who witnessed this fell to their knees, proclaiming the one true God. Elijah denounced Baal, and ordered all of Jezebel's prophets killed. All 450 of them. Queen Jezebel took this as a personal slight from Elijah.

As so we come to today's passage. And this background is important, I think, because here we have a powerful display by the one true God of Israel, witnessed by the people of Israel. Elijah is looking pretty good here. The prophets of Baal were left with nothing, and lost their

lives as a result. Jezebel was understandably angry. She sent a messenger to Elijah, threatening him – he would die, just as all her beloved prophets were slain.

Despite his huge success against the prophets of Baal, and despite the obvious faithfulness of God, Elijah suddenly turned tail and headed for the hills - literally. He was mortally afraid and left in a hurry. He went a long way, all the way into Juda hand then deep into the desert. When he came to a single broom tree, he collapsed at its base. He called out to God, overwhelmed, and asked to die.

Granted, Jezebel was the queen and her threats were not to be taken lightly, but Elijah's reaction seems a bit much. Unless it was the one piece that finally pushed him to his breaking point. He felt like a failure, like he could not even measure up to those prophets who came before him. He was pushed to his limits, and the thought of having to face any more challenges, made him long for death. "I'd rather die, than have to continue on like this."

He was at the breaking point. Life had become a chore, a struggle. He had a huge success over the prophets of Baal. Something he could hang onto for a bit. Maybe take a breather and bask in the glow of success. And though thousands of Israelites witnessed the event and claimed God as the true God of Israel – Elijah didn't hear that. All he heard was the words of Jezebel, "You're on my list, prophet!" That voice of failure, that voice of fear – conquered everything positive about what had happened. It was too much.

Over and over again, I hear people all around me talking about how tired they are. You've probably heard it too. In some ways it's becoming epidemic. So much going on. So much to do. Work responsibilities, family obligations, worry over world events, politics and gun violence, concerns about health, being bombarded by negativity in the media – it sometimes seems like our lives are an ongoing repository for drama. People are overwhelmed. Our little successes pale in comparison to the perceived and real failures. People become focused solely on the negative. Perhaps some of you have felt like that at some point, or are currently feeling it, or will in the future. That point where you feel as if you can't take anything else.

Have you ever had one of those days that just starts a bit off and goes downhill from there? From sleeping through the alarm, to finding you're out of milk, to realizing the pants you wanted to wear are in the laundry, to losing your keys, to running late and then finding your gas tank sitting on empty. You get the idea...you wonder if you'll ever even make it out of the house, let alone get through the day. A lot of little things that build upon each other, stress upon stress, pushing you to a breaking point, until finally you hit the wall.

Well, imagine if your whole life felt like that. And then I think you'll understand where Elijah is – collapsed at the foot of a solitary broom tree in the Judean desert. Completely wiped out. God sent an angel to feed Elijah, seeing to his needs and preparing him for a journey of 40 days. Elijah went and arrived at Mt Horeb, also known as Mt Sinai, the place where Moses met with the Lord.

By this time, after traveling alone for so long, you might have thought Elijah would have been recharged, rejuvenated. He's had time to step back, process everything, maybe gain a bit of perspective. He had his down time, took his vacation from the pressures of everyday life as a prophet of God. By now he should be ready to get back at it, right? Not necessarily.

Elijah was still feeling pretty down. He arrived at the mountain, and found a cave. God asked him, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" God will ask this question of him again later. And this is where Elijah's pain comes out. "I have been zealous in my work for you, but the people have all turned away, tossed aside your altars, and killed your prophets. I am the only one left that follows you, and now they want to kill me, too." Yep, he was focused only on the negative - he forgot about all those people who turned back to God, and didn't count the ones who never turned away in the first place.

But here I think Elijah is stuck in a type of depression. He can't see beyond himself. He feels bad, and he is wallowing in his bad feelings. Again he can't get beyond his breaking point, and doesn't see, doesn't want to see, a way out. He is caught down in a pit of despair. And in this pit, he has a distorted vision of reality.

People who are caught up in despair are generally not aware of the big picture. They see only themselves and the circumstance, and they are struck by the weight of that which is pressing upon them. There is a feeling of being out of control of what's going on. It can seem truly insurmountable - so begins a cycle of, "there's nothing I can do about it, so why bother?" And the downward spiral continues. People in this state tend to have little energy or drive. Simply managing to exist is about all they seem to be able to handle, and sometimes that is even too much. And in the face of such negativity, people may give up hope.

Elijah remains in the cave, and later God comes back to him and asks the same question, "Elijah, what are you doing here?" And the prophet gives the same answer. God is not satisfied with this response, and he tells his reluctant prophet to get up and get back to work. He has some kings to go anoint, and a successor to mentor. "Go and do the work I have set before you."

Elijah has had a time of rest, of refreshment. He has communed with God. But he is still focused inward, afraid of going back to face the outside world. It is safer, barricaded in a cave on a mountain – perhaps miserable, but at least free from harm and worry and the outside pressures. He is reluctant to get back up.

It's interesting, though. If you've ever know someone in this position, one thing that seems to help is to get up, get out and do something for someone else. To get back to doing those things that make an impact. Put the focus on someone else rather than self.

At the end of numerous mission trips, I have heard people say how amazed they are by the experience. They thought they were coming out to do some work to help someone else – to make an impact in someone's life. But in the end, the worker finds that he or she has been affected in a significant way – changed for the better, empowered, rejuvenated. Oh they may feel tired from the work done, but because it was work to help someone else, meaningful work, God's work – they too received a benefit. When we do God's work – focusing on others, rather than on ourselves, we find ourselves empowered. Now granted, there is serious depression that requires medical intervention to help us get ourselves refocused and back on track, and I am in full support of that.

But I think in the case of Elijah, he just needed a push from God and a change in his perspective. And so God told him to get up and get moving. Elijah needed to get back to doing God's work. To focus more on the mission at hand instead of being distracted by all those things that kept him caught in the stress of living in the world.

Elijah had a lot going on in his life. He was a powerful prophet, and had important work to do. Over time he allowed the world to get to him, draining him of his energy and his purpose. Until finally, even in the aftermath of a great success, the threat of an angry queen caused him to succumb to fear and run away. God nurtured him and restored him and sent him back out.

We too get distracted by the goings on of the world. The demands on our senses, our time and our energy can drain us to the point of exhaustion. What little escape we find may not be enough to restore us. We may draw inward, seeing ourselves to be alone in what appears to be a faithless world. Yet God is there, right with us, offering us strength and restoration and a way back. God calls us to God's purpose. Serving God and serving others. When we return to that path that God has set before, we will find our way.

