

“God Can Bless Our Shortcomings”  
Grace Chapel, July 21, 2002  
Mountaintop Presbyterian Church, August, 2002

Responsive reading: Psalm 11

1. In the Lord I take refuge: how can you say to me, “Flee like a bird to the mountains.
2. For lo, the wicked bend the bow, they have fitted their arrow to the string, to shoot in the dark at the upright in heart;
3. If the foundations are destroyed, what can the righteous do?”
4. The Lord is in his holy temple, the Lord’s throne is in heaven; his eyes behold, his eyelids test the children of men.
5. The LORD tests the righteous and the wicked, and his soul hates him that loves violence.
6. On the wicked he will rain coals of fire and brimstone; a scorching wind shall be the portion of their cup.
7. For the LORD is righteous, he loves righteous deeds; the upright shall behold his face.

Scripture: 1 Kings 19: 1-18, Romans 8: 28

This morning’s Old Testament scripture reading is taken from I Kings, Chapter 19. We read of the prophet Elijah as he faces a crisis of confidence and purpose. As we begin, the Lord and Elijah are triumphant after the contest on Mount Carmel, where God demonstrated with fire and rain who is God. Elijah has run ahead of King Ahab’s chariot back to Jezreel.

I Kings 19:1 Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done, and how he had killed all the prophets [of Baal] with the sword. 2 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.” 3 Then he 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.”

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 in 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 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. 13 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?"

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. 16 Also you shall anoint Jehu son of Nimshi as king over Israel; and you shall anoint Elisha son of Shaphat of Abelmeholah as prophet in your place. 17 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)

For our New Testament scripture, I read a very familiar and comforting passage from Paul's letter to the Romans, Chapter 8 verse 28:

Romans 8: 28 We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, and are called according to his purpose. (NRSV)

This verse from Romans is one of the most quoted, and sometimes mis-quoted, in scripture. When bad things happen, we often hear it as a consolation, for it is indeed a statement of assurance that it is God's world: that His purposes cannot be frustrated by our errors and shortcomings, and that He can bless even those things that seem to go wrong. We are familiar with cases where this principle seems to operate. Joseph was sold into slavery in Egypt by his brothers, but he survived to later save them from starvation during the famine that followed.

However, we often, perhaps usually, do not see this happen. We see the errors we make, or misfortune we experience, but without seeing any good at all, or being able to imagine any good, that can come from it. We are left only with trust that God's will will be done, and the knowledge that we cannot know His plans. His ways are not our ways, and we can see but dimly.

Today we go to the story of Elijah for an example of this. Elijah was a failure. Did you hear that in the reading from I Kings? Sometimes stories are so familiar that we do not hear them in all their richness. Most often, this story is read up to the commission to choose Elisha as a successor, without investigating what God is really saying to Elijah, and what it implies. So often we read only the "good parts," the portions of scriptures that make good Bible stories for children. You know what I mean: nice, short, not too bloody, and a satisfying moral at the end. We read how Samuel was called by God, but seldom do we read the message of condemnation he was given for Eli and his corrupt sons. We read of Isaiah's vision of the heavenly temple and his answer of "Here and I, send me," but not of the message he was given, that would be ignored. But, there are jewels throughout the scriptures, even in unexpected places like I and II Kings, if we look carefully. Let's look at Elijah's encounter with God today, and see what we may discern of how God was present with him then, and is present with us today.

We find Elijah just after God's, and his, great triumph at Mount Carmel. With fire from heaven and rain to end the draught, God is shown to be The Lord, and Baal is shown to be powerless. The people of Israel are convinced. The king, Ahab, even seems to be convinced. Elijah follows up this success by having the 450 prophets of Baal brought down to the wadi Kishon and killed there. For that time and place, this action is not surprising. After all, we could read in Chapter 18 that Jezebel, Ahab's queen, had already caused many of the prophets of the Lord to be killed.

450 prophets of Baal may seem like an unreasonably large number. But in the context of the times, that would have included not only the priestly leadership, but also the lesser servitors, including the choir, the deacons, and the organist, too. We read nothing in the scriptures that says God ordered this execution. Nor do we read that he didn't. Could it have been an error by an overzealous Elijah? We cannot say for sure one way or the other. But we do know that it is this slaughter of the prophets of Baal that Jezebel cites in her own threat to Elijah.

