

We live in stressful times. Look at the headlines: Immigration. Oil spills. The Middle East. Global warming. Health care. A great recession with a sluggish recover.

Makes you want to get away from it all and take a vacation. But then you have to deal with high gas prices, crowded highways, or the hassles of modern airports.

Stressful? You bet.

But even when things are going well in the world, they may not be going well in individual lives. In a church our size, at any given time, there are always numerous people struggling with painful issues in their lives: illness, marital difficulties, problems at work or at school.

The question before us is: How can we live and function in such stressful times? More importantly, how can we serve God when we're feeling beset and besieged, when we're feeling down and discouraged?

Some wonderful answers come from the story of the Prophet Elijah, especially from the 19th chapter of 1Kings. In looking at the story of Elijah in this chapter, we are given tremendous spiritual information about how to handle the stresses and difficulties of life. Elijah is dealing with tremendous problems in his life.

First off, he is stressed out because his life itself is threatened. Queen Jezebel is out to kill him. v1 King Ahab tells Queen Jezebel about what Elijah has just done. Elijah had stood toe to toe all by himself on Mt. Carmel defending God against 450 prophets of the pagan god Baal. Elijah successfully called down fire from heaven. He won the contest. This was the high point of Elijah's career. It's one of the greatest miracles in the Old Testament.

Yet, v2, the queen sends Elijah a message that she's going to have him killed. And in an instant, Elijah goes from triumph to terror. v3, Elijah flees. He leaves his country. Then he goes all the way across the next country to it's opposite border. He's really running.

We're also told in v3 that he leaves his servant there, in the border town of Beersheba. This servant would be his protégé, his heir apparent. Leaving the servant behind is a sign that Elijah is giving up his vocation as prophet. He's not only running for his life. He's running away from his ministry. v4 He heads even further south out into the desert. He plops down under a shrub and says, "It is enough; now, O LORD, take away my life."

It's quite an irony. He's running for his life, yet he's so depressed he wants God to kill him. This is a man who is frazzled and fried. So what happens? Does God grant him his wish? Does God send down fire from heaven to consume him? No.

v5 God sends an angel who tells him, "Get up and eat." v6 There is bread and water that miraculously appears. And so v6, Elijah eats and drinks. v7 After he has slept, the angel comes again, and says "Get up and eat." But then he adds something. "Get up and eat,

otherwise the journey will be too much for you." This Hebrew word translated as journey has rich connotations. It means not only a physical, geographical journey between two points. It also means a journey through life. A mission. A vocation. A way of life. "Get up and eat, otherwise the way will be too much for you."

And this is the first great lesson for us in ch19. Power. Are you relying upon your own internal sources of power? Or are you relying upon God to power and equip you? The spiritual reality is, if you're trying to accomplish your mission on your own, if you're relying on your own strength, then you're going to be overwhelmed. If you're relying on yourself, the way going to be too much for you. Instead, God is saying, eat and drink what I provide. Take what I give to get you through the journey. Rely upon my power, and not your own. That's lesson 1.

So, v8 Elijah eats and drinks again. It revives him, at least physically. We're told that "he went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights to Horeb the mount of God." You probably know Mt. Horeb by it's other name: Mt. Sinai. The mountain where God spoke to Moses. Even if you haven't read Exodus, you know what happened from the movies. Sinai is the mountain where God appeared to Moses in the midst of storm and thunder and earthquake.

And there, in v9, we're told that Elijah comes to a cave. Literally, the Hebrew says that Elijah came to THE cave. Perhaps it was supposed to be the same cleft in the rock where Moses hid as God's presence passed by him. And again, as in the days of Moses, Elijah is told, v11, to "Go out and stand on the mountain before the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by." And then there are all of these manifestations reminiscent of the days of Moses. There is a loud and terrific windstorm that breaks rocks. There is a tremendous earthquake. There is fire. But unlike Exodus we're told very clearly, God was not in the wind. God was not in the earthquake. God was not in the fire.

And then, v12, after these events, there is 'a sound of sheer silence.' Sometimes translated as 'a still, small voice.' What a wonderfully poetic phrase. A sound of sheer silence. And v13, when Elijah hears this sound of sheer silence he wraps his face in his cloak. In other words, he recognizes God's presence in this stillness.

Elijah has been through storminess in his life. But he finds that God is present in sheer silence.

