

Ninth Sunday after Pentecost

YAHWEH DOESN'T QUIT ON QUITTERS

I Kings 19:9-18

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Analysis by Cathy Lessmann

9At that place he came to a cave, and spent the night there. Then the word of the Lord came to him, saying, 'What are you doing here, Elijah?' 10He answered, 'I have been very zealous for the Lord, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away.'

11 He said, 'Go out and stand on the mountain before the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by.' Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake; 12and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence. 13When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. Then there came a voice to him that said, 'What are you doing here, Elijah?' 14He answered, 'I have been very zealous for the Lord, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away.' 15Then the Lord said to him, 'Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus; when you arrive, you shall anoint Hazael as king over Aram. 16Also you shall anoint Jehu son of Nimshi as

king over Israel; and you shall anoint Elisha son of Shaphat of Abel-meholah as prophet in your place. 17Whoever escapes from the sword of Hazael, Jehu shall kill; and whoever escapes from the sword of Jehu, Elisha shall kill. 18Yet I will leave seven thousand in Israel, all the knees that have not bowed to Baal, and every mouth that has not kissed him.'

Diagnosis: Giving Up on God

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *Elijah Gives up and Throws a Pity Party*

When things got tough for him, Elijah simply gave up and quit. He deserted his post whining that he might as well give up and die, Yahweh just wasn't doing enough for him. When he climbed Mt. Horeb (Sinai), no doubt he was expecting a repeat performance of the Moses-and-God-on-the-mountain spectacular, that Yahweh would reassure him with a dazzling show of power, just as he had done for Moses.

How like Elijah we are! When our lives get rough, we complain bitterly that God is ignoring us and we demand that he "prove" himself with a convincing show of force, say, a healing or some sort of windfall advantage.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *"What Are You Doing Here?"*

Two times, Yahweh asks Elijah, "What are you doing here?"—the implication being that he really ought to be somewhere else. That question expose Elijah's heart-problem: he just doesn't trust that Yahweh is involved in or cares (enough) about his life and work. He doesn't trust Yahweh to get him through his troubles. (If he did, he'd be back at basecamp.) He doesn't trust that Yahweh will handle the situations he confronts. In addition, his heart is hardened against the unfaithful

Israelites. Instead of expecting God to intercede on Israel's20 behalf—as Moses had done in that exact same place way back when, Elijah wants Yahweh to wreak vengeance on them.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *The Sound of Sheer Silence*

But Yahweh doesn't stoop to responding to Elijah's promptings. Yahweh does not reveal himself in the mountain-splitting "great wind" that whips through, nor in the earthquake, not even in the fire. All spectacular shows. Instead, Yahweh passes by with "sheer silence." The problem with giving up on Yahweh is that Yahweh finally has to give up on us! One ends up with no god at all, most especially, the one who can and does make a difference. Only silence. Nothing.

Prognosis: God Never Gives Up

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *Yahweh Passes By (and Stays a Bit)*

Yet Yahweh doesn't quit on Elijah the quitter. His "sheer silence" (so un-spectacular!) speaks volumes. He keeps up their relationship by asking a second time, "What are you doing here?" (v. 13). Then with incredible mercy-that-doesn't-give-up, which answers-when-you-don't-deserve-it, Yahweh addresses all Elijah's concerns: He names a successor, he promises that violence will be handled, He reassures Elijah that he's not the only faithful one left.

We now recognize this mercy to Elijah as a manifestation of what Yahweh had been doing throughout Israel's history, namely, keeping his Promise that he would fix the world and make all creation right/new. We later-believers (starting with the disciples) can even pinpoint the exact time when Yahweh's Promising "Word" became flesh and blood and became Emmanuel, God

with us. In fact, we (all) have witnessed the grand finale, the concluding denouement of Yahweh's Promise that breaks the silence in the death and resurrection of Emmanuel Jesus, when death, eternal silence, was overcome. Funny how that seemed as such an un-spectacular and pathetic show of no force but yet ended up being so powerful that the entire cosmos has never been the same.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Elijah Trusts Yahweh*

Even without a spectacular show of power but a mere patient Presence, Elijah's encounter causes him to trust Yahweh once again. When we encounter Jesus' death and resurrection, we become convinced that God doesn't quit on us either, that we have Emmanuel, God with us—forever! Being so comforted, we trust Jesus to get us through both our lives and our deaths. He, after all, is how Yahweh's Promise is spoken.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *"Hi ho, hi ho. It's off to work we go!"*

The narrative continues, "So [Elijah] set out from there" (v. 19). That is, Elijah goes back to work, no longer afraid, even though the work is still dangerous and lonesome. He even undergoes an attitude adjustment towards those wretched, unfaithful Israelites. He doesn't quit on them anymore, but keeps returning to them with his admonitions and warnings. Likewise we can and do today. When troubles and tough times come, we don't succumb to depression or give up. Au contraire! Instead, you might catch us with joyful smiles on our faces, whistling "Hi ho, hi ho, it's off to work we go." We can face anything, knowing God-is-with-us (Jesus). We can treat those around us in the brand-new way we've been treated—with kindness and love. And rather than seek revenge on others' callousness and nastiness, we find ways to share with them how they too can enjoy God's eternal presence.