

**New Store/Maysville Presbyterian Churches June 19, 2022**

**A Father's Care 1 Kings 19:1-15a Luke 8:26-39**

If one is a close reader of the Old Testament, you will find multiple references to the prophet Elijah. In Jewish circles he is considered one of the most — if not the most — beloved of prophets. At the dinner table of many traditional (i.e. kosher) families there is always an empty chair and a full place setting called the Elijah place (or chair); such is also found at most Seder meals, regardless of Jewish practice. Also, he is frequently held in as great esteem as Moses by Jews, Christians, and Muslims. The Gospel accounts of Jesus at his Transfiguration tell of the Christ standing with Moses and Elijah, prompting Peter to exclaim that such personages should be honored with three tents or dwellings or altars. And, as mentioned, Elijah is honored in Islam as one of the true prophets. So, in a variety of ways, Elijah is worth spending a bit of time with this Father's Day.

Our reading from 1 Kings may seem familiar. Elijah has fled from those who want to take his life. He eventually arrives at Mt. Horeb where he has a direct encounter with God who gives him his "marching orders" in which he is to be a kingmaker for two countries and tap Elisha as his replacement. Now this all sounds very brief and direct, and maybe a bit ho-hum, but like Elijah himself, the fuller telling is not and has so many things going on that one could spend a month of Sundays preaching and teaching on just these 15 verses!

Have you ever experienced times when things seem to overwhelm you? Perhaps it's this COVID pandemic, a serious global health situation that has been going on now into a third year! Tired of the roller coaster announcements of surges and ebbs that the virus is making; frustrated with the back and forth debates about how to protect yourself and your loved ones; wishing our lives would, or could, get back to "normal," you might be tempted to chuck it all and

retreat into the woods, or, as Elijah did, run off into the wilderness.

Now Elijah had good reasons to run off. The king of the northern kingdom of Israel was Ahab who, like his father before him, was **not** a very good king. And, his choice in wives wasn't the best either. Her name has become the eponym of a vindictive, manipulating, vengeful, and cruel woman. Just to set the tone, Jezebel wanted Elijah's head on a platter for thwarting her plans to draw Israel away from God and for killing over 400 of the priests of Ba'al, the deity she worshiped. So, this prophet of God has run off into the wilderness.

We may not ever be in such dire straits, but still, as I said, we may find ourselves feeling like the whole world is against us — maybe it's from efforts to get others to listen to reason about gun control, or abortion, or immigration, or war, or health care, or parenting, or education, or climate change, or the class economy or... well, it may be a thousand other issues, events, situations, and relationships. In all cases, we come to a point where we want to give up, to abandon

the effort, when we feel like we've had enough.

Elijah had indeed reached that point. He no longer had the energy to keep going. Like the widow who was ready to die in the midst of the famine that he himself had prophesied, Elijah was done; ready for God to take him away from the troubles of the world. But, God wasn't done with Elijah. Like a father who loves his child, God cares for Elijah in the wilderness at the depth of his despair. God's angel twice brings him a wheaten form of johnny cake and a jug of water to sustain him on his journey from the far north to the far south of the countries of Israel and Judah.

Martin Luther King, Jr. tells his own Elijah story when he was at a similar moment. Having received credible threats on his life and against his family during the midst of the Montgomery bus boycott, King wanted to give up. He prays in the middle of the night, in the kitchen with a cup of cooling coffee. As he tells it: "I was ready to give up. With my cup of coffee sitting untouched before me, I tried to think of a way to move out of the picture without appearing a coward. In

of a way to move out of the picture without appearing a coward. In this state of exhaustion, when my courage had all but gone, I decided to take my problem to God. With my head in my hands, I bowed over the kitchen table and prayed aloud. "The words I spoke to God that midnight are still vivid in my memory.

'I am here taking a stand for what I believe is right. But now I am afraid. The people are looking to me for leadership and if I stand before them without strength and courage, they too will falter. I am at

the end of my powers. I have nothing left. I've come to the point where I can't face it alone.' "At that moment, I experienced the presence of the Divine as I had never experienced God before. It seemed as though I could hear the quiet assurance of an inner voice saying: 'Stand up for justice, stand up for truth; and God will be at your side forever.' Almost at once my fear began to go. My uncertainty disappeared. I was ready to face anything."

Like Elijah from his journey through the wilderness and with his encounter with God on Mt. Horeb, King's faith and trust in God was renewed. His final words earlier would still test him when shortly after that midnight epiphany his house is bombed and his family barely escapes with their lives. "Strangely enough," King writes in recall, "I accepted the word of the bombing calmly. My religious experience a few nights before had given me strength to face it." News of the bombing brought a crowd to the site. Soon this crowd became a mob, pressing up against the shattered house and shouting for vengeance. King mounted his broken porch and raised his arms. "We must meet hate with love," he called out. "Remember, if I am stopped, this movement will not stop because God is with this movement. Go home with this glorious faith and this radiant assurance." The mob dissolved, their mood reversed, the message of gospel nonviolence ringing in their hearts. Now let's return to that much older story.

We heard how the once bold Hebrew prophet is frightened out of his wits. Queen Jezebel has promised to have him killed. So he flees, he

runs far, taking refuge in the wilderness. He sits down beneath a solitary tree, and prays that he will die before he is captured by her soldiers. Utterly exhausted, he falls asleep. Something touches him and a voice wakes him, commanding him to eat. Is it an angel? Food and water are beside him, and he eats and drinks, then falls asleep again. Once more the touch, the voice, the command to eat and drink, and now there is mention of a journey he must take. The prophet gets up, eats and drinks, then travels a long distance to a mountain holy to his people. He finds the cave he is looking for and spends the night there. It is not a quiet night. The voice of the Lord himself addresses him in that dark cave, asking him his business there at that holy site.

The prophet's answer is self-centered and despairing. He's been faithful, unlike everybody else. He recites all the bad news of recent times, none of the good news. He claims to be the only one the Lord can count on. This solitary prophet is focused entirely on himself and frightened out of his wits.

Like a loving and caring father, the Lord summons his prophet to stand outside the cave. But, before Elijah decides to move, the Lord puts on a show of power for him: hurricane force wind, earthquake, and flames of fire. Then comes silence. The Lord is not in the wind,

the earthquake, the fire. Where the prophet encounters the Lord is in the silence. And so the prophet finally steps out from the cave. Again the Lord asks Elijah what he is doing there. And the prophet's answer is the same as before, self-centered and despairing.

Like a good coach, the Lord does not refute his prophet, but tells him what he is to do. The Lord points him to a larger picture, a more

promising reality than the prophet had imagined. The prophet learns that a future awaits him, and that it is bigger than himself. What is our future? Will we lean on God, fully trusting in God's care and love to carry on, to reenter the fray, to be the light to the nations as God calls?

**Let us pray:** Heavenly Father, Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer God who is in the wind and in the fire and in the trembling of the earth, we lift our hearts and minds to listen to the silence and to receive your care and love. We pray that by the power of Your Holy Spirit, we may face all that the world places before us; that we are able to continue to be your witnesses and prophets and teachers and leaders in this community so that your love, grace, mercy, peace, and hope become visible and the world becomes a better place. Strengthen us for the journey. We pray all this in the name of Your beloved Son, Jesus the Christ. Amen.