

(1 Kings 19:1-15a NRSV)

<sup>1</sup> Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done, and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword. <sup>2</sup> Then Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah, saying, "So may the gods do to me, and more also, if I do not make your life like the life of one of them by this time tomorrow." <sup>3</sup> Then he was afraid; he got up and fled for his life, and came to Beer-sheba, which belongs to Judah; he left his servant there.

<sup>4</sup> But he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a solitary broom tree. He asked that he might die: "It is enough; now, O LORD, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors." <sup>5</sup> Then he lay down under the broom tree and fell asleep. Suddenly an angel touched him and said to him, "Get up and eat." <sup>6</sup> He looked, and there at his head was a cake baked on hot stones, and a jar of water. He ate and drank, and lay down again. <sup>7</sup> The angel of the LORD came a second time, touched him, and said, "Get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you." <sup>8</sup> He got up, and ate and drank; then he went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights to Horeb the mount of God. <sup>9</sup> At 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?" <sup>10</sup> He 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."

<sup>11</sup> 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; <sup>12</sup> and after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence. <sup>13</sup> When 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?" <sup>14</sup> He 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." <sup>15</sup> Then the LORD said to him, "Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus.

(Luke 8:26-39 NRSV)

<sup>26</sup> Then they arrived at the country of the Gerasenes, which is opposite Galilee. <sup>27</sup> As he stepped out on land, a man of the city who had demons met him. For a long time he had worn no clothes, and he did not live in a house but in the tombs. <sup>28</sup> When he saw Jesus, he fell down before him and shouted at the top of his voice, "What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beg you, do

Copyright © 2001 by Dudley C. Rose. All rights reserved.

The scripture quotations contained herein are from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, copyright © 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

not torment me"-- <sup>29</sup> for Jesus had commanded the unclean spirit to come out of the man. (For many times it had seized him; he was kept under guard and bound with chains and shackles, but he would break the bonds and be driven by the demon into the wilds.) <sup>30</sup> Jesus then asked him, "What is your name?" He said, "Legion"; for many demons had entered him. <sup>31</sup> They begged him not to order them to go back into the abyss.

<sup>32</sup> Now there on the hillside a large herd of swine was feeding; and the demons begged Jesus to let them enter these. So he gave them permission. <sup>33</sup> Then the demons came out of the man and entered the swine, and the herd rushed down the steep bank into the lake and was drowned.

<sup>34</sup> When the swineherds saw what had happened, they ran off and told it in the city and in the country. <sup>35</sup> Then people came out to see what had happened, and when they came to Jesus, they found the man from whom the demons had gone sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed and in his right mind. And they were afraid.

<sup>36</sup> Those who had seen it told them how the one who had been possessed by demons had been healed. <sup>37</sup> Then all the people of the surrounding country of the Gerasenes asked Jesus to leave them; for they were seized with great fear. So he got into the boat and returned. <sup>38</sup> The man from whom the demons had gone begged that he might be with him; but Jesus sent him away, saying, <sup>39</sup> "Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you." So he went away, proclaiming throughout the city how much Jesus had done for him.

## At the End of the Rope

A sermon preached at North-Prospect United Church of Christ, Cambridge,  
Massachusetts

Date: June 24, 2001

Rev. Dudley C. Rose

Texts: 1 Kings 19:1-15a; Luke 8:26-39

Elijah was in trouble, in trouble with king and queen, no less. And here is how Elijah got himself into such a bad way.

First, Elijah saw fit to publicly criticize the king's choice of wife. Elijah had professed loudly that the Phoenician Jezebel was not an appropriate bride. She was a foreigner and a worshiper of the idol Baal, the idol Israel had been tempted by as far back as the time of Moses.

Ahab persisted in his marriage, and indeed, the idols of Baal populated the land. In addition the prophets of Israel's God were replaced at the royal court by the prophets of Baal. Only Elijah remained a voice for the great God of Abraham and Sarah.

Soon enough, the land was pitched into a mammoth drought. The fields dried up. There was hardly water for the livestock. The crops were ruined. The economy was in disarray. And Elijah blamed it all on the abomination of Baal.

Finally, to make the power of Israel's God and the depravity of Baal crystal clear, Elijah challenged the prophets of Baal to a sacrifice competition, a battle of the bulls so to speak. Elijah was bold and loud. He shouted out the obvious disparity in their numbers. "Look," he said, "There are 450 prophets of Baal, but I am the only one left of the Lord's prophets. But even so, I will go against all of you. Go ahead. Prepare your sacrifice; perform your rituals; bring about the end of the drought."

The prophets of Baal set up the sacrifice, and around it all 450 of them marched. Nothing happened. They circled the bull from morning to noon. Elijah began to taunt them. "Keep going," he said, "Surely your god will come. Maybe he is meditating. Maybe he is asleep. Maybe he is away on a journey. Keep going, surely he will come sooner or later." But still nothing. Now the prophets of Baal are getting tired. They are limping around the altar. But still nothing. So they took swords and knives and cut themselves in order to encourage Baal to come to them. So, now they are bloody and really limping. But still at sunset Baal has not responded.

