

Be Not Discouraged

August 23, 2015, August 30, 2015

There's a well known saying. I'm sure you've heard it. "It's always darkest just before.....the Dawn." It's a saying with a positive message, meant to encourage. But perhaps you have also heard, "It's always darkest just before.....it gets pitch black?" That's a variation meant to be funny. Everybody knows, "It's always darkest just before dawn." So this alternate ending surprises. Usually it's said in jest, to make light of a situation. But, it is not exactly a message of encouragement. For someone grappling with serious problems, or facing a difficult future, this is not the message, as Christians, we want to be passing along. Indeed, in the darkest of times, our hope in the risen Jesus has sustained us, and those before us. We know that God will be with us, and save us, even in death.

But, still, it is easy to listen to the news, or read the newspaper, and be discouraged. I don't know about you, but I found this summer's news to be particularly troubling. There is the heart-rending chaos in the Middle East, with the outright persecution and killing of Christians, even children, for their faith. There was that awful mass shooting in South Carolina. It's easy to find problems in the direction of our country's institutions, too. There have been many events that make us wonder where the world, and our country, are headed.

We as citizens in the United States are perhaps more prone to being affected by bad news of this sort than most. It's not just that we care deeply about our country and its people. We also bear responsibility. We as citizens participate in electing the leaders. We take seriously our obligation to stay informed, in order to make good decisions. But, my goodness, how can you stay positive with all that is going on, and all of the trends which seem to be going in the wrong direction?

This is not a new situation. As we turn to our scripture reading from the Old Testament, we find ourselves in a troubled time. Politically, Israel is an independent country led by King Ahab. Ahab is, as a ruler, more effective than most. But Israel is in constant war with Syria. To make matters worse, the superpower of the day, Assyria, is becoming stronger and moving in that direction. Ahab gets help in the form of an alliance with the King of Sidon. That alliance is secured by Ahab marrying the King of Sidon's daughter. Perhaps you have heard of her? Yes, Jezebel.

That sets off a religious crisis. For, Jezebel is, shall we say, "forceful." She operates with a ruthlessness that would shame most modern politicians. Jezebel brings to the capitol of Israel, Samaria, her god Baal. Ahab builds a temple for her and her god, worships there himself, and allows Jezebel to pursue and slay followers of the LORD.

Into this situation, the prophet Elijah appears. In that day a King was an absolute monarch. Almost. In Ahab's case, you could say he listened to Jezebel, which he did, but that aside, there was no independent news media, there was no constitution, and no legal political opposition. Unique in the ancient world, in Israel, there was one check on royal power: the prophets. The prophet Elijah is called by God to announce that, in punishment for the sins of Ahab and Jezebel, there would be a drought. And indeed, a drought and famine came, a very

severe one, lasting three years. Now, this was a severe challenge to King Ahab's authority. A King was supposed to be an intermediary between his people and God. If God was punishing the kingdom, that was a discredit to the king. Naturally Ahab and Jezebel blamed Elijah for calling down the drought, as if Elijah was performing magic invoking God to his will, instead of just being the messenger. That's the pagan understanding of how gods, and their priests, functioned.

Ultimately, there is a showdown on Mount Carmel. The priests of Baal put an offering on an altar and pray to Baal to send fire to burn the offering. Nothing happens. Elijah does the same, building an altar and placing on it an offering to the Lord. The Lord does send fire, and the verdict is decided: The LORD is God, and Baal is powerless. The prophets of Baal are slain, and Elijah and Ahab return to the capital city of Samaria. But, that doesn't recon on the power of an angry Queen Jezebel. She sends a message to Elijah. "So may the gods do to me, and more also, if I do not make your life as the lives of one of them by this time tomorrow." Despite his recent triumph, he sees Jezebel marshal her political power, threaten him, and he flees for his life.

So, then, that is the background for today's reading. Elijah is discouraged. He feels personally responsible for Israel's spiritual direction. He has been charged by God as bearing His message, and Elijah thought he was seeing things turn around for the better. Yet, before Jezebel's forcefulness and power, he has run, defeated and fearful for his life. It's a fascinating story, and you can find the rest of it in chapters before and after today's reading. But, let's focus now on Elijah in this moment. I read from I Kings, Chapter 19, starting with verse 3.

I Kings 19: 3-18

3 Then he [Elijah] was afraid; he got up and fled for his life, and came to Beersheba, which belongs to Judah; he left his servant there.

