

Walking through Burnout

1 Kings 19:9b-13

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Real Audio (3 MB)

Last week when we left our prophet Elijah, he had just achieved the most stunning success of his career. For many years Queen Jezebel had led Israel into the worship of the idol Baal, but at a great contest on Mt. Carmel, Elijah demonstrated who was the true Lord God.

It was an amazing day. The 450 prophets of Baal prepared an altar and spent the day pleading with Baal to accept their sacrifice. "But there was no response." Then Elijah repaired the altar of the Lord and prayed to him. The fire shot down from the sky, the altar exploded into flames, and the fire consumed the sacrifice and even the altar. The people then fell on their faces, crying out, "The Lord, he is God. The Lord, he is God." Elijah was so excited about this revival he ran 17 miles back to the palace and arrived ahead of King Ahab's chariot. Maybe he was expecting to discuss religious reforms when he got there, but he forgot about Queen Jezebel, who was still in power.

When the king returned to the palace and told his queen about their humiliating defeat on Mt. Carmel, Jezebel was enraged! She sent word to Elijah that he would be dead in 24 hours. Now we would expect after all Elijah had just seen, when he heard her threat, he would kick his head back and roar with laughter. "Who is this puny queen to contend with God who pulls fire down from the sky?" But that's not what happened. What happened was that Elijah became afraid and fled for his life. He ran into the desert, fell under a solitary broom tree, and begged God to kill him before the queen did.

The portrait we have of Elijah today is so different from what we saw last week. Today he is discouraged, frightened, running away, feeling like a failure, burned out. Why? Because after all he has done -- all the risks he has taken, all the conflict he has survived -- this wicked queen is still in charge. Nothing has changed!

At one point he laments, "I was zealous for the Lord, the God of hosts, but I am the only one left in Israel. The only one. And now they are going to kill me." Those are the words of a man who is burned out.

There is no time we are as susceptible to burn out as we are on the other side of Mt. Carmel. You may have a day of great victory at home or the office, or in the political process. But when the dust settles and you take a hard look around you, only to see that nothing has really changed, you become afraid your life isn't really making a difference.

Like Elijah, you start making generalizations: "I am the only one, Lord." "Nobody in this family understands me." "Nobody in this office is even trying to be ethical." "Nobody else cares about the mess the world is in." "Why do I even bother?"

Notice that Elijah's prayer is all about himself, Israel, and Jezebel. It is all horizontal. If you just look horizontally at the options, it doesn't look good for the sacred vision of the world. It doesn't look good for Israel and Palestine today. Or for Afghanistan, Sudan, the Kashmir. Or for getting rid of all the terrorists. Maybe it doesn't look too good in your own home. But there is more than you can see.

There is more than what is apparent on the horizontal plane. There is also the vertical. And that is why we pray. Even when your prayers, like Elijah's, aren't very spiritual, the very act of prayer lifts up your eyes, which is the only way to see what God sees. And God can always see more options.

It is striking that God is so tender with his burned-out prophet. He doesn't slap him around and tell him

to snap out of it. Nor does he try to talk Elijah out of his despair. No one has ever been talked out of despair. The most you can do is get people back on their feet. Get them walking again, and the hope will come back along the way.

First the Lord sends his angels to care for the prophet's body. They tell him to get up, eat and drink. Then they send him to a different mountain, Mt. Horeb, where God will care for his soul. So Elijah travels another 40 days and nights to Mt. Horeb, which is also known as Mt. Sinai, where God appeared to Moses.

Mt. Horeb is very different from Mt. Carmel where the multitudes go to worship. Today you can drive right up to the top of Mt. Carmel. It isn't a very hard climb. Anyone can make it to the place where faith is hot, dramatic, and easy. But the road to Mt. Horeb is hard and lonely. It is taken only by those who have lost their holy visions. Mt. Carmel is a full church on Sunday morning, where you're surrounded by people saying, "The Lord, he is God. The Lord, he is God." Mt. Horeb is where you go at 2 a.m. to pray, alone with your fears. Eventually we all find ourselves praying on both mountains.

