

St. Columba's Episcopal Church
August 11, 2024 – The Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost
1 Kings 19:4-8
The Rev. Dr. Susan Kraus

Have you ever sat here on a Sunday morning, listened to the first lesson, and wondered, “What on earth was that about?” To be honest I often wonder why the people who chose our readings for Sunday worship included the Old Testament lessons we read. They may make little sense unless you are very knowledgeable about this huge collection of ancient writings.

Our Bibles are basically divided into two sections – the Old Testament or Hebrew Bible and the New Testament. In the study Bible that I use most often, “The New Oxford Annotated Bible,” the Old Testament is about 1,770 pages long. The New Testament is about 450 pages long. At ordination Episcopal priests promise to preach the Gospel. Therefore, many of us tend to focus on the weekly lessons from Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John – only about 170 pages out of 2,220 pages in this Bible. People who attend church regularly get to know the story of Jesus well, but the Old Testament and the other books of the New Testament often get little attention. Since today's lesson from John's gospel is quite similar to last week's lesson, I thought I would focus on our Old Testament reading from 1 Kings.

Originally written as one book, our Old Testament books of 1 Kings and 2 Kings were written in approximately 620 BCE and describe the period of Jewish history from the death of King David through the aftermath of the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem in 586 BCE, a period of approximately 400 years. These books aren't history books, primarily concerned with reporting a factual account of events. Their focus is on God, God's intervention in human history, and the loyalty or lack of loyalty of the Jewish kings and people to God through time.

Some background to the story we heard this morning about Elijah. He should be familiar to you from the accounts we read every year of Jesus' Transfiguration. When Jesus was on the mountain and was revealed to three of his disciples as the eternal Son of God, radiant with the dazzling light of his glory, he was talking with Moses and Elijah. Elijah was one of the greatest of the prophets of Israel, a healer and miracle worker, who lived in the 9th century before Christ. He defended the worship of Yahweh – the Hebrew name of the God of the Israelites – against the worship of the foreign, Canaanite deity Baal. Elijah's name means “my God is Yahweh.”

This morning's lesson makes a great deal more sense if you know that the reason Elijah “went a day's journey into the wilderness” was that he was running for his life. In a contest with the prophets of Baal, Elijah had shown that Yahweh was the stronger, more powerful God. Two altars had been set up with wood for sacrifice. The prophets of Baal called on Baal to light the fire – no response. Elijah had his altar soaked with water, then prayed that God would light the fire. God did. Having proved his point, Elijah then ordered that all 450 prophets of Baal be killed. Jezebel was the foreign wife of Ahab, King of Israel. She had convinced her husband to abandon the worship of Yahweh and encourage the worship of her god, Baal. Jezebel had supported the prophets of Baal. When she heard what Elijah had done to them, she promised to take his life in return. So Elijah fled south through the wilderness to escape.

Elijah had done what God had wanted him to do, to show God's people that they must worship only God, not Baal or any gods of other people living in the land. Elijah had done spectacularly well as a prophet of God, and here he was fleeing for his life through the barren wilderness. He finally comes to a broom tree, a large bush under which he found shelter, and he is so discouraged that he asks God to take his life. An angel comes to minister to him, giving

him a cake of bread and a jar of water. Strengthened by this food, Elijah was able to walk on for forty days and nights. In the Bible when the number forty is used, it means an unspecified but large number. So we understand that Elijah walked through the wilderness for a long time before he finally reached Mount Horeb (also known as Mount Sinai), the holy place where Moses had received the Ten Commandments from God.

When we hear our Bible lessons, we might ask ourselves, "What does that have to do with us now? Times have changed! What could the "lesson" be for us in this lesson?" In light of our reading from 1 Kings, we might reflect on our own experiences and on the experiences of others who have attempted to live according to the teaching of God as revealed in scripture, in Jesus, and through other pathways. People may certainly do what God commands – broadly speaking, to love God and our neighbors as ourselves – and suffer any number of hardships as a result. And people may live in ways contrary to God's teaching and prosper. You may find these truths all through the Bible. As one example, I would suggest you read Psalm 73, ancient writing but as true today as it was then.

If you have walked on this journey of life for quite some time, as many of us have, you have probably learned these lessons for yourself. Loyalty to God is costly. Living with love is costly. Each week we begin the celebration of the Eucharist with the words from Paul's Letter to the Ephesians that we heard today, "Walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God." An offering. A sacrifice. Costly, not cheap. Sometimes terribly difficult. In fact, we may become so worn out doing what we know to be right that we sometimes feel like Elijah under the broom tree.

But let's consider the rest of Elijah's story. In his time of great need an angel ministered to Elijah, giving him the food and drink that kept him going on his journey to God's holy mountain. Just as the angels ministered to Jesus after he had spent forty days and nights fasting in the wilderness and withstanding the temptation of Satan. And just as an angel from heaven ministered to Jesus after his terrible struggle in the Garden of Gethsemane before his arrest and crucifixion.

We are all still here on our journeys to God. I invite you to look back on your journey thus far and ask yourself how God's angels, God's messengers, have ministered to you when you were in need. How have you been given the strength to go on when you didn't think you could? Perhaps through another person, perhaps through the church, or perhaps through God's direct gifts of faith and inner strength, the action of the Holy Spirit. How has God strengthened you on your journey?

When Jesus was transfigured on the mountain he was speaking with Moses and Elijah. What were they talking about? Luke writes that "they appeared in glory and were speaking of [Jesus'] departure, which he was about to accomplish in Jerusalem" (Luke 9:31). His departure through the cross. As Christians we understand that the sacrifices and trials we go through in life to walk in God's ways are not tragic, not the end of the story. They may even be "glorious," in the sense of having the power to transform us, to bring us near to Christ, and to know how God sustains us on our way. We walk on in faith, with trust in God who saves us now and will save us always. We walk on in faith in God who raised Jesus from death to glory.

On our way may we, with St. Paul, always be "convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:38-9). In Jesus' name. Amen.