4 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 [fathers]. 5 Then he lay down under the broom tree and fell asleep. Suddenly an angel touched him and said to him, "Get up and eat." 6 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. 7 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." 8 He got up, and ate, and drank; then he went on the strength of that food forty days and forty nights to Horeb the mount of God. 9 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?" 10 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."

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 was an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake; 12 and after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence. [Or, KJV "a still small voice"] 13 When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his

mantle and went and stood at the entrance of the cave. Then came a voice to him that said, “What are you doing here, Elijah?” 14 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.” 15 Then 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 [That is, Syria]. 16 You shall also anoint Jehu son of Nimshi as king over Israel; and you shall anoint Elisha son of Shaphat of Abelmeholah as prophet in your place. Whoever escapes from the sword of Hazael Jehu shall kill; and whoever escapes from the sword of Jehu Elishah shall kill. 18 Yet I will leave seven thousand in Israel, all the knees that have not bowed to Baal and every mouth that has not kissed him.” (NRSV)
May God bless the hearing of His holy word.

Notice that even in defeat, when Elijah is running, God still cares for him. An angel ministers to him in the wilderness. That’s already about 100 miles from Samaria. Perhaps Elijah had meant to just let himself die there, under that broom tree. The angel gives him hope, the hope of coming before God with his pleas. On the strength of that food, and that hope, he travels to Mount Horeb. That’s a few hundred miles more, miles of wilderness.

Elijah is discouraged because he has been faithful to the task God has given him. He’s been “zealous for the Lord.” But the results are not what he expected. He thought that with God’s power over nature as demonstrated by the drought, by the power of God’s response by lightning burning up the offering on Mt. Carmel, and by the power of the rainstorm that followed, King Ahab and the Israelites would be so convinced that they would turn back to the Worship of God, and reject the pagan worship of Baal. That seemed to be happening. It should have happened. But now all seems lost.

Elijah did what he was commanded by God to do. Why did things go wrong? He describes just how bad things are. “The Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword.”

This is true. The King represents Israel. In the days of Samuel, the Israelites complained that they needed a king, who would lead them in battle and represent them to God, as an intermediary who would act for them. Samuel warned them that the King would tax them, and take them as servants when he wished, but they insisted they would have a king. Thus the Israelite monarchy began. So, here in Ahab’s time, the King’s actions in establishing the worship of Baal is, in effect, synonymous with “all Israel.” After all, who but perhaps an unruly obstinate prophet would oppose the will of the King? So, yes, at King Ahab’s command, inspired by the wishes of his queen Jezebel, these things have happened.

Then Elijah’s complaint becomes personal. “I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away.”

We too are vulnerable to discouragement. Even when we think we have done what is right, when we think we have been obedient to God’s call to us, sometimes things go wrong. We

live in a culture that tries to measure people's worth in terms of results. When the results fall short, we blame ourselves, or others blame us.

In our day and time, I particularly am concerned for teachers who struggle to do what is best for their children in difficult school situations. The value of what they do, their best efforts, can be missed if their worth is measured by testing statistics. Here, it is Elijah who is judging himself in terms of the "results" of his prophetic ministry. He has done what God called him to do. He has done it with great courage. But Israel has rejected the message. He feels like he has failed.

The LORD does not answer Elijah directly. God does not castigate Elijah for failure. He also does not explain to Elijah the "what" and "why" of what is happening in Israel. What he does is give Elijah something else to do. Something very different from what Elijah was doing before. Perhaps Elijah didn't understand the implications of these three new tasks, but I suspect he did.

With the benefit of hindsight, and a perspective from a few millennia later, we can see what was going on in a way that Elijah couldn't. Elijah could see only the failure of the moment: Ahab, and the nation he led, had turned against God, despite his best efforts and obedience to God's calling. In fact, what had failed was the institution of the monarchy, not Elijah. God made his best effort to reach out to Ahab and Israel with his saving grace. It is God, not Elijah, who has been rejected. And now, as a consequence, terrible things are about to happen. God also comforts Elijah by telling him that he is not alone. There are seven thousand in Israel who have not bowed down to Baal, who stand for righteousness, and will be saved.

