

**Sermon** August 11, 2024  
[1 Kings 19:4-8]

*The Pouting Prophet*  
Rev. Dan Peterson

Grace to you and peace this twelfth Sunday after Pentecost, from God, the Creator, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus, who is the Christ. Amen.

I think it's easy to dismiss the story of Elijah. That is, the story taken from scripture in our First Reading. Like John, Elijah pouts and whines. I was thinking, we learn about him being taken up in the chariot of fire afterward, and on the back of that chariot of fire would be one of those signs that says, "Baby on Board."

In verse four, we're told exactly what happens. He asked that he might die! "It is enough," he says. "Now, O Lord, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors."

Now Jonah, as you know, had his reasons. In that story, Jonah is called by God to proclaim the message of law, and then forgiveness to the Ninevites. And Jonah doesn't like that. The Ninevites don't deserve God's favor. They deserve God's wrath. And so Jonah becomes *so angry* by the end of the story that he asks God to let him die.

In this case, Elijah sounds similar, but there is more to the story. Beyond the initial wish he expresses to die, we learn that an angel brings him bread, and water, after he had been sleeping. Now, some translations make this more interesting; they talk about how the angel brings him cake and water – but my favorite is the International Standard Version, which says, "So he looked around and there near his head was a *muffin* sitting on top of some heated stones, along with a jar of water." So you just imagine that the angel maybe conveniently stopped by Palestine's most famous bakery, Macrina, and then took them over to Elijah after he had awoken.

Elijah sleeps. Then the angel returns, and he's invited to eat again. "Get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you," the angel says, reminiscent of what my friend Beatrice Lawrence calls "the Jewish mother of Genesis 3," who makes sure that Adam and Eve in that story have coats as they venture out into the world.

Here, the Jewish mother in the story is the angel, who wants to make sure that Elijah has enough to eat to sustain him in the story.

Finally, we learn that Elijah runs 40 days and 40 nights to Mount Horeb, which is another name from Mount Sinai, where Moses received the great revelation and with it the ten Commandments from God. We know, of course, that running 40 days and 40 nights is a recipe for death! *Nobody* can do that, except maybe Jim Margard and Marc Oplinger, both of whom have run in marathons, I believe.

Either way, the story at face value seems absurd. Elijah, the prophet, pouts at the beginning; an angel comes and brings bread and water for Elijah; the angel insists, or rather invites, Elijah to eat the bread and the water, drink the water, and then run for 40 days to Mount Sinai. Okay.

Well, this morning, I'd like to push back against that face-value reading. I believe that Elijah's story is not simply an idle tale, or Jewish folklore. I believe it applies to all of us. It's *our* story, not only as individuals, but soon, as I'll talk about momentarily, as a congregation. This is a story about life transition and how to manage life transitions as a people of faith. This is a story about how God is involved along the way; and this is a story that raises a practical question for each one of us gathered here: What can we learn from it, and how might it apply to our lives?

What can we learn from it, and how might it apply to our lives. Let's start with some details to make sense of the story. You'll notice that the story is framed by references to Elijah venturing into the wilderness, and then at the end, the length of his journey, which will be 40 days. So what do these mean? Well, the wilderness, as you know, is a place of uncertainty. It's sometimes been described as "a place beyond" or without words. The reference here to the wilderness is probably an allusion to the story of the Israelites in the book of Exodus, where, after being freed from their captivity to the Egyptians, they are led by Moses for – how many years? 40 years – through the wilderness, to the Promised Land.

40 itself is also a significant number. It's not only the number that we hear about in the book of Exodus. We also hear about it in the New Testament, when Jesus is tempted for 40 days and nights in the desert, according to Matthew, Mark, and Luke. What does 40 days mean? Well, this is a large approximate number that can be understood as similar to "umpteen." So, Elijah ran for a really long time, or "umpteen days" to Mount Horeb.

It's also important because usually during this time, the character, him or herself, experiences a change of perspective. A change of perspective. Remember at the beginning, that Elijah wants to die. The situation here is clear from the previous chapter. Elijah, after bringing down the fire of Yahweh onto the altar of Baal, the Canaanite God, kills 450 prophets of Baal. He is then chased for his life by the Queen, and when we meet him at this moment in the story, he's obviously burned out, as most commentators put it. Elijah has had enough. He's tired of running. He's exasperated. He's ready to give up.

There's also part of me that wonders if there might be a hint of remorse or guilt here, after what Elijah did to all of those Baal prophets. And so, given the state, Elijah does what I recommend whenever you feel this way: Sleep on it. Sleep on it. Sometimes, when I feel exasperated, burned out or depressed, I find that a good nap brings about a new perspective.

I often think of Psalm 30, verse five, where the author says, "Weeping may linger through the night (or through the nap), but joy comes with the morning."

So he sleeps on it and he wakes up. Now this is another important moment in the story. It's a symbol, you might say, or a blueprint for conversion. Elijah, as it were, is dying to his old self, and becoming a new creation of God. So, whenever you see

somebody “sleeping” this very well could suggest that we have a conversion about to occur.

