

A SERMON BY REV. DR. RICHARD CLEWELL
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“CONFRONTING THE FEAR FACTOR”
SCRIPTURE: 1 Kings 19: 1-18

Fear is a very significant factor in human life. We all are affected by uncertainties and fears in everyday living which threaten our sense of security and well-being. Certainly people of faith are not immune to such trepidations. In the current economic climate we fear the loss of jobs and the threats to retirement plans. We fear that the changes in health care will take away or reduce the benefits we may now enjoy. We fear that we will not be successful in our career paths or that our kids won't get into the right college or that we will not be able to afford the tuition. Old timers fear another depression and the end of a way of life. Since 9/11 we fear unknown terrorism and see politicians using fear tactics to enhance their chances for reelection and avoid finding genuine solutions for problems or trying even to answer major questions. Years ago Franklin Delano Roosevelt in similar circumstances declared, "We have nothing to fear but fear itself." Fear is gripping and can take over one's life, even the lives of people of faith. As believers how do you and I confront the fear factor?

The Scriptures give us instruction in dealing with this question. We turn again to the Hebrew canon for help this morning in addressing this issue. The Book of Kings, utilizing legendary stories from Israel's history passed down through the generations, was written in exile in Babylon during the reign of King Nabonidus (555-539 B.C.) Jews in exile were the intended audience whether they lived in Babylon, Egypt or Judah. Loyalty to Yahweh had hit rock bottom. They sought to blend in with their new surroundings to reduce any threat to their lives for disloyalty. The theological questions posed by the fall of the nation were crucial. Was the Babylonian god Marduk stronger than Yahweh? What did defeat and exile mean to a people who had once considered themselves Yahweh's own choice? What was the relationship between the individual and the nation in matters of sin and punishment? What had happened to God's promises about the Davidic dynasty and the city of Jerusalem? Is there any hope at all?

A large part of the response to these questions is this written version of the legendary prophet Elijah's experience in his calling by God and his emphatic theme that "life is made possible by the Lord alone." (Read 1 Kings 19: 1-18) We first encounter this prophet in the 17th chapter of Kings as he has the unenviable duty to tell King Ahab of Israel that the Lord God of Israel will bring a drought upon his kingdom because he and his Canaanite wife, Jezebel, have established Baal worship throughout the land. In response to Ahab's anger, God directs Elijah to leave the Promised Land and hide in the Kerith Ravine east of the Jordan River. There he will be sustained by water from the brook and by bread and meat brought to him twice daily by ravens. Elijah obeys Yahweh who according to his word provides for him. In the course of the drought, the brook dries up.

Then the word of the Lord comes to Elijah again telling him to go to Zarephath in the region of Sidon where a widow will feed him. He meets the widow at the town gate and asks for water to drink and a morsel of bread to eat. She protests that she doesn't have enough flour or oil to even keep her and her infant son alive. Elijah tells her not to be afraid for the Lord God of Israel will keep the jar of flour and the jug of oil full until the day God ends the drought. In obedience to the Word of the Lord, she does as Elijah directs and they are filled daily.

Later the widow's son becomes ill and soon dies. She cries out to Elijah, "What have you against me, O man of God? You have come to bring my sin to remembrance, and to cause the death of my son!" But Elijah takes the expired child from her, enters his room, and prays to his Lord who listens to his plea and revives the child. Elijah returns the infant to his mother, who

responds, “Now I know that you are a man of God and that the word of the Lord in your mouth is truth. From her fear of death comes new life and faith.

The eighteenth chapter of Kings is the highlight of the prophet’s ministry. He reemerges from hiding in the third year of the drought in obedience to God’s direction to present himself to King Ahab to announce the coming end of the drought. This might be life-threatening to see this angry king again. The drought is severe and Ahab summons his palace steward, Obadiah, who reveres the Lord greatly. In fact, during the time that Queen Jezebel was killing of the prophets of the Lord, Obadiah had rescued a hundred faithful prophets, hiding them in a cave and providing food for them. Now he is dispatched by his “boss” to search out part of the land to find water and forage to feed the horses and mules of his armed cavalry to survive.

While on his search, Elijah meets him and he recognizes the prophet as God’s called one. However, when Elijah instructs him to tell Ahab he is back to meet with him, Obadiah is caught in mixed loyalties; fears for his life and career, and fears if Elijah disappears again, the enraged king will kill the messenger. Elijah promises him that he will meet the king that day and so Obadiah obeys with fear and apprehension.

