

*"How to Handle Despair"*

*Psalm 42; I Kings 19:1-15a*

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*Woodbury United Methodist Church, Woodbury, Connecticut*

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Despair. Despair will come to us somewhere along life's journey. That's as certain as the sunrise.

The current unrest in our country is one of many sources of despair. The murders of Democratic Minnesota state Rep. Melissa Hortman and her husband, Mark, and the shooting of state Sen. John Hoffman and his wife, Yvette Hoffman, is reprehensible to any civilized person. It underscores the urgent need, expressed from this pulpit and pen nearly a year ago after the assassination attempt on then-candidate Donald Trump, and by others more eloquent than I, to cool the rhetoric and settle by peaceful means our differences. To this we can easily add the three-year-old war launched on Ukraine by Russia; the new conflict between Israel and Iran; the war in Gaza; and wars in Somalia and the Sudan.

Yet, as someone said last Sunday, we as a human race have been this way for thousands of years. This is not to acquiesce to violence, but it is to recognize the deep power of our sin, our unwillingness to love as God loves and our choice to ignore Jesus' command to love. This is one source, among others, that causes us at times to throw up our hands in despair.

And, yes, the Bible testifies to such despair in the behavior of Elijah in the story we just heard from I Kings. To remind us, especially those of us for whom the prophet is simply an ancient figure in a dusty past, let us remember that Elijah was the greatest of the Old Testament prophets. When Jesus asked the disciples "Who do people say that I am?" one of the answers was "Elijah." When Jesus was transfigured on the mountaintop (Mark 9:2-13), the other two who appeared in that theophany were Moses, the greatest lawgiver; and Elijah, the greatest prophet.

So with apologies to fans of the late boxer Mohammed Ali, Elijah was indeed "The Greatest." Yet here is he today, in a funk to beat all funks, running from his adversaries. It's ironic and would be funny if it wasn't tragic. You see, Elijah has just finished a huge victory on Mount Carmel.

That “victory,” such as it is since it, too, is borne of violence, is told in I Kings 18, where Elijah challenged the 400 prophets of Ba’al to a test of whose God was the real God. Elijah’s God won the test and 400 prophets of Baal were killed.

But victory can have its problems, and the problem in this case was that the losers had a powerful backer. Queen Jezebel did not take kindly to the defeat of her prophets, hence the opening words of the story: “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.” Elijah had a price on his head with the Queen paying the tab. So he flees. Where? As far away as possible: to Beersheba, not only out of Israel into Judah but about as far south as one can go. But wait. Then he goes a day’s journey into the wilderness.

Sharp listeners will say, “But pastor, that’s fear, not despair.” But wait. Elijah says, “It is enough, now, O Lord, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors.” THAT’S despair! Elijah’s cry can be interpreted two ways. One way to understand his cry is that for all his success, Elijah is no better than the generation before him.

We recognized graduates two Sundays ago. Just about every graduation speech tells the graduates they’ve got the world by the tail and everything is within their grasp. I drove past a university this week that had a sign that said “*Go, graduates, and set the world on fire,*” a message I thought particularly ill-timed and particularly inappropriate for a Roman Catholic institute of higher learning. In any event, what happens to our graduates when everything is not within their grasp and when the job search runs long and the living at home with Mom and Dad runs thin? Despair can be one result.

Another interpretation is that Elijah’s statement is slang, and that “I am no better than my ancestors” translates “I might as well be dead.” This is certainly consistent with the writer’s introduction: “He (Elijah) asked that he might die.” While the Biblical culture would not have known the term “depression,” we have about as clear a case of it here as anywhere in the Old Testament.

So how are we to handle despair? The text has clues.

First, we have to do a fierce and honest self-assessment. That usually happens when we eliminate distractions. The wilderness Elijah enters is a real physical place—the desert—but it is also a metaphorical place: a place of personal and divine revelation. Geographical cures seldom work. Changing locations just brings the despair with us unless we are willing to tell the truth to ourselves. Elijah may have been the greatest prophet but he still has the blood of 400 people on his hands, never mind that it was “in the name of God.” So if we are in despair we need to ask ourselves “Who or what are we running away from?” and “What or where is the wilderness in which we can seek clarity and wisdom?”

Second, note that while Elijah is in the wilderness an angel touched him and gave him provisions: not once, but twice. I’ve been called many things in 47 years of ordained ministry and more than once was called – stay seated for this - a “guardian angel.” To God be the glory! Who are your guardian angels? What do people you trust to tell you the truth say about your despair? Those who seek to soldier on alone are often the walking wounded. So reach out! You are not alone.

Third, seek the intervention of God. Note how the angel told Elijah the second time “Get up and eat, *otherwise the journey will be too much for you.*” The angel clearly expected Elijah to continue his journey, literally and figuratively. Elijah sought God, and what better place to seek God than the pinnacle of God’s revelation to Israel, Mount Horeb? Unfamiliar? How about Mount Sinai? Different name, same mountain: where the Ten Commandments were given. It is unlikely any of us are headed soon to the Sinai desert. But regular worship, regular prayer, and regular fellowship with other Christians are garden-variety miracles at our fingertips!

Fourth, be quiet. I would say “Shut up” but that exclamation was as forbidden as any curse word in my house growing up and the homes in which I raised four children. In the story, Elijah hides himself in a cave on Mount Sinai. There was wind, earthquake and fire but God was not in any of these. It was the “sound of sheer silence.” Think of that for a moment. The sound of sheer silence. It reminds me of a Zen Buddhist koan “The sound of one hand clapping.” It is a paradox. Yet Elijah wraps himself in this paradox, in this sound of sheer silence, in this God who is revealed—at least in this instance—not by mighty acts of nature but in silence. Be quiet and listen.

Finally, go. We can't stay in a cave. Counselors sometimes treat despair or depression with what is called "outcome based therapy." While not without some family background and other personal assessment, the goal is to identify outcomes toward which the despairing person will reach. Those of us who despair at the slaughter in Minnesota must ask ourselves if we are going to "go" to work for a change in the status quo. Carol's friend of over three decades, Po Murray, has worked in the wake of the Sandy Hook murders with Presidents and Senators and will soon travel to Mexico to meet with its President to address the flow of American firearms entering Mexico. Stew Leonard, Jr. is known for his regional chain of dairy stores. But Stew and his wife Kim are also passionate advocates for water safety after the 1989 drowning death of their 21-month old son, Stew, III. They could have remained in despair, but they have used their loss and their influence to help others avoid their tragedy.

Robert Fulghum, Unitarian minister and author of Everything I Know I Learned in Kindergarten tells of meeting Alexander Papaderos in Fulghum's sequel It Was on Fire When I Lay Down on It. Papaderos led a two-week seminar on Greek culture on the island of Crete and closed with a typical question, "*Are there any questions?*" Fulghum, something of a iconoclast and smart-aleck, asked "*What is the meaning of life?*" Papaderos looked at him a long time and said "*I will answer your question.*"

He then removed a small round mirror about the size of a quarter from his wallet. As a child he found it among the pieces of a German motorcycle that had been wrecked during the World War II Nazi invasion of Crete. He played with the broken glass as a toy and made a game to reflect light into the places where the sun would not shine: deep holes and dark crevices.

Papaderos said that as a man he learned that this was a metaphor for his life: he is not the light or the source of the light. But light – truth, knowledge, understanding – is there and will only shine in many dark places if he reflects it.

Elijah left his despair behind. So can we. Reflect the light. Amen.