Copyright © 2001 by Dudley C. Rose. All rights reserved.

The scripture quotations contained herein are from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, copyright © 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

The Elijah begins his attempt. He carefully reconstructs the altar to the Lord, which Ahab and Jezebel have destroyed. He lays everything out meticulously. And then at sunset he calls out to God, "O God, let it be known this day that you are the God of Israel. O Lord, answer me that this people may know that you are God." Suddenly, God appears in a torrid fire. The fire consumes the sacrifice, the altar, and even the stones. The people fall down in recognition that Elijah is right. And then Elijah has the people take the prophets of Baal to the river where, as they would say on the Sopranos, they were wacked. As a final demonstration, Elijah points to a cloudless sky and predicts an end to the drought. In a little while the heavens grew dark, and there came clouds and wind and torrents of rain.

Elijah is in trouble. You might think that winning the contest and ending the drought would have made him a hero. But there is a saying that no good deed goes unpunished. Elijah, it would seem should be a hero, but Jezebel, the queen, swears to murder him. She is not amused by Elijah's harsh criticisms of her. She is embarrassed at Elijah's singlehanded defeat of 450 of her best and brightest. And she is hopping mad that Elijah not only defeated her prophets of Baal but is also responsible for the death of all 450 of them. Jezebel is so furious she swears she will see Elijah dead by the following day.

It is at this point that we pick up the story this morning. Elijah has fled to safety. But he is not a rebel in hiding. Elijah is at the end of his rope. He is ready to give up. He even prays to die. Enough is enough. Elijah has had it up to here. He has tried to do the right thing. No, he has done the right thing. But he finds himself alone and on the lam.

Elijah falls asleep tired in and in despair. After awhile an angel awakes Elijah and provides him with food and water. Elijah sleeps again. A second time he is awakened by the angel and fed. Elijah is now nourished enough for forty days and forty nights.

Do you like fantasy stories? Like C.S. Lewis's *The Chronicles of Narnia*? Remember in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* how the children walked through an old wardrobe closet and into a whole other land? I've always been intrigued by this possibility of playing fast and loose with space and time, entering parallel universes and the like.

In a way that is what has happened to Elijah. An angel comes and feeds him enough for a long journey, forty days and forty nights in the wilderness. Doesn't that sound familiar? Forty years; forty days? Already we hear the echoes of Israel's sojourn in the wilderness, which was forty years long. Elijah enters something of a time warp. Elijah travels for forty days and arrives at the Mount of God, Mount Sinai. God causes Elijah to travel Moses' route of the Exodus backwards, tracing

Copyright © 2001 by Dudley C. Rose. All rights reserved.

The scripture quotations contained herein are from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, copyright © 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Moses' steps in reverse, until Elijah arrives at the mountain, Mount Sinai, where God had revealed so much to Moses.

Elijah finds a cave, spent the night and awoke in the morning. Finally, the word of the Lord comes to Elijah, "Elijah, what are you doing here?" At this point Elijah is a little testy. It has been a very bad month and a half. He says, "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."

God lets the implied insult go and says, "Go out and stand on the mountain before the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by." And you know the story. A rock shattering wind comes, splitting the mountain into shards, but God is not in the wind. Then comes an earthquake, but God was not in the earthquake. Then comes fire, but God was not in the fire either. And then came silence. Older translations say a still, small voice. Whatever it was, it was inconsequential. Elijah would have been glad to have found God in the powerful spectacles – the wind, the earthquake or the fire – something that showed that God was in charge here and that Elijah wasn't really all alone. But Elijah got no such assurance. Elijah got at best a tiny voice or maybe even sheer silence.

And then the voice of the Lord comes again, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" Elijah rolls his eyes and repeats what he has already said, this time slowly as if the Lord may be hard of hearing or a bit of a half-wit, like you sometimes see frustrated parents speak to their children, "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."

But Elijah's mockery goes unnoticed by God, and so does his plea for God to jump in and take Elijah's burdens from him. God simply says, "Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus."

Basically, God tells Elijah to get back to work. Maybe you know this experience. Maybe, like Elijah, you have been at the end of your rope. Maybe you have thought you could go no further. Maybe you have even gotten down on your knees and prayed to God for help. And maybe all you have heard in return is silence. Silence, with the implication that you must simply get back up on your feet and get back at it.

I think this has to be the most terrifying human possibility. I was brought up to believe that if I worked hard, if I kept my nose clean and to the grindstone, if I just did what I as supposed to do, then things would work out just fine. I expect some of you were brought up that way, too. We are proud of our rugged individualism and self-sufficiency in this society. We hear, "Be all you can be." And we are told we can be anything we want to be.

