

**1 Kings 19:1-15a O.T. 311 (NRSV)**

<sup>1</sup>Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done, and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword. <sup>2</sup>Then Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah, saying, “So may the gods do to me, and more also, if I do not make your life like the life of one of them by this time tomorrow.” <sup>3</sup>Then he was afraid; he got up and fled for his life, and came to Beer-sheba, which belongs to Judah; he left his servant there.

<sup>4</sup>But he himself went a day’s journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a solitary broom tree. He asked that he might die: “It is enough; now, O LORD, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors.” <sup>5</sup>Then he lay down under the broom tree and fell asleep. Suddenly an angel touched him and said to him, “Get up and eat.” <sup>6</sup>He looked, and there at his head was a cake baked on hot stones, and a jar of water. He ate and drank, and lay down again. <sup>7</sup>The angel of the LORD came a second time, touched him, and said, “Get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you.” <sup>8</sup>He got up, and ate and drank; then he went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights to Horeb the mount of God. <sup>9</sup>At that place he came to a cave, and spent the night there.

Then the word of the LORD came to him, saying, “What are you doing here, Elijah?” <sup>10</sup>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.” <sup>11</sup>He said, “Go out and stand on the mountain before the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by.”

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Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake; <sup>12</sup>and after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence. <sup>13</sup>When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. Then there came a voice to him that said, “What are you doing here, Elijah?” <sup>14</sup>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.” <sup>15a</sup>Then the LORD said to him, “Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus.”

**1 Kings 19:1-15a O.T. Page 311**  
**“Holy Despair”**

**Opening Prayer:** Let’s pray. O God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable in your sight this day. **Amen.**

**Introduction:** There is an ancient tidbit of wisdom in the book of Proverbs that should cause each of us to step back and examine what we’re doing, and why we’re doing it. I’m sure as I quote it, you’ll immediately recognize it. **“All deeds are right in the sight of the doer, but the LORD weighs the heart.”** (Proverbs 21:2, NRSV). What this tells us is that just because we think we’re right, that doesn’t necessarily mean we are right. A **healthy dose** of self-doubt needs to temper all of our actions. If it doesn’t, we risk falling into a trap described in another **tidbit of ancient wisdom**, my favorite. **“There is a way that seems right to a person, but its end is the way of death”** Proverbs 14:12 (NRSV).

**The annual season for graduations** is underway and a staple at every graduation is the graduation speech. Speakers tell you if you apply yourself and believe in yourself, you’ll succeed. While that surely is much better advice than telling people to sit around idly and freeload off family and friends, it still makes me uneasy. Every time I hear a speaker say, *“Believe in yourself,” “Go for your dreams,” “Aim high,”* giving the graduates **the green light** to charge ahead, my mind plays those ancient tidbits of wisdom from Proverbs **and throws out the caution flag**. The Lord weighs our hearts. **The Lord sees** our underlying motives. The Lord gets the final say as to what’s right and what’s wrong. But of course, graduation speakers aren’t allowed to say that, even if they believe it. Oh, the irony of living in the **land of the free and the home of the brave**. **“Humble yourself in the sight of the Lord, and God will lift you up”** (James 4:11, KJV).

**PAUSE**

**Move I.**

**Remember confidence begins with the word “con.”** We’re all perfectly capable of conning ourselves into believing whatever we want to believe. We do what we want to do. We think what we want to think. We even worship what we want to worship. We call it independence. But when we exclude God, independence takes on the stench of rebellion. **We become like the toddler** who’s running as fast as she can, straight into oncoming traffic. The child might be having fun, but mom is absolutely terrified.

**This scene speaks volumes.** What we see are two determined faces glaring at each other. They’re waging a battle. On the right, we have a little boy who wants what he wants. He’s exerting his independence. And on the left, we have mother who knows far better than her child does. A rebellious spirit fills the child, while a caring spirit fills the mother. If the mother didn’t love the child, she would let him do what he wants, but she does love him, so she can’t sit idling by and let him stray into harms ways. **The analogy** of the relationship between a parent and a child is one of the most powerful analogies we have for our relationship with God. **God is our divine parent**, and each of us is God’s beloved child. It’s not that God doesn’t want us to grow up and become a productive member of society, in fact, that’s what God created us for, but God provides active resistance when we’re venturing into harm’s way.

**Our Bible lesson** today is yet another Old Testament story about the prophet Elijah, the successor of Moses. **The commandments** God had given to Moses on Mount Sinai warned the people of the importance of being faithful to God. Does anyone remember **the First Commandment**? You likely learned them when you were a child in Sunday school or perhaps when you went through Confirmation class. So, what’s the first commandment? **“You shall have no other gods before me.”** Sounds simple enough doesn’t it. Don’t cheat on God with other gods.

**And what's the second commandment?** It's closely related to the first. ***"You shall not make or worship idols."*** I think these commandments are crystal clear. Love and be faithful to God and life will be good. Ignore and cheat on God and there will be hell to pay. **Well, that's what** the people of the northern tribes of Israel have done. They've created on God. Ahab, their king, had married the Phoenician princess, Jezebel, **who enticed her husband** to set up a temple to her god, Baal alongside Israel's God, Yahweh. Ahab and Jezebel wanted what they wanted, and being king and queen, who was gonna stop them? They let another god come before Israel's God and they set up an idol and worshiped it.

