

Sermon “When Fear Takes the Wheel”

Kirk of St James

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I read a book several years ago called “Speak like Churchill and Stand like Lincoln” by James Humes. Humes was a speechwriter who had written for five different American Presidents among other high-ranking officials. One of my favourite stories that he shared in the book, is a story I also shared here back in 2013, but I wanted to revisit it considering our scripture today.

He once told a story about an old friend he had run into, and the conversation that ensued when he asked about his friend’s daughter Jenny, and how her first year of university went. His friend just shook his head in response and pulled a letter from the inside of his coat pocket and handed it to him. The letter was as follows:

Dear Mom and Dad,

I won’t be home for Christmas. I am dropping out of college and moving to Nepal. I am pregnant and my boyfriend is a Buddhist. I am moving with him to his home in the Himalayan Mountains so we can raise our baby among his Buddhist relatives. Could you please mail me my winter jacket before we leave?

Love Always,

Jenny

PS I’m not pregnant. I’m not becoming a Buddhist. I’m not moving to Nepal. But I did fail calculus and biology. It does put those grades more into perspective though doesn’t it?

See you at Christmas,

Jenny

As someone who struggled with my math marks every year, I can appreciate the attempt to try and distract your parents from the realities of your grades!

When we come to Elijah today, we find someone in crisis, unable to see their way through the problems in their life. Just before this passage Elijah experienced one of the most powerful moments in his ministry, so the fact that we find him running away (almost immediately) in absolute fear is rather shocking.

Elijah was a prophet with a message no one wanted to hear. Queen Jezebel has been trying to establish the worship of Baal in Israel, and Elijah is in direct opposition to her. He does not want to see Israel turn away from God, and become idolatrous, so he speaks against what is happening, and becomes the most-wanted enemy of Jezebel. In a confrontation with her and her prophets Elijah mocks them, and after God accepts his offering, Elijah then has all the prophets killed. While one might think such a show of power from God, and the ultimate triumph of Elijah as he proves that what he has been saying all along is true would be a turning point in his career it leads to the opposite.

Jezebel vows she will have Elijah killed for what he did to her prophets, and inexplicably instead of standing his ground he runs away—over one hundred miles in fact, and even after going that distance he then flees even further into the desert. How does Elijah, who so confidently proclaims his message, who tells Israel what they must do, who challenges the 450 prophets of Baal become a chaotic mess in the desert? “Elijah, defender of God and the covenant, enemy of corrupt leaders of his own community and other nations who have abandoned the one true God...” who has a legendary showdown on a mountain, is reduced to begging for God to take his life because Jezebel threatened him. It defies belief.

As we listen to Elijah lay out his complaints to God and the reasons for his fleeing it becomes clear that Elijah at some point has lost perspective. He no longer sees the power of God, no longer seems to believe in the promises of God, and perhaps saddest of all no longer appears

to remember why it is important for him to try and protect and lead the people. Elijah's response to fear is likely one we can empathize with. When he feels threatened and afraid he flees, trying to put as much distance between himself and the threat as possible. We can understand that response. We know what it is to feel afraid, tired, alone, to have to face our own self doubt and negative opinions. God's initial question to Elijah does not sound overly sympathetic— "What are you doing here Elijah?" and Elijah lists his complaints, many of which have a lot of merit.

In response God hears Elijah and then allows him to experience something that very few people in the bible have experienced—the Lord passes by Elijah, and that is a show of divine favor. In doing so God demonstrates that he has heard Elijah's fears, God knows that Elijah is afraid for his life and feeling discouraged—and none of those things affect God's favor or love for Elijah. Then comes the sad part of this story, after God passes by Elijah, and demonstrates who God is, Elijah still cannot let go of his fear. When God asks Elijah for the second time why he is there Elijah responds with the same list of complaints. Unable to let go, unable to trust, Elijah does not allow what he has experienced to shape his life in any way, which is incredibly sad. It would be a bit like Moses experiencing the burning bush, but instead of it launching his prophetic career, Moses turns around and goes home.

One of my greatest fears in life is that I somehow allow fear to keep me from acting in ways that I should. That fear would keep me paralyzed and unable to move forward. Yet we know what it is to fear, to feel uncertain, to feel as though we could not possibly do that thing that lingers in the back of our minds. Elijah was scared and overwhelmed and he temporarily lost perspective; we understand what that is like. God reminds us to have courage, to not be afraid, and to trust.

One of the commentators I read spoke of how they have been a birdwatcher for many years and they described how part of their brain has been so shaped over time to pay attention to birds that he notices their presence even when not consciously looking for them. He went on to say that what often amazes him is how many people do not see birds because of course they're not looking for them however, they may see things that he does not because their patterns of attention are triggered by other expectations. Much like my sister, who is an aquatic biologist. Any trip to the beach will involve her poking around in puddles, examining marine life, and puzzling over things. When we train ourselves to look for certain things in our lives, the patterns become easier to see and recognize.

Elijah reminds us, through his struggle today that it is important in our faith lives to remain connected to the root and source of our faith. Not to institutions, or religious figures, but to God. The more we look for God's presence in our lives, the easier it is to hear God's call, and to have the courage to act. "Sunday worship is the time we gather with others on the same path, practicing Sabbath and listening for the still small voice that reminds us of the project of life we are constructing together." Together we support one another, the community around us and beyond, as we encourage each other to keep listening for the call of God. Every time we work to start a new outreach, a new ministry, try and new idea, we are trusting that God will lead us. Even when we get it wrong, we trust that God will call us back. I wonder, if the thing that Elijah needed most, was a few people—a community around him, to encourage him when things became hard. May God bless this time together, and the work of our hands we prepare to go back into the world and answer God's call as best we can.