So Ahab comes, sees Elijah and declares, “Is it you, you troubler of Israel?” Elijah fearlessly responds, “I have not troubled Israel; but you have, and your father’s house, because you have forsaken the commandments of the Lord and followed the Baals. Now, have all Israel assemble for me at Mount Carmel with the four hundred fifty prophets of Baal and the four hundred prophets of Asherah who eat at Jezebel’s table.” When Ahab assembles everyone, Elijah brings the issue of faith into focus, observing the Israelites’ ambivalence. He issues a challenge: “If the Lord is God follow him, but if Baal, then follow him!” The people didn’t answer making no commitment. Elijah challenges them all as the lone prophet of the Lord against the four hundred fifty prophets of Baal. He proposes an offering to see which God responds. He gives prophets of Baal first chance allowing them to pick the first bull, slaughter it, and put it on their altar but not to set it on fire. He then would do the same. Then each of us will call on the name of our god – your Baal and my Yahweh – and the one who answers by fire is indeed the Lord. The people endorse this idea. So the contest begins. The prophets of Baal prepare their sacrifice on their altar; call on the name of Baal from morning until noon with no results. At noon Elijah mocks them urging them to cry louder; perhaps your god is meditating or is taking a potty break, or is on a journey or perhaps is asleep and must be awakened. The four hundred fifty prophets cry louder and cut themselves with swords and lances until their blood gushes. Midday passes and they rave on until the time of Israel’s sacrifice of oblation. There is no voice, no answer, no response and no fire.

Then Elijah calls all the people closer. He repairs the altar of the Lord which had been destroyed. He takes twelve stones representing the tribes of the sons of Jacob and builds the altar in the name of the Lord. He digs a trench around the altar, puts wood on it and then the pieces of his slaughtered bull. He has them fill four large jugs of water and pour them over the altar and its sacrifice. They do this three times so the water runs all over the altar and fills the trench. At the proper time of sacrifice, Elijah prays to the Lord to answer him so that this people may know that you are the only God and that their hearts will be turned back in faith. And the rest is history – the fire of the Lord falls and consumes the sacrifice, the wood, the stones, the dust, and even the water in the trench. The people seeing this fall down and cry, “the Lord indeed is God!”

At Elijah’s command they seize all the prophets of Baal who are killed in the Wadi Kishon. Elijah tells Ahab to go up, to eat and drink for there is the sound of rushing rain. Ahab goes to restore his strength and Elijah climbs to the top of Mt. Carmel where he bows down exhausted. He tells his servant to go look at the sea for any sign of rain. On the seventh time he reports that a little cloud no bigger than a person’s hand is rising out of the sea. Elijah sends his servant to Ahab to tell him to “saddle up” and go down before the muddy road stops his chariot. Then the wind and rain come in a deluge as Ahab starts back to Jezreel. Again God renews Elijah who runs in front

of Ahab the seventeen miles to the city. This is the highlight of Elijah's story. But it doesn't end here and we finally come to our text.

When Ahab tells Jezebel, his Canaanite wife, what occurred, she sends a message to Elijah, "Swearing on my gods, I will make your life like the life of one of them by tomorrow!" Elijah is terrified, he gets up and flees for his life to Beersheba in Judah where he leaves his servant and travels a day's journey into the wilderness where he comes to a solitary tree, sits down and begs that he might die. Enough, already, O Lord, for I'm no better than my predecessors. As he sleeps the Spirit touches him and orders him to get up and eat. Again a second time to eat some more because otherwise the journey will be too much for you. On the basis of this nourishment he goes forty days and nights to Mt. Horeb, the mount of God, and spends the night in a cave. The word of the Lord comes to him asking, "What are you doing here?" He complains about how much he's done on behalf of God and that the Israelites have forsaken the covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets. I alone am left and they want to kill me. Woe is me! What good is following you? He is commanded to go out and stand on the mountain before the Lord who is about to pass by. There is a great wind so strong it shatters the rocks, but the Lord is not in the wind; then an earthquake, but the Lord is not in the earthquake; then fire, but the Lord is not in the fire; after the fire the sound of sheer silence. When Elijah hears it, he wraps his face in his cloak, goes out, and stands at the entrance of the cave. And there comes a voice asking, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" He gives the same answer as before. The Lord says to him, "Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus where you'll anoint Hazael, king over Aram and Jehu, king over Israel, and Elisha as prophet in your place. Those kings will finish off further Baal worship. You are not the only one faithful for there will be seven thousand in Israel who are also faithful. (v. 18)

