

Because of the dozen summers I worked in the woods at church camps and living in several houses that didn't have clear views of a horizon, it's only recently I've begun to appreciate how long the summer days truly are. You would think I'd be more attuned to the light, since I get cranky enough in the winter that one Christmas I was gifted one of those artificial sun lamps. But for weeks now I've been outside in the evening hours, reveling in the late twilight. Enjoy it while it lasts; yesterday was the longest day of the year, so it's all downhill from here. We may not like it, but many aspects of our lives fall into cycles: light and dark, feast and famine, ease and struggle, joy and sorrow. The low points are not necessarily signs of fault or failure; progress in life, whatever that means, is rarely linear, and are not built to sustain emotional, spiritual, physical, even professional highs indefinitely. I've lost count of how many books I've read about the spirituality of low places. Contrary to popular opinion, scripture does not offer us examples or instructions for avoiding those down times; rather we have story after story showing us that when we get stuck in the inevitable muck, God digs a little deeper to get to us.

One of Israel's greatest heroes is the prophet Elijah; he represents the whole prophetic tradition when he appears with Moses at Jesus' transfiguration. It is still Jewish Passover tradition to set a place at the table and keep the door open for Elijah. He commands the weather and raises the dead. He calls down fire from the Lord. He never dies but is taken up to heaven in a fiery chariot. But in between his deeds of power and his miraculous departure, Elijah hits a low point, so low, he begs the Lord to take away his life.

Only one chapter earlier, Elijah was at the apex of his career. He publicly challenges the prophets of Baal and wins, successfully praying for fire to consume his sacrifice after Baal's prophets fail to get their fire to light. Then he kills them all and ends a three year drought. King Ahab tells Queen Jezebel what Elijah has done, and she vows to kill him. Although God has just given Elijah the power to defeat 450 men and control the weather, and although Jezebel sent a messenger, not an army, to deliver her threat, strangely, this is the time when Elijah becomes afraid and flees for his life. He descends from peak success to complete resignation in two verses.

Elijah falls into deep despair, or maybe it's more shallow self-pity, but it's definitely dramatic exaggeration: *It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors.* And then he takes a nap. Twice an angel wakes him and feeds him to give him strength to complete the journey ahead. As is the case with so many of us when we get tired and hungry, the naps and the snacks help, and Elijah continues through the wilderness for forty days and forty nights, reminiscent of the Exodus, to Horeb, the mountain where Moses met God. Nobody told Elijah to go there, but if he wanted the protection or attention of the Lord, this was the logical place to go. God asks, *What are you doing here?*

Elijah's response is heartfelt but not entirely accurate. In some ways, he *has* been very zealous for the Lord; but he also killed 450 people, which nobody, let alone the Lord, told him to do; so some of the wrath from which he is fleeing he brought upon himself by violating God's commandment. In spite of Jezebel's threat, nobody seems to have pursued him over his forty day journey through the exposed, empty

desert, nor was he arrested when her messenger initially found him. And not *all* of the Israelites had forsaken the covenant, so Elijah is not really alone. Regardless, Elijah *feels* alone and hopeless, and we know perception is enough to create one's reality. I bet a few of us have been known to say, *I'm the only one who cares...If it wasn't for me, nothing would get done...* or similar sentiments of lonely frustration.

God does not correct Elijah's hyperbole. God doesn't argue or try to reason with him. God doesn't remind him how much worse things could be or how much rougher other people have it. God doesn't implore him to try harder, pray harder, or adjust his attitude. God doesn't give him a pep talk to focus on the positive or find a silver lining. God doesn't tell him to stop whining, to pull himself together, to get over it, to get on with it, or to suck it up, Buttercup. God tells him to go out and wait, because God is coming to meet him.

*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; and after the earthquake a fire...but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence...What are you doing here, Elijah?*

God doesn't fix everything that had broken around Elijah or that Elijah, by his own actions, had broken himself. Whatever dramatic response Elijah might have wanted—like the loud, destructive violence of wind, earthquake, or fire—that was not what God offered. In the sheer silence, God gives Elijah the gift of presence—as much in his valley of his despair as when he was calling down fire from heaven on Mount Carmel. Elijah is not alone, because God is with him; his enemies have not prevailed, because Elijah has lived to stand in the presence of God. Yet when God again asks Elijah what he is doing there, Elijah's answer does not change, not a single word.

Even in the very presence of God, Elijah remains despondent. We could see that as a failure, but God doesn't seem to see it that way. Again, God doesn't argue or coerce Elijah into resuming the prophetic work that has brought him to this point. If we were to read on, we would find the details of Elijah's decommissioning and retirement. He has to anoint new leaders; he has to ordain his successor; but ultimately, Elijah is done, and God remains with him as he passes his work on to the next generation.

Agnes before John Donne or Simon and Garfunkel, Elijah taught us that no man is an island. Much of Elijah's despair came from thinking the weight of the world rested on his shoulders alone, even when he was the one who had placed it there. *Feeling* like we're all alone is not the same as *being* all alone, and God never asks us to do it all by ourselves, neither in the good seasons nor the bad. If nothing else, as Elijah learned, the work goes on after us. That can be humbling, but also comforting. God is with us just as much when we pass the baton as when we start out with all our energy, courage, and hope—and in all the highs and lows we cycle through in between. Sometimes God did show up in wind and fire, but God was also in the silence. Light and dark, feast and famine, joy and sorrow, war and we hope, one day, peace: because we find ourselves in all those places, God finds us in all those places. Lord have mercy as we go on our way.