

The Touch of the Healer: Whispers in the Quiet

October 24, 2021

Bendersville & Wenksville United Methodist Churches

1 Kings 19:1-18

So, we are working our way through a short, little mini-sermon-series about healing in scripture. Healing can take so many different forms – last week, we saw a story of a physical healing – the healing of a blind man. And today, we are shifting gears a little bit as we look at a very different kind of healing story – healing for a person’s weary soul.

So, a little context here. Elijah was a prophet of the northern kingdom. During King Solomon’s reign, King Solomon had taken it upon himself to build the very first-ever temple. But to do that, he raised taxes severely, and he used forced slave labor to build the temple. And then, once the temple was built, he raised taxes again to an exorbitant level as a way to raise funds to maintain his court and expand his army.

Not surprisingly, not everybody in the kingdom was happy about this. And so a little movement of rebels in the north rose up and led the northern tribes to push back against Solomon and his crazy taxation and forced labor practices. “Lower our taxes and ease our burdens, and we will stick with you,” they said. But then, king Solomon died and his son Rehoboam said “No. And in fact, I’m going to raise them even more, just to spite you.”

And so the northern tribes of Israel said “okay, we’re out,” and the north split from the south. So we have now two kingdoms: the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah.

So about 50 years or so passes, and Israel basically has a revolving door of kings. They go through 7 of them in just 5 decades. And finally, king Ahab ascends to the throne.

Now, here’s what we need to know about King Ahab. History and archaeological evidence tell a different story from the story we get in the Bible. Archaeological records show that from a purely political standpoint, King Ahab was one of the greatest and most effective and most powerful kings that ancient Israel ever had. He strengthened the country. And as a ruler on the world stage, most would say that he did a really, *really* good job.

But politics and faith tell two different stories. He may have been a capable ruler and a strong king. But we also know from the Bible that King Ahab was one of the most unfaithful kings Israel ever had. He basically abandoned God and led Israel to worship Ba’al, the fertility god of the Canaanites.

So, enter, the prophet Elijah.

We don't know all that much about Elijah as a person. We don't get his birth story; we know next to nothing about his family of origin; we don't even get his call story. It just seems that one day, we wake up and, there's Elijah. He starts his ministry a few chapters before today's story when he predicts a drought and then saves a woman and her son from starvation and death. And then, he takes King Ahab to task when he challenges all of the prophets of Ba'al to...a prophet's duel. "Let's all call out to our own gods, and see whose God is bigger." The prophets of Ba'al prayed to their god, and nothing happened – while Elijah took great delight in mocking and taunting and humiliating them, and then Elijah called down fire from heaven, and in a great display of divine power God's fire consumed a sacrifice that had been set for him.

So Ahab and his prophets were completely humiliated. And if Elijah had stopped there, his point probably would have been made. But Elijah didn't stop there. He was on a roll. And *not by the leading of God* but completely on his own, he took all of the prophets of Ba'al down to the river and slaughtered every last one of them.

And that is where things go south for Elijah. King Ahab's wife Jezebel gets mad, and sends the executioners after Elijah, forcing him to flee into the wilderness.

And that is where we find Elijah today. He has just had a whole series of powerful moments. He's predicted the weather. He saved a widow from starvation. He brought a little boy back from the brink of death. He called down fire from heaven. He "stuck it" to the powers that be. No other prophet in all of scripture *ever* displays God's power as clearly as Elijah does. No other prophet performs the kinds of miracles that Elijah performs. This is as good as it gets. The mountaintops don't get any higher.

And Elijah isn't feeling it.

It's interesting, isn't it? When we talk about a great faith leader like Elijah: a prophet; some might even go so far as to call him a saint, for me the images that jump immediately into my mind are of somebody who is good, kind, generous, loving, selfless. Maybe even perfect. Without blemish or without error. Somebody who I might get a little bit tongue-tied around because I feel intimidated, like I can never quite measure up. Somebody who always seems so close to God – a lot closer to God than I ever feel. Somebody wise, gracious, infinitely patient. In other words, not me.

But here's the thing about God's people: God's people are *people*. You and me and all of us. We experience highs and lows. There are times in all of our lives when we will feel very close to God, when we will feel like we are in lock-step with God's plans for our lives, when we will feel at peace and the gifts of patience and wisdom and grace will flow out of us.

But then there are all the other times. The times when the bounds of our "faith" are stretched. Days when our less-charitable side wins out. Days when we feel like the list of people to whom we need to offer sincere apologies is a mile long. Days when we have

no patience left, no more of ourselves to give, no kind words in us, and it is all we can do just to make it to the end of the day without having a breakdown. These are the days when it feels like God is a million miles away and we feel like we are left on our own to deal with challenges that are bigger than we are.

And that is why I love this story. Because here Elijah is – a man of great faith and a man of incredible power. The man who was so close to God that he never even died but was instead carried up into heaven in a chariot. The man who appeared with Moses and Jesus on top of the mountain at the Transfiguration. The man for whom Jewish people still – to this day – set a place at the table in their Passover celebrations.