Copyright © 2001 by Dudley C. Rose. All rights reserved.

The scripture quotations contained herein are from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, copyright © 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

And then, then, somewhere along the line, even if we have done our very best at it, it all falls apart. Maybe it's a divorce, maybe it's trouble at work, maybe it's failure at school, maybe it's just the inevitable trio of sickness, old age and death. But somewhere, somewhere and sometime, the idea that you can make it all happen will leave you high and dry, and it may set you on a quest for God.

This is a huge change in direction, don't you see? It is just about the opposite of everything we have been taught. The opposite of believing that you can control your world is to admit you cannot, and then to turn to God. When we are the inventors of our own lives, the captains of our own destinies, when we call the shots, it's not just that we don't need God. There is no place for God in the equation. Giving anyone else, even God, such leverage is inconsistent with any idea of self reliance. So, when we come crawling to God, like Elijah did, beaten and discouraged, we have had to give up a lot of belief in our own ability. We have had to reach out and trust our lives and our well-being to a power outside ourselves. For most of us, this reaching out, this asking for help is foreign, and it is risky. It's a loss of control. It's putting your destiny in someone else's hands.

It's not unlike a teenager asking for a date. Funny how that experience still is so fresh after all these years. Most of you remember this, don't you? You give control of the situation to another person. You risk humiliation. You risk rejection. You risk your self-image. What if she says, No? And, of course, asking for a date is a small thing compared to turning to God when your life is a mess. It has to be one of the most terrifying possibilities to risk, to risk turning to God and hearing nothing but silence. We can certainly understand Elijah's frustration with God. He took the venerable advice of AA. He let go and let God. Elijah put his fears and desperation out there, turned them over to God, and he was stunned that God answered only with silence.

Now, at this point, it may seem good logic to forget about turning to God and deal with things ourselves, as best we can. But it turns out that's not a very good answer. In our other story this morning we met a man possessed by demons for many years. A legion of torments ruled his soul. There are many ways that people can be tormented, and equally as many reasons for it. Very often it is some form of mental illness, much of which is still very little understood. But another common way in which we are tormented happens when we find ourselves at the end of our rope, and we let ourselves slip into misguided coping strategies. The list is long, and we all know that drugs, sex, alcohol, denial, workaholicism and a thousand other strategies may provide some momentary relief. But we also know that they are a very quick and sure way to the life of the Garasene demoniac – a life of roaming unclothed among the tombs.

At this point you may be thinking to yourself, the choices don't seem very good here. I can try the old standard coping mechanisms and end up among the

Copyright © 2001 by Dudley C. Rose. All rights reserved.

The scripture quotations contained herein are from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, copyright © 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

walking dead, or I can let go, turn to God, and risk utter silence in response. No wonder Elijah threw his hands in the air and prayed to die.

No wonder. No wonder, except that we haven't really told the story correctly so far. Or better said, we haven't noticed an important part of it. Elijah laid out his situation before God – "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." Elijah essentially asked God to come in and rescue him, to come in and make everything better, to come in and make Jezebel and her army go away. Elijah said, essentially, "Look God, I have tried my best. I have been your prophet. I have risked my behind for you. And now they are all after me. I've done all I can do. I quit. You fix it yourself."

Well, as we know, God didn't fix it. In fact, he gave Elijah more work to do, just like he did Moses before him. But recall early in the story. Elijah flees and falls asleep under the broom tree. An angel awakens him. And what does the angel of the Lord do? Remember? That's right, the angel feeds Elijah. The angel then lets Elijah sleep some more, awakens him for a second time, and feeds him again. The angel gives Elijah sustenance enough for forty days and forty nights. The angel of the Lord gives Elijah enough sustenance for the whole journey which lays before him.

Now, at first this may not seem very much. It certainly was not what Elijah prayed for. Elijah just wanted God to drop down and fix things. To that request Elijah heard utter silence. When you're at the end of your rope, it's perfectly normal to want the trouble to just go away. But think of those coping mechanisms I mentioned earlier – drugs, alcohol, workahol, and the like – they are our attempts at a quick fix or an escape from the situation, and they lead nowhere but to the tombs.

In the end, while it may not provide instantaneous relief, God knows that we are far better served with bread for the journey than we are with quick fixes, for it turns out that they most always lead to death and not to life abundant.

I feel for Elijah. It is a terrifying and daunting experience to be at the end of your rope and realize that there is simply no rescue. In the end, though, I rejoice that there is not. For there is – be it found in prayer, in a church community such as this, or in any number of venues where angels of the Lord wait upon us – there are cakes and water and other nourishment, which will give us the strength to follow Moses, Elijah and so many others, follow them out of the wilderness and into new life. Thanks be to God. Amen.

Copyright © 2001 by Dudley C. Rose. All rights reserved.

The scripture quotations contained herein are from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, copyright © 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. Used by permission. All rights reserved.