There on Mt. Horeb, all alone with his fears, Elijah heard the Word of the Lord, "Go out, and stand on the mountain before the Lord." Like him we have to get up and take our stand in the midst of our fears and disappointments. Stop anesthetizing yourselves to the pain. Stand in the midst of your worries about your kids and career. Stand in the midst of your doubts about a new kingdom coming. Because it is all a way of standing in the midst of your God who holds all things.

"Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting the mountain and breaking the rocks into pieces, 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, the sound of sheer silence." When Elijah heard the silence, he covered his face with his mantle because he knew he was in the presence of God.

This phrase, "sheer silence" is also translated as "a still small voice." In the Hebrew it has the connotation of a silence that is so strong it speaks. Now Elijah was a man of fire, words, and dramatic struggles. But God was not contained in the things that Elijah was used to. God was found in the silence. He was not in the irresistible force of power, but in the quiet voice of hope that speaks only to those with ears to hear it.

When you're burned out, a miracle isn't going to do anything for you. It doesn't matter if God makes it rain fire down from the heavens. That isn't going to help, because what you need is fire in your heart. For that, you have to listen to the God who prefers to speak through the silence. There are times when he does the most dramatic things, like he did on Mt. Carmel, but those times are very rare. His preference is to work in quieter ways.

The sound of sheer silence was heard again centuries later, when a baby was born in a stable in Bethlehem on a silent holy night, and when an innocent man was crucified on a cross in Jerusalem. It was heard more recently when a young man stared down a tank in China, when an old nun quietly washed the bodies of the dying in Calcutta, and when a New York fireman silently ran back into the crumbling Trade Towers in hopes of pulling one more person back to life.

Silently, God has always been present in our world, fighting in his own way against all of the Jezebels and Ahabs that threaten us. That's what you have to see when you've lost the flame in your soul. You have to see that God just loves quiet faithfulness. It is all he has ever asked of you. It is all you need to do. The changes are his business.

After the sound of sheer silence, the Lord asked, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" But the prophet still didn't get the Lord's quiet point, and he began to lament again, "I was zealous for the Lord, the God of hosts, but I am the only one left in Israel. The only one. And now they are going to kill me." If I were the Lord, at this point I would have killed him myself. But the Lord, ever gracious, just keeps Elijah moving. He sends him back to work, and he reminds him that he is not alone. There are 7,000 who haven't bowed their knees to Baal. Then he calls Elijah to anoint Elisha to be his successor, and Hazael and Jehu to be the new kings.

In other words, God's will is revealed not primarily in the spectacular drama of Carmel, but in the quiet providential ordering of history: in the process of political and religious succession, in the righteousness of the thousands who aren't idolaters, and in the call to a tired prophet to go back to work another day, just as the sun quietly rises morning after morning.

Elijah's soul got in trouble because he couldn't see the quiet ways God always prefers to work. And because he could not see God's preference for the unspectacular, he could not see the purpose in his own unspectacular faithfulness. When you cannot see the holy purpose in unspectacular faithfulness, you have to exaggerate your life into being more spectacular than it is. This will inevitably result in burn out because it is only a matter of time before you realize you are not so spectacular.

You are not the holy one who can pull fire down from the sky. But for those who pray, and who know the way up to Mt. Horeb, the discovery that you are not so spectacular is only a call to worship the God who is.

The hymn "O Love that Wilt Not Let Me Go" was written in the 19th century by George Matheson, who became blind not long after he was engaged to be married. His fiancé decided she couldn't marry a blind man and broke off the engagement. For a while he tried to be brave. He went to school, learned a vocation, and became a minister. That was all pretty spectacular for a blind man in the 19th century. But on the day of his sister's wedding all the unresolved issues of his broken engagement rushed to the surface. He began to wonder if he would always be alone, and if his life would ever mount to anything worth loving. In the midst his lonely despair, though, he began to pray into the sound of sheer silence. Then he remembered that love comes not from achieving a spectacular life, but from the grace of God that just keeps showing up every day.

Renewed in his faith, he wrote this hymn. "O love that wilt not let me go I rest my weary soul in thee. I give thee back the life I owe, that in thine ocean depths its flow may richer, fuller be."

O God of earth and altar, when we are discouraged and confused about our life's purpose, teach us to lift our eyes to see your own holy, loving purposes which will not let us go. Amen