Listen to Jezebel's words: "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."

Maybe this does not sound very threatening to you. Sung effectively by a good contralto in Mendelssohn's oratorio *Elijah*, it is threatening indeed. True, in some performances she is unimpressive, leaving you asking, "Yeah, lady, you and what army?" But then the chorus comes in. "Oh, That army!"

It may seem incredible that in that day a woman, and a foreign woman at that, would wield so much power that a triumphant Elijah would be sent running. But, run he did. We read, "He was afraid; he got up and fled for his life." I understand. Considering Jezebel, her words and her deeds, she scares me some 3000 or so years later. But is running from Jezebel what God would want Elijah to do, especially after the events on Mount Carmel?

We will skip over the details of Elijah's trip to Mount Horeb, the Mountain of God where Moses had received the Ten Commandments. We come to God's question: "What are you doing here, Elijah?" It doesn't matter where you put the emphasis. "What are you doing here, Elijah?" "What are you doing here, Elijah?" There is a strong implication that Elijah is not where he ought to be.

Elijah explains that he has been zealous for the Lord, but unsuccessful. The people have rejected God and killed the prophets. He is the only one left, and they are seeking his life too.

The Lord does not seem to be sympathetic. He does not explain himself, or the future course of history, to Elijah. He simply gives Elijah three tasks: to anoint Hazael king of Syria, Jehu as king of Israel, and Elisha as his successor. In fact, Elijah subsequently does only one of these tasks. It is left to Elisha to anoint Hazael and Jehu.

Consider these instructions from Elijah's point of view. He was a prophet. Since the time of Samuel and Saul, centuries ago, kings reigned over Israel as God's chosen leaders, and as intermediary between God and the people. David had perhaps come closest to this ideal. But

even he needed the prophet Nathan to hold him accountable to God, and to convey God's judgment, and God's grace.

Elijah's career had similarly been as a messenger from God to Ahab, to condemn his evil deeds as at Naboth's vineyard, and to condemn idolatry, especially worship of Baal. It seemed at Mount Carmel Ahab would be won back to the worship of the Lord, and that Israel might be redeemed. But, it was not to be. Elijah flees to Mount Horeb broken in spirit and lacking in hope. He is, or seems to be, a failure. Perhaps he blames this failure on things he did, or did not, do. He certainly lacked the nerve to stand before Jezebel, even after the amazing demonstration that God was with him on Mount Carmel.

The three tasks God gave Elijah would, if anything, have reinforced his sense of failure. He would have known these people. Consider Elisha, who was to be his successor. Elijah was so poor that he had to sponge off of a poor widow, in a time of famine, when to be a poor widow was the extreme of poverty. Elisha was so rich that he was plowing a field with twelve yoke of oxen when Elijah found him. Elijah is an outcast for bringing bad news to kings, and is being hunted. When we read about Elisha, he is on good terms with kings and other wealthy persons of his day. Elijah is typically alone, or with one servant. Elisha seems to be followed about by a large company of "sons of prophets." I don't think Elijah likes Elisha. Certainly his words seem to convey that. I believe that Elijah would have considered Elisha as totally unsuited to be a prophet, as he understood the nature of the calling. It would be like choosing Bill Gates, J.P. Morgan, or one of the Enron executives to be the pastor of a mission church. Yet, this is who God said to choose. How could Israel be saved with Elisha as God's prophet?

Let's take a look at Jehu, who was to be anointed king of Israel. Eventually, Elisha commissions one of his followers to do the job.

II Kings 9: 1 Then the prophet Elisha called a member of the company of prophets and said to him, "Gird up your loins; take this flask of oil in your hand, and go to Ramoth-Gilead [where the army was camped]. 2 When you arrive, look there for Jehu son of Jehosaphat, son of Nimshi; go in and get him to leave his companions, and take him into an inner chamber. 3 Then take the flask of oil, pour it on his head, and say, 'Thus says the Lord: I anoint you king over Israel.' Then open the door and flee; do not linger."

