

Crashing, then Listening

1 Kings 19:1-18

Steve Hollaway

Harbor Church

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1 Kings 19 is the story of how a believer crashes. He goes from the highest high to the lowest low. Last week in chapter 18, the prophet Elijah showed the world that his God was real, and he won a decisive victory over the forces trying to take Israel away from Yahweh. He'd won the Super Bowl of the gods—or maybe this week I should say he won the Stanley Cup. If a guy needed proof that his life made a difference, Elijah had it.

But right after that the man of God crashes and burns. Elijah gets the word that Jezebel the queen has sworn that she will have Elijah killed. Her name means “Where is Baal” just as Elijah’s name means “God is Yahweh.” Jezebel want revenge because Elijah had the prophets of Baal executed. In the face of that threat, the man who stood up to the powers on Mount Carmel now goes on the run. He travels from the north country of Israel all the way to the southernmost point of the southern kingdom of Judah, to the town of Beersheba on the edge of the Negev desert. There Elijah leaves his servant boy behind and heads out into the desert on a suicide walk. He walks a full day—presumably without water or food—until he comes to a broom tree with a little shade, where he collapses exhausted on the ground and says “I’ve had enough. Yahweh, take my life. I am no better than those who have died before me. I am no better than any of the prophets, who have all failed. I give up.” And he went to sleep, hoping he would not wake up.

I’ll say one thing about this story: it means we don’t have to pretend anymore. We can admit that we don’t spend our lives on the mountaintop celebrating victories. Sometimes we are afraid that our enemies will catch up with us. Sometimes we are just too tired to go on. Sometimes we find we have gotten ourselves in a desert where there is no water, and there doesn’t seem to be any point to anything.

Why does Elijah crash? It’s not unusual for someone to crash after a really big moment—after a goal achieved, like graduation or a wedding, or a great performance. We can understand it from a medical perspective: the adrenalin rush that got us through the crisis is over, and our energy level drops suddenly; the serotonin gets depleted in the brain; and often, like Elijah, we are just exhausted. You don’t have to be bipolar to experience ups and downs that are pretty dramatic, but some of us are more susceptible to depression than others. It has to do with genetics and brain chemistry and personality, not very much with attitude and choice. You may have noticed that the most intense people—like Elijah, with strong personalities and emotions—and also, surprisingly, the funniest people—seem subject to the deepest depressions.

But you could argue that Elijah’s depression is situational. The queen takes out a contract on you so you have to leave your country; that would bring any of us down. But I wonder if it’s not rooted in disillusionment. Elijah wakes up the morning after and nothing has really changed. Yes, God has proved himself real; yes, a large number of those leading Israel astray have been killed. But the next morning it seems that Jezebel has the real power. All power seems to flow from the sword, and from the money to pay armies. One spectacular appearance by Yahweh has not changed the political reality. It’s a hard thing to change a culture so thoroughly corrupt.

I know some of you have been disillusioned about island life over the past year. When you suddenly find yourself engaged in trench warfare, you can’t help but remain on edge waiting

for the next grenade. Even if you have a tremendous worship experience on Sunday morning, it's not long before the phone rings and you debate whether to answer it. You begin to wonder if it's all worth it, and if God is really involved at all—if he's really bending the arc of history toward justice and toward peace, he sure as heck is taking his time about it. I hope none of you is at the point of asking God to take your life, but I can understand if you get discouraged about changing things that are wrong in a place so resistant to change. Family systems theory tells us that every dysfunctional family has reached a state of homeostasis, a way of doing things (however sick it may be) with which they are comfortable. Any effort by a family member to get better or to make the family work better will be met by resistance, because people always prefer things the way they were.

I had a bit of a morning-after self-doubt experience recently, when after four weeks of meetings about the drug and alcohol problems on the island, hearing people agree that we need to end the denial and face our problems—after all that to see a letter in the *Block Island Times* saying that it is wrong to place any blame for tragedies on the atmosphere on the island or the community itself. It can't be *our* problem as a culture, in other words; it has to be a few rotten apples who made bad choices. We say this as if the phenomenon of a 12-year-old selling marijuana at school happens in a vacuum, or as if the death of someone's daughter of a heroin overdose has nothing to do with the fact that she started drinking beer at 12 at a beach fire. 12-year-olds don't choose their own values. They learn them from their communities. Oh, and then in the *Times* I saw the photo of the stop sign amended to say "Stop Talking to Cops." I had an Elijah moment—one of those moments when you think the naysayers are right: you can't change a culture that has been sick for generations; it's a lost cause; if people want to choose self-destruction, what can you do?

But you only get to despair if you forget what God can do, only if you lose touch with God's heart that wants to bring people back to life and health. Yes, we are always going against the wind. We are always pushing uphill. Gravity favors sin, just as the world tends toward entropy. But there is another force: the invisible kingdom, and the One who draws all people to himself. There is the transforming power of love and forgiveness. And one of the things we have to learn, like Elijah, is that being zealous is not enough. We have to be patient.