Here is this great prophet, hiding out in the wilderness and asking God to take his life. He was in so much despair that an angel had to come to him and talk him into eating. And finally, when he has enough strength that he is able to form words, all he can do is see darkness and dead-ends.

The word of the Lord came to him, saying, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" He answered, "I have been very zealous for the Lord, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away."

Here's the thing: Elijah's scared. It *is* true – they *are* seeking his life, to take it away. The Queen wants him dead, and Jezebel is nothing if not ruthless. Elijah has every right to be worried.

But he doesn't see the whole picture. And as God would remind him at the end of today's reading, he is *not* alone. There *are* still people standing alongside him. There *is* still hope to be had, if he will open his eyes and see it. It's just that at this moment, Elijah is so stuck in his worry and in his burnout and in his frustration and in his fear that he simply cannot see what God is doing. For him, life looks incredibly bleak. And darkness is all he can see.

So God calls to him. *Go out and stand on the mountain before the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by.* And as Elijah steps out of the darkness and into the light of the day, God rattles Elijah to his core. God sends a great wind, so great that it is breaking rocks into pieces. And then a massive earthquake that might have left Elijah squished in the cave.

And then a fire, blazing hot, ripping through the wilderness area that was supposed to be Elijah's safe place. It was as if God was saying to Elijah, "You think life is scary? You think Queen Jezebel is powerful? Let her bring her worst. I am bigger and more powerful and more scary than anything you have ever seen." Life is full of winds and earthquakes and fires – and as we keep seeing over and over again, these winds and earthquakes and fires are not always metaphorical. Life is full of disaster and pain and

struggle and challenge that can rattle us to our core. That can leave us terrified, wondering who we are and how we are going to survive.

But that's not the end of the story. Because then Elijah heard the thing that gave him pause – the thing that shook him out of his terror and his despair. The sound of sheer silence. The moment when everything was calm and there was no noise, no distractions, no threats, no disasters to avert or crises to manage. And in the silence when the only two voices were the voice of God and the voice of Elijah's soul, all of a sudden Elijah's complaint rang hollow.

What are you doing here, Elijah? God asked again.

And again, Elijah responded: *I have been very zealous for the Lord, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life to take it away.*

It's almost like Elijah had practiced this line a few times. Rehearsed it until it sounded just right. But this time, it's almost like there was a big question mark in his voice. What *was* he doing here? Was he *really* alone?

And God responded by saying to him, essentially, "Elijah, you are burned out. You can no longer see things clearly. And no. You are not alone. Not only do you have me – the one who can rattle the earth's foundations – but you have other people in your corner as well. So here's what you are going to do: You are going to walk back down this mountain. Go back where you came from. And anoint Elisha to take over where you have left off."

Oh, and by the way, Elijah? I am also going to raise up the seven thousand men who never bowed down and worshipped Ba'al. *Seven thousand*, Elijah. You think that you alone are left, but there are *seven thousand* faithful people surrounding you who you don't even see.

My friends, I don't know about you. But I know that I have had a lot of these Elijah moments lately. Not Elijah calling down fire from heaven moments, but Elijah whining in the wilderness moments.

"God, it's too hard."

"God, I'm sick of this stupid pandemic."

"God, I'm tired. We're all tired. We are trying to hold too much together."

In the church, "God, we don't have the people to do what we used to do."

"God, if it's going to get done I'm going to have to do it myself. I alone am left."

"God, I'm afraid for the future."

"God, I've tried to be faithful for so long – so why do things feel so hard now?"

And when I get in these moods, these seasons, these "funks," theologians call them "dark nights of the soul," it is so easy to begin to think that if God is not doing what we

want, when we want it, in big and impressive ways, then God is not here. If God is not healing my loved one like Jesus healed the blind man in last week's story, then either God has left the building or my faith isn't big enough. If I can't see God showing up in the middle of earthquakes and tsunamis and pandemics, then it must be true that I alone am left and the weight of the world rests on my shoulders. And I'm tired and I don't have the strength to handle the weight of the world, and so God, will you just make it stop already? And if you're not going to make it stop, then will you take me out of the equation, because I've *had it*.

And here's what God does:

God gives us food. Nourishment for our hungry bodies.

God gives us rest. Time away, to give us some perspective.

God asks us: "What are you doing here?" "Where are you right now? And how did you get here?" "How is it with your soul?"

And when God speaks, it is not in a big, booming voice, but in a whisper that we can scarcely hear. Depending on your translation, it may say "a still, small voice," "a gentle and quiet whisper," or "a sound of sheer silence." And in that silence, in that stillness, in that whisper, God's voice speaks volumes:

You are not alone. You are surrounded by a vast multitude that you cannot see.

You are not finished. There is still work to be done.

But it is not your work alone. It is mine. And while your strength might fail, mine never does.

So go, good and faithful servant. Continue to run the race that I have set before you.

When you get scared and discouraged, know that it is my strength that sustains you.

And in this, you will know that you are my child, and that I am your God.