

Sermon Notes – April 18, 2021

(I Kings 19:1-9)

Today, I want to talk a little bit about discouragement, despair, and depression. You know, going through this COVID pandemic, a lot of people have been discouraged and depressed. “Is anything ever going to change? Is it going to get any better?” All of us have highs and lows. When I talk about discouragement and depression today, I do not, in any way, want to oversimplify depression, because there is deep depression that requires medical care and medication. I attest to that because my youngest brother was manic-depressive and on medication for twenty-five years, and he had to be under the supervision of medical doctors. So, please do not take it that I am oversimplifying it. I want to talk about the kind of discouragement and depression that comes to the majority of us, and that is the highs and lows, “the blahs”, that bad day, that bad week or weeks; those times that we tend to react to something that’s happened in our lives.

Psychiatrists say that there are four types of depression: One is endogenous, which is chemical depression, caused by a chemical deficiency in our brain. We may have been born with it; it may have happened over a period of time; but, we’re missing some chemical or enzyme in our brain and it causes depression which requires medication. There is toxic depression, which means that some environmental chemical has entered our body or some drug has affected us in some way that causes deep depression. Then there’s psychotic depression, where people have a mental breakdown (a mental illness), are hospitalized, and take medication. Most of us, fall in the order of reactive depression, which means we react to something going on in our lives – like the loss of a job, the loss of a pet, the loss of a loved one, a broken relationship, a move, change in our health. But, something happens that causes us to go into discouragement and depression.

I want to talk a little bit about reactive depression and Elijah, the Old Testament prophet. One of the things that I am amazed about in the Bible is that it never skews over people with failures, frailties, and faults, and it even points out the faults of the heroes (like Abraham, Moses, David, and even Elijah). We all have to deal with issues, but the good part is the Bible always has a word of comfort and strength for us – and hope. That’s what I hope you will see today. ***I hope that you will hear that God cares for us, God listens to us and our troubles, God speaks to us, God strengthens us, and God goes with us.***

Think about the story of Elijah today. Let me set the background for this: If you go back and read in I Kings 18, you'll find out that the Israelites had disobeyed God; they were disobeying the commandments; they broke covenant with him. They started worshipping Baal, a false idol God, rather than Yahweh God, the God of Israel. God got upset with them. He punished them by telling Elijah to tell King Ahab and Queen Jezebel, "I'm sending a drought upon the Israelites." That drought lasted three years. They really needed rain and water.

One day, they had still not learned their lesson, and Elijah goes and tells King Ahab and the queen, "We're going to have a contest on Mount Carmel. It's going to be a contest between the God of Israel and Baal, and we're going to see who the one true God is. I want you to construct a wooden altar, kill a bull, put the pieces of meat on it, and I'm going to construct a wooden altar and I'm going to put my piece of meat on it. We'll pray to our God and see which one sends fire and consumes that sacrifice. Whichever God answers, sends fire, and consumes it, that will be the God of Israel." Well, they all agreed to the contest, but they didn't promise that they would worship God. So, they go up on the mountain, and sure-as-the-world, the 450 prophets of Baal show up, they've constructed their altar; they put their meat on it; they started praying and crying; they chanted; they danced; they even cut their arms and put blood on the sacrifice; and still, Baal didn't answer. Half a day went by. Elijah started teasing and chiding them, saying, "Maybe your God is asleep. Maybe your God doesn't hear you." They just got louder and louder. Still, there was no answer.

All of a sudden, Elijah said, "It's my turn now." Elijah prayed a simple prayer. He went over to the altar and he said, "Dear God, help these people to know that you are the one true God of Israel and I am your servant, doing as you commanded. May they know this day that you are the one true God of Israel." All of a sudden fire hit and consumed the meat, the wood, the water, and everything with it, and the 450 prophets of Baal were killed that day by Elijah and some of the Israelites.