Then we learn about the angel. And the angel, of course, symbolizes something, and that is God’s accompaniment on the journey. God’s accompaniment on the journey. Now, most of us take our understanding of angels from Renaissance art, which depicts them as cute, plump, little beings who fly around somewhere, but in the Hebrew Bible, angels were not separate beings from God. They were expressions, or manifestations, of the Divine Presence. So when we see the word “angel” here, we’re not simply talking about some being who flies around above the clouds and occasionally comes down to bring muffins to whomever; we’re talking about a symbol reflective of the very presence of God. This is how God is present to Elijah.

And then we heard about how he was fed bread. This is also a symbol, for spiritual sustenance. We read about it in our Gospel reading for today, where Jesus himself is linked with this symbol. But we also heard about it in our Gathering Hymn by Marty Haugen, who talks about the bread, indeed the bread of new birth, which has a very good place here.

Finally, as we talked about, he runs 40 days, which also is a time of transition, of moving away from the old self to the new, only to experience God in a radically different way. Again, Moses had been the one who climbed to the top of Mount Sinai and experienced God in a certain way; Elijah does the same thing, and the first thing the Lord says is, “What are you doing here?” What are you doing here?

And so then we go through the experience where Elijah is envisioned as something like “Moses 2.0” for the Israelites, which is to say, his experience of God is far more profound and subtle than that of Moses. Instead of experiencing God in earthquakes, fire and wind, Elijah experiences the divine in the murmurs, or the sound of sheer silence, as the New Revised Standard translation puts it, that follow these, otherwise Fourth-of-July-firework events.

So we can see that this story is clearly one about transition and one rich in symbolism: the bread, the sleeping, the running 40 days, the entering the wilderness, the presence of the angel – all of them are packed with meaning.

So, what are the transitions in our lives, and how might we as people of faith undergo them? Well, in my estimate, and this will not surprise most of you, I think the theologian Paul Tillich offers a great summary. Transitions, it turns out, have a deeper significance as well. They foreshadow the ultimate transition for all of us, which is death.

Tillich writes, “It is our destiny and the destiny of everything in our world that we must come to an end. Every end that we experience in nature and humankind speaks to us with a loud voice: you also will come to an end! It may reveal itself in the farewell to a place where we have lived for a long time (there’s a transition), the separation from the fellowship of intimate associates (there’s a transition), or the death of someone near to us (there’s a great transition). Or it may become apparent to us in the

failure of a work that gave meaning to us, the end of a whole period of life, the approach of old age, or even in the melancholy side of nature visible in autumn, all this tells us: you will also come to an end.”

So what Tillich is saying here is that transitions prefigure the final transition, the total death of self, and with it the possibility for rebirth in the life of the world to come. We experience these transitions throughout our lives, whether it's from leaving home to go to college, or to move into care facility, whether it's in terms of divorce, career change, moving – all of these are places of transition in our lives.

Of course, communities also go through transitions, and that includes us as a community of faith. As you all know, one will soon be upon us. Beginning on September 1, I will be away at Princeton Theological Seminary for three months. I'm not going away forever, but this is going to be a significant time: you might say, 40 days and 40 nights, for us as a congregation and as individuals, to learn something from Elijah about what it means to undergo transitions. While I have every confidence in my replacement, whom you'll meet next week, and who happens to be a little softer on the edges than I am, and certainly a little more gregarious, and I think will be a really great breath of fresh air for this community, this will be a time of uncertainty for me, and for you.

So how do we navigate it, and what lessons might we learn from Elijah? Well, I think Elijah teaches us three things about undergoing transitions in life.

First, the story invites us to trust in the face of uncertainty that God provides. How does God provide in the story? What's the symbol? Bread. Bread is the spiritual sustenance symbolizing that God provides. That's number one.

Second, trust in the good news that we are not alone, that God promises to accompany us. I think of this when it comes to the Bible's most famous psalm, Psalm 23, where God says He will never leave us. Right? That good news, that God will always be present to us. In the story, what symbolizes this constant accompaniment and presence of God? The angel, which is an expression of the divine presence.

Third, and finally, the story invites us to be open to new possibilities that arise from our time in the wilderness, possibilities that exist just beyond the horizon, especially in moments where we're feeling burned out, where we've had enough, or when it feels like a period or chapter of life or work has come to an end. What symbolizes this in the story? Elijah going to sleep and waking up.

I mean, think of what happens next here to Elijah as well, and how he experiences God in a new way, one he could have never anticipated at the beginning of our story today.

It's easy, in short, to dismiss the story of Elijah, but that changes when we realize that his story, rich in symbolism, is *our* story. We all go through transitions in life, sometimes big ones, sometimes individually, and sometimes as a community. When we undergo transitions, may we remember first to trust that God provides. May we

remember, second, that we are not alone, and may we be open, third, to new ways to experience God in their lives, that come out of this time of transition.

The prophet Isaiah says it beautifully.

“God will make a way in the wilderness  
and rivers in the desert  
to give drink to God’s chosen people,  
the people God formed,  
so that they might declare God’s praise. “

Dear Friends in Christ, that’s you.

That’s us.

Amen.