

**“After the Turmoil”**  
a sermon  
by Dan Griswold  
Trinity Reformed Church  
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1 Kings 19:1–4, 8–15a

Psalm 42 & 43

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Elijah was scared.

Elijah was worried.

Elijah, truth be told, was depressed.

Of course, he had good reason to be scared. His worry was well founded. And that he would be singing the blues, well, we should understand this, too.

For Elijah was in trouble. No, more than that: he was in danger. You see, the wicked Queen Jezebel had marked him for death. That’s right, Jezebel. I think you wouldn’t have to know anything about the Bible to know, just from the sound of it, that someone with the name “Jezebel” must be trouble! *Jezebel*. It’s enough to make you shiver.

Jezebel was one mean lady (and I use that term loosely). She was tough. She brooked no opposition. She would do anything, and I mean *anything*, to accomplish her goals, to preserve her so-called “honor,” to extend her control: bribery, theft, extortion, murder. She would not be crossed.

But Elijah had crossed her. He had challenged 400 prophets of her false god, Ba’al, to a test. It was a very public test, out there in the open before the people of Israel. The test was to see whose god, Ba’al or the Lord, the god of the Canaanites or the God of Israel, the god of fertility or the God of all heaven and earth, who would, with no direct help from that god’s prophets and ministers, ignite a sacrifice constructed in that god’s honor.

That’s a different story, of course, one I would enjoy telling. (Another day, perhaps.) But suffice it to say that this test didn’t go well for the prophets of Ba’al. In the end, it went very badly for them. Ba’al’s sacrifice remained stone cold, while the sacrifice Elijah constructed to the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob was engulfed in flame hurled from heaven. So the prophets of Ba’al failed the test, and they were exposed as false prophets; and in those days, in those lands, false prophets were often given rather abrupt and bloody retirement packages. No gold watch for those guys.

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That’s where our passage this morning picks up. The king of Israel, King Ahab, had to give his wife the news, that the prophets of Ba’al were dead, and it was all Elijah’s fault.

And wouldn’t you know that Ahab’s wife was Jezebel.

Lucky him.

Let’s just say that Jezebel didn’t take the news so well.

After she broke some dishes and terrified all the pets, she got down to business. She starts barking out orders — to Ahab, to the butler, to the generals. She makes a vow: she will have Elijah killed, no matter what. There’s no way she’s going to let him live. It’s either him or her.

Good thing for Elijah, he hears of Jezebel's threat. (What I don't get is why *Jezebel* warned him; that doesn't sound so bright, but it does sound characteristically impulsive.) And so Elijah takes to the road, running for his life. He heads off into the wilderness, and eventually plops himself down under a shrubby tree that gives him a bit of shade from the harsh desert sun.

And there he mopes. He pouts. He wallows in self-pity. "It is enough, O Lord. Put an end to me now, O God. I am no better than my ancestors."

And then he falls asleep.

Actually, I am a bit too hard on Elijah. How, after all, can I blame him for feeling this way? How can I hold against him his fear and his despair? Would I, would any of us, have behaved any better? Yeah, right. We would not have joined him under that tree, sharing in his despair, because we would not have been anywhere near there in the first place. We would not have done all the things Elijah had done for God; we would not have come even close to his example of holy courage and profound dedication to God.

So, maybe I can cut Elijah some slack, and let him pout a little after a very busy and difficult week. I'm not sure he's exactly "earned it," but he has more warrant to pout than I usually do. Maybe I can just let Elijah cry to God and then take his nap beneath the tree.

Really, I think that there's something comforting here. More than that, I think there is something instructive here, something in this we ought to learn, something good and important.

You see, Elijah didn't hold it in.

He didn't keep his sorrow to himself.

He didn't hide this emotion from God.

He didn't believe he had to.

He didn't believe that only happiness should be shown to God.

No, he knew that his entire being must be open to God, including his entire emotional life, whether that was a life currently brightened by joy or one marked by despair.

It was as if he had learned well the lessons suggested by the psalms we read earlier, Psalms 42 and 43. It's as if he felt that thirst for God akin to that of the deer for flowing streams, as if he felt himself the aching soul expressed in those psalms, an ache that bears a sense of God's absence, God's distance, that cries out, "Where are you, O God?!"

*My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.*

*When shall I come and behold the face of God?*

It's a cry of faith, that God is the One on whom I can rely, and yet, where is God? Like those psalms, Elijah is asking why God is declining to help, right here, right now, in the midst of this turmoil.