Elijah has lost patience with life and with God. "Take my life," he says, and goes to sleep. I want you to notice what God does and doesn't do. Some of us are jerks with people who are feeling down. If this was my son, I might tell him to get a more positive attitude, perhaps without asking it implying "What's wrong with you?" Some Christians would tell Elijah he needs to stop sinning by doubting God—and tell him that wishing he was dead is a sin too. Some would just tell him that everything is OK; that he's exaggerating.

But what does God do? Does he rebuke Elijah? No, God send a messenger in the form of a baker who, while the prophet sleeps, builds a fire under some rocks and bakes some fresh pita bread on the rocks. Then the baker touches Elijah on the shoulder and says "Get up and eat." Sometimes our needs are just human needs. We are tired and we need to sleep. We are weak and we need to eat. We need to stay hydrated. God understands that, and in that story he sends a messenger or angel to meet those needs.

There is no sense in anything God does or says to imply that depression is a moral failure. God does not suggest that happiness is a choice or that Elijah should just get over it. Even when Elijah falls back to sleep, still too weak, Yahweh's angel comes a second time and says, "Get up and eat. Otherwise, the journey will be too much for you." Elijah might have wondered "Where

are we going?” But then he understood that the journey was a journey to God. He was going back to the place where God met his people before, to the place where Moses met God.

The story of Elijah at the cave is one of the most famous in the Old Testament—or at least one of the most preached about. When the word of the Lord, Yahweh’s word, comes to the prophet, what he hears is “What are you doing *here*, Elijah?” The question is “Why aren’t you in your field of ministry? Why aren’t you where I sent you?” Elijah answers “I have been very zealous for you, Yahweh. But the country is going to hell in a hand basket, they’ve taken God out of the schools, they are persecuting believers”—or something like that, a tale of woe.

“I’m the only one left, and they are trying to take my life away,” he says, ignoring the fact that not too long ago he was asking *God* to take his life. If you go back a couple of chapters you’ll find Obadiah saying that he’s hidden 100 of the Lord’s prophets in two caves, protecting them from the Baal forces. So certainly Elijah is not the only one, even if he feels that way because he’s out of touch. At the end of the Lord’s speech to Elijah at the cave, the Lord adds a little PS: Oh, by the way, there are 7000 others who are faithful to me. One scholar wrote about this story, “He was never as isolated as he thought he was. He should not have made isolation his virtue, and then that virtue his despair” [Kenneth Gros Louis, *Literary Interpretations of Biblical Narratives*, Abingdon, 1974, p. 190]. When we are depressed we feel more alone than we really are, but our feelings often lead us to isolate ourselves further. Sometimes we think of ourselves as isolated because of our rightness or faithfulness, so that our isolation becomes a badge of honor. No, God says, you are never alone.

At this point Yahweh tells Elijah to come out of the cave and stand on the mountainside, where the Lord himself will pass by. Three times a natural phenomenon happened which was traditionally associated with God’s presence. First a tremendous wind passed by, like the EF5 tornados in Moore and El Rio, Oklahoma. No doubt Yahweh made it happen, but God was not *in* the storm. Then there was an earthquake, but that wasn’t the way God chose to reveal himself. Then there was a fire—the very sign of God’s presence Elijah had asked for on Mount Carmel—but this time God was not in the fire. But after all that, there was silence. The Hebrew calls it the sound of silence, or the voice of a sheer stillness. If you could call it a still, small voice, as the King James has it, it was a very still voice that Elijah could barely make out—maybe the kind of voice God speaks to you in most of the time.

By this time it seems that Elijah has retreated into the cave, hiding. But now, hearing something in the silence, he wraps his cape over his face to protect himself from the glory of God, just in case. He stands there listening to the stillness. Then he recognizes the voice of Yahweh again, asking the same question because he never got an answer to it: “What are you doing *here*, Elijah?” Disappointingly, Elijah gives the same self-justifying “poor me” answer. Mercy, the Lord is patient! God doesn’t give up on us nearly as easily as we give up on him. He doesn’t say anything mean to Elijah or tell him to get over it. He does something completely different.

God tells Elijah to get back to work. He tells him to go back north where he came from. God gives him a mission, a big one. Your mission, should you choose to accept it, is to install a new king over Syria and a new king over Israel—and to make Elisha your successor as prophet. I think the message is “You’ve had your retreat. You’ve had time to recover. The best thing for you now is not to stay here feeling sorry for yourself but to go about the business I am giving you to do.” As it turns out, those are not easy tasks. What if God told you all he wanted you to do was to put in a new President of the United States, and a new President of Mexico to boot. Elijah never actually gets to anoint those two kings. What he does do, right away, is to pass his

prophet's mantle on to Elisha, and it is Elisha who goes on to anoint Hazael. Eventually God does take care of the Baal problem by replacing two kings, but it takes time, and God works through the processes of history. It is not enough to be zealous for the Lord; you have to be patient and wait for him to act.

Our stories are not going to be as dramatic as the story of Elijah, but it's true even of us that when we crash, God will help us recover. And then the thing to do is to listen: not for something spectacular, not for a message written in the sky, but to listen to the silence. Sometimes in the silence I hear the voice of Jesus. I know what he says to some who have crashed: "Come unto me, all ye who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." To others he says, "As the Father has sent me, so send I you." Listen, as the Lord passes by.