King Ahab was there watching all this, and he got upset. He got on his chariot, went back to the castle, and told his wife, Queen Jezebel, what Elijah had done. (Queen Jezebel was known to persecute and kill people that she didn't like and who differed with her. She was also the one who pushed Baal worship.) She sent her messenger with a message for Elijah. She said, "Listen, Elijah. I am going to kill you this day. If I get a hold of you, you will die like the prophets you killed." Elijah got the word - gossip travels fast, doesn't it? He got the word and he took off and left town. He has just experienced a big victory on Mount Carmel that showed who God was (God of Israel), and all of a sudden,

somebody threatened his life and he left town. I'd probably leave town, too, wouldn't you? But, he left town. He was discouraged; he thought that he was the only faithful prophet of Israel left.

Have you ever noticed that when you try to accomplish something and maybe you fail at it - maybe you failed a test; maybe you wanted some promotion at work and you didn't get it - they gave it to somebody else; maybe something big has happened in your life and you get disappointed - sometimes you get really discouraged and depressed. "Well, what's wrong with me? What'd I do? Why doesn't it work for me?" When we're in the pit of depression, we can tend to over-exaggerate our situation; we don't see our plight clearly. We also think nobody cares.

I want you to notice what happened in the story with Elijah. God let him go off on his own, and he went into the wilderness. We don't know how long it took him to get there, but he was so tired from his travels that he sat down under a broom tree and fell asleep. When he awoke, an angel gave him "angel food cake." Can you imagine? He had a cake of bread and a jar of water. (God let Elijah get needed rest.) Elijah ate and was filled and so tired that he fell asleep again. The angel came back, got him up, and said, "Get up! It's time for you to go on a trip." Now, we don't know why he was gone for forty days and forty nights, but forty is a symbolic number in the Bible. I often wonder if it doesn't take us awhile to get over our depression, our despair, or our grief. God gives us time to think and reflect. I think Elijah did a lot of reflecting doing all that walking to get to the top of the mountain. He went back to a place that was important to him -- Mount Horeb (also known as Mount Sinai) - where Moses had seen the burning bush. Elijah went back to where he felt his call to ministry. He went back to his roots, his spiritual roots. ***Sometimes when we get discouraged and depressed, we need to go back to what's important to us - the people that are important to us; to God; to our church and our church family.*** We need those folks. Elijah went to a place where he could be in touch with God and what was important to him.

Elijah continued on his journey to Mount Horeb and when he got there, he hid in the cave. I want you to notice that God let Elijah share his troubles with him. How often we need to share our troubles with God and with one another! "Elijah, what's wrong with you? What's going on?" (God cares and God listens to you and me.) He wants us to tell him what is going on. He already knows, but he also knows that we need to tell him because it's therapeutic - it's good for us. We need to get it out and we need to share it with him and with others.

So, Elijah told him, “Listen, Lord. I have been serving you all this time. These people are stubborn, hard-headed, and they don’t listen to you. They have forsaken their covenant with you, torn up your altars, and killed your prophets. I am the only one left, and now they want to kill me, too.”

I heard an interesting story about a Pastor friend that went to a funeral that his father did -- who was a retired Minister. Afterwards, he said, “Dad, is that the hardest part of ministry - doing a funeral for a church member?” He said, “No, son, because that’s a victory celebration when you know they’re a Christian. The hardest part for me is going to committee meetings in church. You listen to all the people talk, and you sit there and wonder, ‘Lord, did I make any difference in my preaching and teaching for all these years?’” Sometimes we feel that way. You’ve been to committees at work and felt like that sometimes. God needs us to know that we can talk to him and share with him, and that we need to share with other people when we’re discouraged. He asked Elijah, “What’s going on here?” and Elijah told him.

But, then I want you to notice something else - we always expect God to appear in the spectacular. In the Old Testament, God often helped the Israelites to defeat their enemies by hail storms, lightning, flash flooding, etc. He would help them defeat their enemies. If you go back and read in Joshua and Judges and the book of Habakkuk, you’ll see some of that. God often spoke through the environment to them - a pillar of cloud by day, a pillar of fire by night. *Well, Elijah is expecting God to speak in something spectacular.* God sent him an earthquake, a fire storm, a wind storm, but guess when he spoke? ... after the fire storm and it was just as still and quiet as could be; God spoke to Elijah in a gentle whisper. God spoke to him in his conscience and in his heart. He asked Elijah again, “What are you doing here, Elijah?” I think God was trying to say, “Elijah, I think it’s time you got over your pity party. I’ve listened. You’ve griped, complained, moaned, and went on-and-on. It’s time to get over it, Elijah - and I need you to do this and this.” God told him to go and anoint two kings - and he told him to go and anoint Elisha, as the prophet to exceed him.

