

June 26, 2022

1 Kings 19:9-21

“Go Back the Way You Came!”

Pilgrim Lutheran Church
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Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

In an article about our Old Testament lesson for this morning Jim Erwin writes: “In the Bible, the prophet Elijah once had a ‘nervous breakdown.’ He had to deal with people and things which brought him down, which discouraged him. By studying his experience we can learn how God deals with us when we’re over worked and over strained.” I looked up the expression “nervous breakdown,” and came across the following definition from the Mayo Clinic:

The term "nervous breakdown" is sometimes used by people to describe a stressful situation in which they're temporarily unable to function normally in day-to-day life. It's commonly understood to occur when life's demands become physically and emotionally overwhelming. The term was frequently used in the past to cover a variety of mental disorders, but it's no longer used by mental health professionals today.

So, did Elijah have a nervous breakdown? If we use the definition from Mayo Clinic, I think that it is safe to say that he did on some level. This begs the next question: why did he have one? Well, the wickedness of the so-called people of God was overwhelming. He confronts that wickedness by facing 850 angry prophets of Baal. After an amazing and miraculous intervention by God, where Elijah successfully confronts and defeats these wicked prophets of Baal, he finds himself being discouraged and threatened by no ordinary woman. Queen Jezebel not only wants him dead but she has the power to make it happen.

In the midst of the powerful actions of God, Elijah was placed in a position where he had to endure a rejection and danger so great that he was compelled to drop everything and run for his life. And life had become miserable. Like Elijah we have the gospel of Jesus which is described in Romans 1:16 as “the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes.” But we do live in an unbelieving world where people not only hate the gospel of Jesus but also those of us who have the audacity to proclaim and live it. This makes life miserable when you take your faith seriously. So we feel like running away. We feel like Elijah who ran some 90 miles until he came to a broom tree and sat down. We read before our lesson:

And he asked that he might die, saying, “It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life, for I am no better than my fathers.” And he lay down and slept under a broom tree. And behold, an angel touched him and said to him, “Arise and eat.” And he looked, and behold, there was at his head a cake baked on hot stones and a jar of water. And he ate and drank and lay down again. And the angel of the Lord came again a second time and touched him and said, “Arise and eat, for the journey is too great for you.” And he arose and ate and drank, and went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights to ... the mount of God.

Food from the messenger of the Lord and his touch! With the strength of that food he traveled forty days and forty nights to the mountain of Sinai which is the place where Moses gave the law as a guardian for the promise. What is important to understand is that when we have those moments when we want this miserable life to come to an end, it is the food that the Lord gives us that will sustain us to his presence, where he makes it clear that he is guarding all of his promises and will get us home in due time.

Elijah was tired of it all. He was down and lonely. He felt a certain self-pity for the journey that he was traveling. Perhaps we could say that he was burned out and frustrated to the point where he just didn't feel like he could go on another day. Have you ever felt like that? Most of the time we feel something like that when we think that we need some sort of a vacation. The truth is that we need the food that comes to us in the gospel and sacraments. We need the provision of the Lord and the reassurance that he will guard our hearts and minds in the cross of Jesus and get us to our destination in the face of our Savior.

Jezebel is still with us in another form to this very day. This nation and world has had just about enough of Biblical Christianity. The Jezebel that we find in unbelievers everywhere is one who would turn our homes, schools, government, and church upside down. She has always been around but in our day she is becoming louder and her objective is more defined and forceful. She is willing to scorch everything to get rid of Jesus and his followers and replace it all with a religion of heaven on earth. For the Christian who struggles and is overwhelmed there might be the echo of Elijah: "I have had enough, Lord! Take my life! Get me out of here! Take me home to heaven!" But this is not the way. Listen to the words of our lesson:

The Lord said, "Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by." Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake came a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper. When Elijah heard it, he pulled his cloak over his face and went out and stood at the mouth of the cave."

The power of the Lord is concealed in a gentle whisper! This is where we must find our comfort for now until we see our Jesus face to face. We find our strength in the gentle whisper that the Father so loved us that he sent his Son to absorb unto himself our sin and death that we might have the forgiveness of sins and heaven. The Holy Spirit comforts us with Jesus and all that comes through him. It's all going to be okay. The Lord is still guarding our hearts and minds in Christ and is still able to give us the peace that passes all understanding.

And then comes the tough words that we may not want to hear. The Lord asks Elijah, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" Now keep in mind that the Lord has given him the food and touch to make it to the mountain where he might be reassured that everything is going to be alright. The Lord will fulfill his promises and is guarding them diligently. But the question that the Lord asks is not to gather information. Rather, it is a question that forces Elijah and us to examine ourselves. What's next? Shall we live in a state of running and wanting to die? It is in the context of the strength that the Lord has given to Elijah that we hear what's next - and truly understand that these words are for us:

And the Lord said to him, "Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus. And when you arrive, you shall anoint Hazael to be king over Syria. And Jehu the son of Nimshi you shall anoint to be king over Israel, and Elisha the son of Shaphat of Abel-meholah you shall anoint to be prophet in your place. And the one who escapes from the sword of Hazael shall

Jehu put to death, and the one who escapes from the sword of Jehu shall Elisha put to death. Yet I will leave seven thousand in Israel, all the knees that have not bowed to Baal, and every mouth that has not kissed him.”

In short, the Lord says to Elijah **Go Back the Way You Came!** And Elijah went from there. He is told by the Lord to go right back in the thick of it all with simply the strength of the gentle whisper of the gospel and the promise that all will be alright. In our way of speaking, the Lord is saying to Elijah, “I’ve got this! You go and do what must be done and leave things to me. Let go of it and fear, love, and trust in me no matter what! I am with you and will see you through!”

The Lord is asking you and me today: “What are you doing here?” Yes. What are we doing? In the power and comfort of the gospel, and in the reassurances that the Lord will keep his promises and see us through, we are to go back the way we came. And as we go back, what’s next? We are to continue to be faithful to his gospel and speak that gospel to one another and a dying, unbelieving world regardless of what they do to us. He has spoken to us with a gentle whisper and we gently whisper the truth to all.

So, when we tend to ask: where is the Lord in all of this? He is here in the gentle whisper of the preaching of the gospel and administration of the sacraments - the means of grace. He is with us always to the very end. And he says to us: “Do not be afraid. Go back the way you came and face what must be faced. Live your life in me. Be my witnesses to the ends of the earth. And when you are done with the work I have given you to do to preserve a remnant I will bring you to my home where all your misery will be remembered no more!” May we rejoice and go back the way we came.

Amen.

Pastor Brock Abbott

<https://www.patheos.com/blogs/jimerwin/2014/08/10/1-kings-191-21-gods-prescription-discouragement-depression/>

<https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/depression/expert-answers/nervous-breakdown/faq-20057830#:~:text=The%20term%20%22nervous%20breakdown%22%20is,become%20physically%20and%20emotionally%20overwhelming.>