*For you are the God in whom I take refuge;*

*why have you cast me off?*

Some might say Elijah is losing his faith, that he has given up on God. I don't buy that. I think that he is expressing great faith in difficult circumstances, just as we find in those psalms.

*Why are you cast down, O my soul,  
and why are you disquieted within me?  
Hope in God; for I shall again praise him,  
my help and my God.*

You see, I run into people who think that their darkest feelings have no place with God. Maybe these are the same people who had parents who told them to stop their bellyaching, "I don't want to hear it," when there was a problem. And now they have taken that emotional squelching pushed on them early on, and transferred it to their understanding of God. So they say,

"I can't pray, because I'm too angry."  
"I can't go to church, because I'm too frustrated."

And yet, there's Elijah, under the broom tree, crying out to God in despair. There's the Psalmist, singing of his ache for a God that at times appears distant and sounds quite silent. Each of them is showing that true faith is trusting that even these can be said to God, that it is okay to express to God not only your best but also your worst.

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So, from there Elijah goes further into the wilderness, traveling far and long, until he comes to Mount Horeb: the mountain of God, the place where God met Moses, you know, the place of the burning bush, the place of "take off your sandals Moses, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." That's where Elijah was heading, drawn there by the hope, or the promise, that here God might give him answers.

When he gets there, he does indeed meet God. God comes to him, and asks him, "What are you doing here, Elijah?"

God knows why, of course. But God knows that it's important for Elijah to answer, to say why he is there. It's important for Elijah to express to God what is troubling him, to give voice to his struggle.

So Elijah answers God. He tells what troubles him:

He has made a stand for God, in the midst of his people's faithlessness. They have abandoned God, and have killed the prophets, and only Elijah is left, and he, too, is in danger.

Then it's God's turn. How will God answer? How will God respond to Elijah's complaint? Will it be with anger? Will it be with rage? Will it be with indifference?

God has Elijah stand on the mountain. "God is about to pass by." So Elijah stands there, and waits. Soon, it happens. There is wind! But God is not in the wind. There is earthquake! God is not in the earthquake. There is fire! Nope, God isn't there, either. And Elijah still waits.

Then, after all this noise, after all this turmoil, there is what scripture describes as — well, the translations differ, which I suspect means that it's not all that easy to put into English what is going on in the Hebrew. It's "a sound of sheer silence," or "a still small voice," or "a soft whisper." Whatever it was, however it should be translated, Elijah knew what it meant. It was then that Elijah knew that God was there. God was present. God was on the mountain to meet with and speak to Elijah . . . after the turmoil.

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Isn't that something? God was not in the wind. God was not in the earthquake. God was not in the fire. God was in none of these, the dramatic, the demonstrative and furious, perhaps where one might expect God. No, God was not there. It may be that the wind, the earthquake, the fire, these may have been the messengers of God's coming, the affects of God's approaching presence, like the waves that reach shore ahead of the boat that set those waves in motion. Even so, tellingly, God was *after* these. God was in "a sound of sheer silence," in the whisper that came after the storm.

This is how God chose that day to announce God's presence: in the "after," in the stillness that follows the turmoil.

That's how it was that day, with Elijah. And, you know something? That's often how it is in these days, with us. God often acts that way, and comes to us in that way:

not *in* the dramatic  
not *in* the loud  
but in the quiet,  
    the silence  
    in what follows the turmoil.

And so God asks us, invites us, to listen for God in that same way, in the same places

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in the silences,  
in the pauses,  
in the in-between times,  
after the turmoil,  
when God's holy presence has pushed aside the loud  
so we may hear and be renewed.

And God asks us, invites us, to look at the turmoil not as threat, not as a sign of God's abandonment, nor as itself divine, but as an opportunity for soon praising God again, as the preparation for a deepening of our relationship with God, perhaps even as the harbinger of God's coming presence, the waves in advance of the boat drawing near shore.

So, I ask you, my friends who have turmoils I know or about which I can only guess, listen for God: in the silences, in the pauses, not only in the turmoil but after it as well. I urge you, express to God your fears, your questions. Wait for God, whose love is deep and broad, who spoke life on a Sunday morning within a lonely and silent tomb familiar only with decay to one abandoned and crucified, spoke life to our Lord Jesus Christ, raising him, and thereafter us, to new life.

Listen for God. Wait for God.

*Why are you cast down, O my soul,  
and why are you disquieted within me?  
Hope in God; for I shall again praise him,  
my help and my God.*