We now know that the state of Israel indeed failed, and was destroyed by the Assyrians about 150 years later. Jerusalem and the Kingdom of Judah fell to the Babylonians and went into exile about 280 years later. But, God was not defeated. A remnant survived and later returned, and lived in Galilee and Judea in Jesus's day. Amazingly enough, when Jesus is taken to the temple as a baby, he is met by a certain prophetess named Anna, a daughter of the tribe of Asher. Asher is one of the ten so-called "lost" tribes of the Northern Kingdom of Israel, perhaps even the most obscure of those tribes. Yet, here they are, represented by Anna at Jesus's birth. Those people of the northern kingdom, and the remnant of Judah who did not return to Palestine, were scattered throughout the known world, so that when the early Church brought the gospel to the gentiles in the First Century, there were already Jews and other God-fearers ready and eager to hear the good news.

Such is the way God was able to turn this situation, the rejection of God's message through Elijah, to the benefit of the world. Elijah could not understand that. It's all still in the future.

But, he remained faithful, and is now celebrated as the prototypical figure of a prophet, so much so, that the coming of the messiah in Jesus's time was expected to be preceded by the coming again of Elijah. To this day, at Passover, the Jews pour the "Cup of Elijah" for the great prophet, in case he should stop in to join them.

In our time, we have the benefit of seeing, in the scriptures and in the history of the world since, how God has blessed humanity, often in spite of our failures. Indeed, humanity's failure to recognize who Jesus was, and his death on the cross, was turned by God into triumph. This brings us to our second scripture reading. This is Peter, writing toward the end of the first century. I read from I Peter, chapter 4, verses 12, 13, then 19.

I Peter 4:12 Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that is taking place among you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. 13 But rejoice insofar as you are sharing Christ's sufferings, so that you may be glad and shout for joy when his glory is revealed. ... 19 Therefore, let those suffering in accordance with God's will entrust themselves to a faithful Creator, while continuing to do good. (NRSV)

Like Elijah, Peter could not tell what the future was going to be in his day, but things seemed to be going in the wrong direction. There was drought and famine, including a severe one in Jerusalem. Persecution of Christians was happening. To be a Christian meant not acknowledging Caesar to be a God. Peter's advice is summarized in that last verse: "let those suffering in accordance with God's will entrust themselves to a faithful Creator, while continuing to do good."

In fact, despite the apparent "bad news" of the day, God's plan was being fulfilled. Peter, Paul and other early disciples were starting churches throughout the known world. The gentiles were hearing and accepting the Gospel. Even in difficult times, that continued. Here's an example of how that happened. I'm taking this example from Rodney Stark's book, "The Triumph of Christianity". About 100 years after Peter wrote that exhortation, and again 100 years later, terrible plagues swept the Roman world. This may have been the first appearance of Smallpox. It was lethal. Caravans of carts were needed to haul off the dead. Nobody knew what to do. Wealthy people fled the cities to their country estates. Those who could not flee avoided contact, and shunned anyone who might be sick. Victims, even loved ones, were thrown into the streets at the first appearance of symptoms, such was the panic. Praying to the pagan gods was useless; what did they care about the problems of humanity? Their priests were among those who had fled. Philosophers simply blamed fate.

But, Christians behaved differently. They answered Jesus's call to love and minister to one another, even if that meant the sacrifice of one's own life. They did not fear death. They cared for the sick, both other Christians, and non-Christians. Many Christians died too, especially the deacons, presbyters, and leading laymen. But the care and nursing so given meant that Christians, and those they cared for, survived in greater numbers than those who perished without care. Is it any wonder that this kind of living out of God's love in action changed the world? Within 300 years of the Resurrection, the Roman Emperor himself, Constantine, was a Christian. Could Peter have even imagined that?

The situation in our day is less clear. We don't have hindsight. Yes, terrible things are happening, and we fear for what will happen in the future. Sometimes we can't see the good that is also going on. We cannot yet understand the meaning of it all: how God will use the events of our day, even the bad ones, for His purpose.

What is clear, is that God has given us something to do, just as for Elijah. The words of Peter are for us, too: “Entrust yourself to a faithful creator, and continue to do good.” We can’t tell how God will use the events of our day, but we can have confidence that He loves us. We see that in the life and ministry and sacrifice of Christ. We have the testimony of God’s faithfulness through the ages, in the scriptures, and in the events of history since. We see examples of God’s faithfulness in the lives of those saints that we have known, living examples of God’s way. Most of all, we have the Gospel of redemption in Christ that promises our future as children of God in the world to come, the bright dawn that awaits us.

So, Be Not Discouraged. As the apostle Paul put it in his letter to the Romans,

Romans 8:38-39. “For I am convinced, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (NRSV)

Amen.