And that's the second great lesson for us. Presence. God is present. God is there. In the midst of the turbulence of life it may be hard to detect that presence. It may require tuning out the storms and the fire and the earthquakes, in order to listen for that still, small voice, that sound of sheer silence. But God is there. Sometimes God is present in very public and flashy ways. But much more often in life, God's presence is known in very quiet and subtle ways. And his presence, his quiet, his calmness are there to absorb your storminess. Bring your storminess into God's presence. He can take it. And he can bring you calm. That's the second lesson.

That's what Elijah does, v13. He goes out, shielding himself, into God's presence. And there he makes his complaint to God. He brings his stormy emotions into God's calm presence: v14 He says, "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 a very pathetic, pouty, and paranoid statement. Listen to the subtext. 'God, I'm the only one who's following you. Everyone else in Israel has abandoned you. I'm the only friend you've got left. And things aren't going well for me. In fact, everyone in Israel's out to get me.'

It's mostly untrue. Elijah is being self-centered. He's blowing everything out of proportion. And God calls him on it. God is loving, but firm. And God corrects Elijah's false assumptions.

First, God calls him to return to his ministry.. v15 "Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus." Again the same word is used here that was used in v7. In the desert, Elijah was told, "Get up and eat, otherwise the journey (the way) will be too much for you." Now, at Mt. Sinai, God is saying, "Go, return on your way (return to your prophetic ministry)." 'Go back, but do it in my strength, not your own.' I've fed you. I've sustained you. You've encountered my presence. Now, stop feeling sorry for yourself and get back to work.

And then God lays out some specific instructions. Our reading ends at v15. But in subsequent verses, God lays out further instructions:.. anoint Hazael as the Syrian king, anoint Jehu as king over Israel to replace the wicked King Ahab, anoint Elisha to be your successor. The amazing thing is, Elijah will only accomplish one of those three tasks. He will anoint Elisha. And it will be Elisha's task after Elijah is gone to anoint the other two.

Then God makes a wonderful statement: "Yet I will leave seven thousand in Israel, all the knees that have not bowed to Baal, and every mouth that has not kissed him." You think you're the only one who's doing God's will? Well, you're not. I have 7,000 faithful followers in Israel.

Remember, numbers are often symbolic in scripture. 7 is a number of perfection. 1,000 is a whole big bunch. To say that there are 7,000 faithful followers means, 'I've got many faithful people who are still doing my will.'

The message is clear. 'Elijah, you're not the only one left. You're not alone. And I'm still in control.'

And this is the third great lesson. Perspective. Elijah is pouty and pathetic and paranoid. But God offers him true perspective. You're not alone. You don't have to do everything. There are others who will share this ministry with you. There are others who will come after you to complete the work of the kingdom after you're gone. So stop feeling sorry for yourself. Stop thinking that you have to do it all. Just get back to work with the piece of God's mission that you've been given. Look at your life, and look at your ministry from God's perspective, not your own.

And so Elijah goes forth. Elijah had abandoned his protégé and his ministry in v3. He was ready to abandon his life in v4. He felt sorry for himself and claimed that he was God's only faithful follower in v14. But God sets Elijah straight. God gives him his power, and presence, and perspective. And then God send Elijah back to reclaim his mission and ministry. Elijah was burned out and ready to chuck it all. But in the end, he resumes his ministry and begins again to carry out God's work.

Like Elijah, all of us ride an emotional roller coaster. Sometimes things are going great and we feel wonderful. Sometimes, things are tough and we're dejected. But God calls us to faithfulness whether we're up or down. God calls us to follow him whether we're happy or depressed.

However, God also promises several things. God knows that the way is too hard for us. We cannot follow him in our own strength. And so he empowers us. He feeds us with his Body and Blood. And he assures us of his presence, in good times and bad. Whether we're up or down, his presence is there. And none of us are expected to do it all. We just have to do our part. And we have to keep that in perspective.

God is telling us, be strengthened at my table. Be calmed by my presence. And keep looking at things from my perspective. And go on your way. Go out to continue your part of the mission.

Make disciples. Feed the hungry. Baptize and teach. Care for the needy. Carry my love out into this broken and hurting world.

And in the midst of the stress, in the midst of fire and wind and earthquake, look for me. Listen for my voice. For I am with you. And I will be with you always, even to the end of the age.