

One of the things I do most weeks in preparation for preaching is listen to a couple of podcasts—those are pre-recorded radio programs—where pastors or seminary professors discuss the upcoming lectionary texts. One always uses a soundbite of someone saying, in what sounds to me like a kind of funny voice, “Good News everybody!” The word “gospel” literally means “good news” although it’s not just the four Gospels but the whole of scripture that tells us the story of our good God. But when we read a passage like today’s from 1 Kings, we see that “good news” does not mean all good things for all characters at all points of all stories. The graph of my life is certainly not a perfectly linear upward trajectory of progress, success, and fulfillment, and the characters in the Bible similarly experience both ups and downs.

Elijah is a prophet of God, which means it’s his job to tell the people of Israel things they don’t want to hear. So he’s going to have some bad days. He has to prophesy to King Ahab, who, according to scripture, angered the Lord more than all the other kings of Israel by leading the people to worship other gods. Right before today’s reading, Elijah won a sacrifice-burning contest with the prophets of Ba’al; 450 false prophets couldn’t get their bull to catch fire, but after dousing his altar with water, the fire of the Lord consumes Elijah’s sacrifice, the altar, and even the water that has pooled around it. The people see this as proof that the Lord really is God, and they capture Ba’al’s prophets, whom Elijah executes.

When Ahab’s wife Jezebel hears that Elijah has killed all her prophets, she promises to do the same to him, so he escapes into the wilderness. After a day’s journey, Elijah stops and prays to the Lord, “I’ve had enough. Take away my life.” If you’ve ever felt that kind of desperation, take heart: God’s most famous prophet felt it, too. Elijah’s greatest triumph is followed by his most acute moment of despair. Elijah is frustrated and tired, so he lays down and sleeps. Twice an angel wakes him up and tells him to eat, lest the journey be too much for him. Maybe you’ve experienced that, too, when in your grief or depression someone had to remind you to eat, or you’ve done that for someone else. Elijah teaches us that when things look bleak, it’s a good idea to take a nap and eat a snack...but that’s not the end of the story.

That food sustains Elijah for a forty day journey to Mount Horeb, the same place where Moses encountered God in the burning bush. When Elijah gets to the mountain and hides himself in a cave, God comes to him and asks, “Elijah, what are you doing here?” And Elijah responds, *I did everything I was supposed to do, yet here I am, all alone, fearing for my life.* Now, it’s worth mentioning that what Elijah says is not really true. We read that he had a servant whom he *chose* to leave behind; a few verses after this passage the Lord acknowledges 7,000 faithful people in Israel who hadn’t joined the false prophets; Elijah received the help of God’s messenger along the way; and the Lord is speaking to Elijah. So, he’s not alone. But again, if you’ve ever struggled with that kind of despair, you know what it’s like to feel alone

even in a crowd of people, or to feel abandoned even when friends and family ask how they can help. In that moment, Elijah's reality is that he is all on his own.

The Lord tells him to go stand on the mountain and wait. Then there is a wind storm, but the Lord isn't in the wind; there's an earthquake, but the Lord isn't in the earthquake; there's a fire, but the Lord isn't in the fire; and then there's the sound of sheer silence... We love this part, where the voice of the Lord speaks out of the sheer silence; those are the verses that make it onto coffee mugs and cross-stitched pillows. But pay attention to what happens next: The Lord asks again, "Elijah, what's going on?" And Elijah gives the exact same answer, word for word, that he gave *before* the wind and earthquake and fire and the silence: *I did everything I was supposed to do, yet here I am, all alone, fearing for my life.* Where is that good news now?

We don't give this story its honest due when we stop at the part where God shows up in the silence. This story doesn't end with God giving Elijah the pep talk he needs to get back in the game and Elijah returning to dutiful service. This is the story of Elijah's *decommissioning*, of him discerning that it's time for him to retire, and telling the Lord as much. God doesn't tell him to suck it up and get back out there; God lays out an exit strategy and tells him who he needs to appoint to take over. I used to think this part of the story narrated Elijah's failure—that the Lord gave him every opportunity, but he still didn't step up. I don't see it that way anymore. We could argue that this story is about Elijah ignoring God's help and giving up, or we could see it as God giving Elijah grace, comfort, and rest when Elijah bared his soul in honest loneliness, grief, and exhaustion. Elijah said to the Lord, *I can't carry this burden any more*, and the Lord said, *OK, you don't need to carry it any farther.* And that, too, is good news.

In this long season after Pentecost we focus on growth—both personal spiritual growth but also growth in the health and strength of the community of faith, the church. That growth is work, and sometimes it's frustrating, exhausting work; I'm not talking about, or not just about, the work of a pastor but the work of kingdom living that we are all called to through our baptism in Christ. But the pressure to carry the weight of the world on our shoulders is an expectation we place on ourselves, not one that comes from God. When we need to rest, we can. When we need to walk away from a particular battle, so we survive to fight another day, we can. That doesn't mean we fail; it means we discern when the seasons of our lives are changing, and we trust God to walk us through the ups *and* the downs. The Lord didn't punish Elijah for passing the mantle on to his successor; the Lord instructed him to do it, and then didn't even let him die but picked him up in a fiery chariot like a heavenly hitchhiker, enshrining him for all time as Israel's exemplary prophet.

The world teaches us that we need to have grit, and we do. But we're not called to spend our whole lives gritting our teeth and bearing impossible burdens. This story shows us that Lord is with us in the grit and when it's time to quit; and we are never loved more or less because of what we do. May that be good news for us, wherever we are in our story.