God spoke to him in a gentle whisper. God still speaks to us today, but we always think that it's going to be in some big event or some catastrophe. Sometimes, God speaks to us in the silence. I know, from personal experience, that sometimes when I am most discouraged and down, God has to remind me that I am not alone. There are sometimes, believe-it-or-not, that I cry in the shower and I pray, “Lord, get me through this day, this week.” Sometimes you feel all alone in ministry. Sometimes you feel like you take the burden of the

world and the burden of the church on you. After I've cried and prayed, I just get quiet, and then God gives me peace. After moaning, groaning, griping, and complaining, I have to get still so God can speak. God doesn't always speak in the spectacular. Sometimes he speaks in a scripture, in a prayer, in a song, in nature, but sometimes he speaks in the quietness. David, the Psalmist, said, "Be still and know that I am God. In quietness and confidence comes my strength." Sometimes we have to be quiet so we can hear God.

And, then I want you to notice, that he gave Elijah something to do. "It's time for you to get over your pity party. It's time for you to go out and reach out to other people." Karl Menninger, the late, great American psychiatrist, was one time asked during an interview, "How do you tell people to get over discouragement and depression?" He said, "I tell them this: Go outside the door of your house, lock the door, go across the street, and help somebody in need." They thought that was such a simple thing. He said, "It's the truth because you'll find peace in doing something for other people and getting your mind off yourself." So, sometimes when we are so discouraged, even though it seems the hardest thing to do it, is best to reach out and do something for somebody else. Reach out and help somebody else who is in worse shape than we are and who needs it.

I heard a funny story about a sign in a service station. It said "Cheer Up! Things could be worse." Somebody went in the bathroom, saw that sign and said, "Man, I did cheer up and boy did it get worse." I want to tell you that God wants us to get out behind ourselves, quit with the pity party, and reach out to help someone else. He has something else for you and me to do. He's not through with us. He's got work for us.

And then I want you to hear something else in that story: Elijah thought he was by himself. When we get discouraged and depressed, we think nobody else cares. "Nobody else is going through what I am. Nobody wants to hear it, Lord." God reminded Elijah - "Remember this, Elijah. There are 7,000 more faithful followers of God in Israel and they haven't bowed down to Baal." In saying that, I think God wants us to know that he is always with us, and we always have people who will care and listen, if we'll let them. Our problem is that sometimes, we won't let other people because we think we can handle everything by ourselves. That's why we have church family - to help each other. We are in relationship with God and one another.

So, when you get discouraged and depressed, I want you to know that God let Elijah get food and rest because we all need that. Sometimes, when you are most tired, you haven't slept well and haven't eaten well, things bother you and me much more, and we get depressed. God gave Elijah the time to rest. He had forty days to reflect and think. Sometimes we often think that God is silent and it feels that way, but He does speak. Part of it is that we're not always hearing him and listening.

God let Elijah have the needed rest, gave him food, gave him time to reflect, let him share his troubles, and then he told him to get over his pity party. "It's time to move on and I need you to remember that I am always with you and there are others who care, if you let them."

When we're going through the difficulties, I want you to know that God cares; he listens to you and me; he is there always; he strengthens us; he still speaks to us; and he is with you, no matter what you are going through. Depression will come and go, the highs and lows for all of us. I said the Bible doesn't gloss over people's failures and weaknesses. Think about it -- Moses had a murderous temper; Jacob stole his brother's birthright; Elijah had depression and wanted to die; David was an adulterer. All of these people had issues just like we do. Elijah's problem was his discouragement, depression, and wanting to give up and just die. But, God wouldn't let him. God had more to accomplish through him. And God has more to do through you and me.

So, when you get discouraged, I hope you'll remember that God cares, God listens, God wants you to share your problems, God is always there to strengthen us and walk with us, and God gave us Christian family to walk with us through those times. How do we help others who are discouraged? Listen to them, walk with them, pray for them, be there for them when they need you and need me. May God help us to deal with our "highs and lows," and may we glean something from the story of Elijah. Amen.