**This is a picture** of an actual Baal idol that Donna and I saw while visiting the Egyptian Room at the Cleveland Museum of Art a few years ago. This particular idol is so small and unassuming most people would walk by without even notice it. But I immediately recognized it. Baal is a god of the powers of nature who's sometimes called the "storm god." But earlier in 1 Kings 18 when Elijah challenged the prophets of Baal to a contest, Baal remained lifeless, while **Yahweh rains down fire from heaven** consuming not only the sacrifice, but even the stone altar and the water in the moat around it. Surely, this would convince Ahab and Jezebel of the folly of worshiping Baal, but they were rebellious and stubborn. **They wanted what they wanted.** They were confident they were right. They thought they were in charge, but they were only fooling themselves. **Yes, remember confidence begins with the word "con."**

**End I.**

**Move II.**

**And we con ourselves into thinking we're vital to God.** Yes, people don't only con themselves into thinking the bad they do is good, they also can con themselves into thinking that the good that happens couldn't possibly happen without them. I have witnessed this with church leaders and pastors. They start some ministry, God blesses the ministry, and it meets with some success. And the next thing you know, **it all starts to go to their heads.** They begin to believe their own hype, and they start acting like as if they're God's gift to humanity. **Ministry grows, numbers grow, offerings grow, the building grows, the parking lots grow,** and the next things you know you have a mega church. During my lifetime I have been a member of small churches with just a couple of dozen members and a member of large churches with a couple of thousand members. And sadly, I have witness ministry "success" **go to people's heads.** Instead of talking about what God has done, they begin to talk about what "they" have done. They will talk about how "they" grew their church from a handful of people to a stadium full of people. They may give God lip service, but in their hearts, they're claiming all of the credit for themselves. All I can say is **when the mighty fall,** they fall hard. And some fall in very public ways. I'm old enough to remember the falls of **Jim Baker** and **Jimmy Swaggart** back in the 1980s. And more recently, there were **Ted Haggard** and **Eddie Long.** Each of these men was once a faithful servant of God, but something happened. They succumbed to the age-old temptations of the flesh. They began to believe that the "*rules*" didn't apply to them. And one by one, each of them fell, and they fell hard.

Those are the very public cases. **There have also been some local cases.** In the 18 years I have served as a United Methodist pastor in Western PA, I have seen two pastors fall—**one for propositioning a minor, and another for embezzling church funds.** They started out good and took a tragic turn to the bad.

A **theme** that runs throughout the Bible is that God can take flawed human beings, and use them for holy purposes, despite themselves. When most people read our Bible Lesson today, they focus in on **Elijah's "God sighting;"** his **theophany**. Like the prophet Moses before him, Elijah had a close encounter with God and lives! **Moses gets to see God's back** as God walks by on Mount Sinai. Elijah gets to hear God's "gentle whisper" as God emerges from the sheer silence on Mount Horeb. Oh, and just so you know, Sinai and Horeb, are actually two different names for the same mountain. These theophanies affirm each man as being a prophet, or human spokesperson, for the Lord God Almighty the Creator of the heavens and the earth.

**But what caught my attention** this week as I reread this story was Elijah's state-of-mind. **When he sees fire** from heaven consume the altar, in his zeal, Elijah orders all 450 of the prophets of Baal put to death. But when he hears of Jezebel's vow to kill him for killing them, **he runs for his life**. He high tails it out of Samaria south through Beersheba in Judea and then a day's journey out into the wilderness. That's like 80 or 90 miles, can you imagine running that far? He is literally running for his life. That's why what Elijah does next doesn't make much sense. **When he finally collapses** in a heap under the broom bush he pleads with God, **"It is enough; now, O LORD, take away my life"** (1 Kings 19:4b, NRSV). He's been running for his life, and he prays to God to die? Elijah's reached his breaking point. He's reached the **end of his proverbial rope**, and he's pleading to let go. He's reached the point of "*holy despair*." Game over, lights out, it's finished. He's fought the good fight, he's defended the faith, it's all up to him, and **Elijah's the only one left. Or is he?** But the truth is **we can con ourselves into thinking that we're vital to God.**

**End II.**

**Move III.**

**But God gives strength to the weak.** When you've gone as far as you can go, when you're bone tired and your mind is fried, when your energy is sapped, and your nerves are shot, you need a rest. You need a helper, a companion, a savior. If that describes where you're at, then **you've reached the point of "holy despair."** You become weary from doing what's right. **That's when you need to remember a nugget of wisdom not from the ancient sages of Israel, but from Jesus of Nazareth**—the very Son of God—the redeemer of all creation. **In Matthew 11:28-30 (NRSV) Jesus says, “<sup>28</sup>Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. <sup>29</sup>Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. <sup>30</sup>For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”**