So what does this long legendary account tell us as those trying to be faithful today about confronting the fear factors in our lives? The first lesson is that God (Yahweh) is Lord alone. There are always competing gods in any culture but God's calling by the Spirit and divine Word is the first and final meaning for life. Whether the Lord uses miracles (i.e. the feeding by ravens, the unending flour and oil, the raising of a dead boy, or the contest with the false prophets), works through history and its power brokers (i.e. Ahab, Jezebel, King Hazael, King Jehu), or touches the lives of those he calls (i.e. Elijah), God accomplishes the divine purpose for the world and gives believers hope.

The second lesson is revealed in the experiences of the characters in the story. The widow in Zarepath, a Baal worshiper who fears for her family's very lives in a severe famine is transformed through Elijah's interaction and God's gracious action to belief and faith. In the midst of her anxiety and ambivalence, she finds a way she can depend on. This can be true for each of us as well.

Obadiah, king Ahab's palace steward, is a person with whom most of us in the community of faith can identify. He is a believer, who reveres the Lord God of Israel. His loyalty is attested by his name (servant/worshipper of God). He is even instrumental in saving the lives of Israel's prophets and undermining the will of the queen. However, he also has other allegiances and fears – he has his boss to serve and please, his career to protect, his own life to preserve. His story is just as easily our story and warns us of the danger of the subtle and seemingly excusable compromises as well as the blatant ones we make. Herein lies the threat to faith for most of us. The great challenge lies in complete faithfulness to God alone and the willingness to trust the Lord, even in times when other alternatives seem more practical, safer, more relevant, more popular. Human needs and wants are so great that there is always the temptation to keep one's theological opinions open to hedge against the possibility that our God may not adequately provide for our needs. To play it safe is already to choose an alternative other than the way of the Lord.

Finally, our text (chp. 19) provides the lesson of Elijah, the prophet, a bona fide hero in the contest, now on the run fearing for his life. Elijah who was faithful, confident and authoritative; who was able to bring about divine miracles through prayer to God; who was able to confront a powerful king with his sin; who dared to challenge a large crowd of Baalists; now is intimidated, depressed, self-doubting, even suicidal and decidedly self-righteous. Under a lone tree in the desert his prayer to the Lord is that he might die. God comes to him, nourishes him and directs a journey to Mt Horab, the place where Moses came in direct contact with Yahweh. There he complains to God and is ordered to stand on the mountain for the Lord is about to pass by. He finds no contact with God in the windstorm, earthquake, or fire but in the sheer sound of silence comes "face to face" with his Lord. In response he wraps his cloak around his head and comes out of his dark cave. He hears the voice of God again asking him what he is doing there. He gives the same self-pitying answer as he had before. Elijah is never rebuked for showing weakness, even for his self-righteousness and complaints. He is accepted as he is and is merely recommissioned to his ministry. God assures him he is not alone (v. 18) and sends him out to follow again and to anoint his successor. Elijah is very much like you and me. Being faithful is a struggle in any culture. We can become "burned-out," depressed, feel sorry for ourselves, and be self-righteous, alone and afraid. But God does not dump us but accepts us where we are and calls us to engage in our ministry again in faithfulness and trust of the Lord's love and direction. Richard Nelson in the *Interpretation* series states, "The narrative explains the interplay between human despair and God's call in a way that speaks to exiles in any age. God provides in the wilderness. God induces Elijah to get back to work by giving him more to do. God shrugs off his complaints and commissions him for further tasks. God's therapy for prophetic burn-out includes both the assignment of new tasks and the certain promise of a future that transcends the prophet's own success or lack of it. In light of such a future, life is worth living after all."

For those exiles in captivity in Babylon as well as those of us today as we face uncertainty and fears, genuine hope is found in the Lord who is faithful and continues to call us to follow and to serve in the best of times and in the worse. I'm reminded of the Apostle Paul's words when he was sick and close to burn-out. After pleading with God for relief, he receives God's word, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." (2 Cor. 12-9) God remains faithful to us even when we doubt or stumble. That is truly the grace of God! Amen