You see, anointing Jehu was like throwing a bomb. You don't want to stick around for when the thing goes off. Jehu immediately sets out for Jezreel where the king, Ahab's son Joram, was recovering from wounds. The dust from Jehu's company was sighted by the sentinel, and two messengers were sent to ask, "Is it peace?" But the messengers did not return.

We read in verse 20: "Again the sentinel reported, 'He [that is, the messenger] reached them, but he is not coming back. It looks like the driving of Jehu son of Nimshi; for he drives like a maniac.'"

This is interesting. All it takes is two or more wheels and a few horsepower, and some people will drive like maniacs. We have too many Jehus in our day.

By the time that Jehu sits down to dine, he has killed Joram, the king of Israel, Ahazia, King of Judah who was in town to visit his convalescing cousin, and Jezebel. And, this is just the beginning of Jehu's bloody deeds. This is to be the king of Israel, this Jehu? Elijah would have known the kind of king Jehu would be. To again draw a modern analogy, it would be like choosing Nathan Bedford Forrest, General George Patton, or maybe Mayor Daley to be ambassador to the U.N. How would Israel survive? The third task was to anoint Hazael king of Aram, or Syria. Hazael is worse than Jehu. Jehu was bloody. Hazael was also cruel.

So, you see, God's answer to Elijah's self-pity is seemingly to reinforce the failure Elijah already feels. Yet, even so there is hope: God will spare the 7000 who have not bowed down to Baal. Elijah isn't the only one left. But the monarchy, and Israel as a nation, are doomed. I expect Elijah took this failure personally.

But despite the seeming failure of Elijah, and his message, God loved Elijah. Even when his time on Earth drew to a close, Elijah did not seem to understand, and was barely civil to Elisha, his chosen successor. God's love did not depend on Elijah's understanding. God's love was so great that he was gathered to heaven in a whirlwind. And in the fullness of time, we know Elijah as perhaps the greatest of the classical prophets, honored for his faithfulness and the great deeds that he did for the Lord. Hundreds of years later when Jesus asks his disciples, "Who do men say the Son of Man is?" one of the answers is "Elijah." Even today, the Passover Seder includes a pouring of the Cup for Elijah, should the great prophet happen to join the family that evening.

The specific goals that Elijah had in mind, of convincing Ahab and the Israelites of the Northern Kingdom to follow the Lord and reject Baal, may not have been achieved. But, even so, Elijah was faithful to God, and God was faithful to him. Elijah's work was not futile. How many of the 7000 faithful were encouraged by Elijah's deeds? And even in the Kingdom of Judah, where there were occasional good kings, that kingdom was conquered and the people exiled. It seems this was necessary. Elijah could not have known. I speculate that perhaps even the ten lost tribes, dispersed into the world, helped prepare for the coming of Jesus and the spread and acceptance of the gospel centuries later.

It is perhaps ironic that we have this story in our Bible. It is not something that would have been recorded in the *Book of the Annals of the Kings of Israel*, a document that has in any case been lost. Elijah lived before prophesies were commonly written down. It would have taken resources and organization to collect, copy, and pass on these accounts. Could Elisha have been the one to initiate recording these events? He had the wealth, and organized prophets independent of the king seems to start with his "sons of prophets." It is possible, but I am speculating.

Prophets in Israel after Elijah's time typically no longer went to the king, but to the people. Amos and Hosea had messages a few generations later calling on the people to repent, and return to God. It was the institution of kingship that had failed, not Elijah, and God seems to no longer bother with communicating with the king.

Elijah could not have known how God's works would play out, and how he would be so honored by God's followers many centuries later. In like manner, we cannot know the consequences of our lives and deeds. Perhaps we have made errors, perhaps we have made mistakes. Possibly we can even see how these might have hurt others. But in the fullness of time, God can bless our faithfulness to Him just as he did in Elijah's case. He loves us, and will gather us to Him beyond our time here on Earth. There we will no longer need to grieve over sins, or mistakes, or any shortcomings, because we will see and know how all things have worked together for good, for we who love God, who are called according to His purpose. For God's love conquers all.

Amen.