A **yoke** is an interesting contraption that most of us don't think much about these days, because **we don't use oxen to plow fields, and we don't ride abounding horse drawn coaches.** A yoke is a collar used to distribute the load among a pair of beasts of burden. You can use a yoke on a pair of horses, or donkeys, or cattle, or even elephants. **Has anyone here ever been to a horse-pulling contest?** (Raise hand.) At a horse pull, you hook a team of draft horses to a heavy sled and measure how far they can pull it. But you have to pair horses that are equally yoked. The teams need to be two draft horses that are of similar size, build, strength, and even temperament. **You couldn't pair a Belgium draft horse with a **scrawny quarter horse** and expect to get very far. The sled would head off track and you'd be going in circles. **How can you ever be equally yoked with Christ?** The simple answer is “You can't.” Jesus makes your yoke easy and your burden light by doing both sides of the work. **The power of God** that is in Christ becomes the power of God that's in you. Christ comes along side and gives you his strength so that together you can do all the good that needs done.**

**Elijah** thought he was all alone. Twice in our Bible lesson today, he laments, **“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”** (1 Kings 19:10, 14, NRSV). Elijah is convinced he’s all alone in his quest. But as great of man of faith as Elijah was, he was making the all too human mistake of underestimating God. He has forgotten that what is impossible for us is always possible for God. God always has a contingency plan for every possible eventuality. **Remember, God is God, and we are not.** If you read just a few verses beyond the end of our Bible lesson today, you learned an interesting fact that Elijah had no inkling of. In 1 Kings 19:18 (NRSV) we learn that God has preserved 7,000 people from nation of Israel who Jezebel has not seduced into worshiping Baal. **“All the knees that have not bowed to Baal, and every mouth that has not kissed him.”** (1 Kings 19:18b, NRSV). Elijah wasn’t all alone; God had preserved 7,000 others with faith just like him. You’re not all alone either.

**This time 18-years ago**, I had just finished my first full year of seminary and I was awaiting word from my District Superintendent if he had a church for me to serve. I had no idea when he would be calling and I certainly didn’t know that when he called, it wouldn’t be with one church, but with two. At that point, **I had preached exactly two sermons** in my life and both of those were for a preaching class I’d just finished. Back then and even today, I’m terrified of preaching. It’s not delivering a sermon that makes me nervous, it’s preparing them. Most weeks as I begin working on the sermon, **I have nothing to say**. I find myself at a point of holy despair. Like Elijah, some weeks I’ve even asked God to let me die to escape the pain of a blank mind. But week after week for some 500 sermons thus far, **God has shown up** with something to say. It’s always a humbling experience.

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I've **never met** a servant of God who felt qualified. That's because none of us every really are. **But God keeps showing up** and honors our willingness to serve, despite our inadequacies.

**Summer** is supposed to be a time to slow down a little and maybe even take a vacation. **But these days** I find myself busier than ever. I suspect the same is true for so many of you. Borrowing some words from the Apostle Paul from his letters to the believers in Galatia and Philippi, "**Let us not grow weary in doing what is right,**" (Galatians 6:9a, NRSV) for "**We can do all things through Christ who strengthens us**" (Philippians 4:13, NRSV).

**It's through the songs** of faith that God speaks most clearly to us, especially when we find ourselves at the point of holy despair. There's an old hymn whose words I pray will echo through your minds in this coming week, especially when you're feeling tired. The hymn is "*In Times Like These.*" Let's sing it together:

**In times like these we need a Savior  
In times like these we need an anchor;  
Be very sure, be very sure  
Your anchor holds and grips the solid Rock!**

*Chorus:*

**This Rock is Jesus, yes, He's the One;  
This Rock is Jesus, the only One!  
We're very sure, we're very sure  
Our anchor holds and grips the solid Rock!**

**Our human frailties** are all too obvious. None of us is ever really up to the task at hand. The point of holy despair is always staring us in the face. **But all thanks be to God, God does give strength to the weak.**

**End III.**

**Conclusion:** As you go racing through life, the caution flag is always up. Life is best lived in humility. **Yes, remember confidence begins with the word “con.”** We’re all perfectly capable of conning ourselves into believing whatever we want to believe. **But the truth is we can con ourselves into thinking that we’re vital to God.** Our ministry meets with some success, and the next thing you know we start thinking we’re God’s gift to humanity. All I can say is when the mighty fall, they fall hard. **But all thanks be to God, God does give strength to the weak.** Jesus’s yoke is easy, and his burden is light. We you’ve reached the point of “*Holy Despair*,” grip onto the Solid Rock. **This rock is Jesus;** yes, he’s the one.

**Closing Prayer:** Let’s pray. Almighty God, thank you for coming along side of us and easing our burdens in life. Because of Your love, we’ve been set free. **Amen!**

**10:30 Closing Hymn: “Here I am Lord” Red Hymnal No. 593**

All Three Verses

**Sending Forth:** Are you growing weary of doing what’s right? Are you reaching the point of holy despair? Then grasp onto Jesus, the Solid Rock! Go forth, knowing that you can indeed do all things through Jesus Christ who strengthens you. **Amen!**