

“Starting Afresh”

1 Kings 19/1-4,8-15a

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What discourages you? What really knocks you down? What makes you feel like giving up? Discouragement is not really something you might associate with the fast-paced Prophet Elijah, with prophecies to deliver, a king to confront, evil to combat, miracles to perform, and then a big dramatic showdown on Mt. Carmel with the prophets of Baal. It's there that Elijah and God win a decisive victory and God breaks the drought by sending rain. But the struggle is not yet finished. Elijah is still in jeopardy—he is a hunted man. Queen Jezebel is wild with anger promising to kill Elijah. And Elijah flees in fear for his life into the wilderness.

I'd have to say that Elijah is one of my favourite characters in Scripture. If you are looking for engaging drama in the Bible—the stories of Elijah are among the best. Yet despite the exciting things that God has done through Elijah, when we meet up with him today he's wizened up with fear and discouragement. Elijah is completely burned-out. He is deeply distressed; a broken disappointed man. Despite all the wins, he now can see only the darkest side of everything. He's not just down-in-the-dumps; he begs to die! He wants to walk away from his calling as a prophet and simply quit his ministry! “I have had enough, Lord...take my life,” he says to God. All he can do is sleep.

There is an old fable that is told about the advertisement that appeared in the newspaper indicating that the devil was putting all his tools up for sale. They would all be laid out for public inspection with the prices marked on them. Those who went there were able to see that some were very treacherous tools indeed – hate, envy, lying, addictions, adultery, murder, etc. And then quite apart from the others lay another one that looked pretty harmless but had an exceptionally high price tag on it, twice as expensive as the others. Someone asked, “What is the name of this tool, and why is it priced so high?” The devil answered, “That's discouragement. It's so worn because I use it so much...on almost everyone. And it's priced so high because it has been so very valuable to me. I find it more useful than all the other tools. I can do more with that one than with all the others. I can pry into a person's heart with that one better than I can with any of the others.”

If the Prophet Elijah—with all his high-flying miracles—can fall prey to fear and discouragement, no wonder it also happens to us. How does discouragement affect you? Sometimes it's at work when our gifts and abilities don't feel valued or trusted. Sometimes it can be at home when there are difficulties in our primary relationships that

discourage us. It can also be here in the church when we've been hurt or knocked down by things that have happened which have left us hurt and disillusioned. The joy drains out of our service.

Discouragement can also happen as the result of a diagnosis. At age 13, Wall Street bestselling author, Karyn Gordon was called into her psychologist's office and told: "You got a problem and we know what it is. You've got a learning disability and you're going to be lucky to finish High School." With those words it was like her whole world exploded. Karyn felt completely hopeless and discouraged. The ride home with her parents was very quiet. Then her father said: "Karyn, from this day forward we will no longer ask to receive your report card. Because your report card is not reflective of your effort. And in this house we care more about efforts than the results. Our question will always be did you try your absolute best—because you can control that—but you cannot control the outcome. And with that the tiny seeds of hope were planted for Gordon who is now a best-selling author and CEO of DK Leadership.

Just like Karyn's wise Dad, God doesn't leave Elijah alone in his desert of fear and discouragement. An angel comes—touches Elijah—and commands him to eat. Food is given by the angel: a warm cake/bread and water; everything needed—and a reminder of everything God has done through Elijah for that discouraged widow in Zarephath, who was down to her last bit of oil and meal. God brings sustenance in places where there is none; with God even places of death can be transformed into arenas of life.

Yet Elijah still can't see it. Even with the miraculous food his despair is not overcome; he is exhausted and sleeps again. The angel feeds him a second time. This time he regains his strength—strength enough for a 40-day walk into the desert to Mt Horeb (aka Sinai). The great Mountain of Divine calling and confrontation—the mount of burning bush and ten commandments. Arriving at Mt. Sinai, he falls asleep exhausted in a cave, an odd place for a prophet, with a message to proclaim against the crown.

And God meets Elijah there in his discouragement and hopelessness: "What are you doing here?" God asks. In Elijah's response we begin to understand what's going on. "I have been very zealous for the Lord..." says Elijah. "My passion for God has put me here and now I am the only one left on your side – I am the only one that's doing anything." I can hear a bit of Martha here: "And my sister has left everything to me." When we get discouraged we can get to thinking that "everything depends on me." Our perspective gets distorted. Elijah has over-valued his own significance; he feels sorry for himself. Discouragement does that to us.

But God will not leave Elijah alone in his desert of discouragement; God meets discouragement and self-pity with revelation—and the opportunity for a fresh start. And like Moses before him, at Sinai, Elijah experiences the overpowering forceful coming of Yahweh. The wind, the earthquake and the fire all point to Moses' meeting with God on Mt Sinai – but things are different this time. Elijah does not meet God in these; instead Elijah meets God in the “sound of sheer silence.” Not even the great Divine special effects will work with Elijah – they fail to make a difference. It is only the sheer silence that brings Elijah forth from his cave to meet God.

But Elijah doesn't receive pity from Yahweh—instead Elijah is reminded of his call; God gives him his purpose back. God is focused on public mission – the big plan of overcoming the darkness of Baal. To this prophet who is still licking his wounds the call is “GO!” NO more sitting around feeling sorry for yourself – do something! It reminds me of the wisdom given by psychologist and Christian, Karl Menninger, to those in the depths of discouragement and hopelessness: “Go” he said, “Get out of the house, lock your door and go across the street to help your neighbour.” Because as Menninger famously said, “Love cures people, both the ones who give it and the ones who receive it.”

Elijah says he is “alone.” So God corrects his math; Elijah is far from alone. His sense of his own importance and the challenging forces at play have blinded him. There are allies Elijah has not even noticed. He is not left alone—there are 7000 others as God reminds him in verse 18. Elijah has no reason for self-pity. God's team is strong and vibrant. By the end of the chapter Elisha has been recruited as Elijah's right hand man and Elijah is prepared to carry on in mission. Elijah is moved from fear to resolve, from hopelessness to fresh energy. The work of God cannot stop and will not be stopped by our weakness and weariness; the great plan of God must proceed and God will provide for that.

Does God come alongside us to overcome our discouragement today? Karyn Gordon would say yes; she experienced that through her father. And I would say yes! God does come alongside to help us start afresh. In my early years of ministry I remember sitting in a pew at the opening service of the Synod of the Atlantic Synod. I was about to be installed as Moderator. In the traditional Atlantic Synod this was still a big deal. The lieutenant governor came to our opening banquet. Yet in that opening Service I was miles away in a place of fear and discouragement that left me immobilized. As I sat in that service knowing that in an hour I was going to have to stand before this whole assembly and preside, all I could say to God was, I can't do this; I'm too tired, too discouraged, I can't do this.” And then God met me during Communion when something extraordinary happened. As I held the bread in my hand, an image came to

me; a picture of everyone seated at a table, except me. I had fallen off my chair and was lying on the floor at everyone's feet—immobilized. And then all of a sudden, I felt the firm hand of Jesus in my hand and he said, here, get up and sit here and I promise to sit here with you. "It will be okay," Jesus said to me, "I promise I'll sit right here with you; you'll have everything you need." And as I ate the bread and drank from the cup the presence of the risen Jesus transformed my fear and discouragement to courage. The companionship of Jesus can do this. Indeed our God does not forget us, but sends sustenance even into places that seem dead and barren. For God's visitations can transform contexts of death into arenas of life. The landscape of life for those who serve the risen Christ is laden with God's good resources.