

“Tree Medicine”

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First Congregational United Church of Christ, Gaylord, Michigan

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Texts: 1 Kings 19: 4-14 and Luke 19: 1-7

It was supposed to have been his moment of greatest success, cementing his status in the pantheon of Hebrew Prophets. Elijah had just defeated the prophets of Baal once and for all in an epic showdown on Mount Carmel. After being thoroughly trounced in a shamanic duel, not one of the rival prophets makes it off the mountain alive. King Ahab and the other witnesses bow down in reverence to Elijah and to the God of Israel that the prophet represents. And not only was God’s preeminence on display in the contest, but immediately following, off in the distance, a much-needed rain cloud is spotted on the horizon, signaling the end of a crippling drought. Elijah appears to be a double victor, winning the contest at hand while also solving the larger problem of the land. Full of the spirit of God he runs down the mountain in a scene of rapturous glee, thinking perhaps that finally he will be given a proper coronation as the court prophet of King Ahab and Queen Jezebel. (Cooperrider, pp123-124)

Boy, sometimes in life things just seem to click. Life is good. On top of the world.

On top of your game. A smile so big your face might break. Eyes lit up more brightly than the Christmas tree at Rockefeller Center in New York City. Until...

In Elijah’s case it was until he found out that Queen Jezebel wasn’t about to praise him. In fact, she wanted him dead. To be sure, there is a lot of death in the Hebrew Bible, and it is uncomfortably often at the hand of God as the scriptures read. If you’re able to bracket the violence in the story, I think you can see a similarity in your own life, and mine, where at times at times it seems like

things are going great, and then the bottom seems to fall out. Disoriented, angry, frightened, confused, hurt...these are just a few of the feelings that crop up for us when such a thing occurs. In fact, sometimes we think that when things are really good, the “other shoe is about to drop” and all will be lost. It’s catastrophic thinking, but honestly, it happens sometimes. That’s where we find Elijah as the story progresses. Disillusioned, he wishes for his own death, but he finds something underneath the Broom Tree that changes a lot for him. I believe we can find something for us in this dramatic story.

Elijah is seen running with joy down the mountain after he’d defeated the other prophets. In his joy, it seems, “he had miscalculated Queen Jezebel’s response to recent events (Cooperrider, p124).” Ever had that happen? You think you’ve done something amazing that someone will praise you for, only to find out that they are angry or ambivalent about what you’ve done. “Rather than celebrating the prophet, Queen Jezebel wants him killed. She sends a message to Elijah that pops his balloon of joy and hope. By this time tomorrow, she says, she swears on her own life that Elijah’s life will be in her hands (Cooperrider, p124). In the words of the Church Lady from Saturday Night Live long ago, “Well, isn’t that special?”

Someone may not have had your life in their hands or threatened you that dramatically – at least I hope not – but many, if not all of us have been in similar positions to that of Elijah. Be it your parents, a good friend, your boss, whoever, you “get your bubble burst” when you believe you’ve done something amazing only to have the idea thrown out, be ridiculed, or to be fired, or just plain punished. Spinning in circles you ask yourself, “What happened?”

Elijah did the same thing. Full of fear, he runs for his life. He leaves his servant behind and enters the desert to hide, but also to try to figure out what’s next. “What’s the meaning of all of this?” he continues to ask himself. At the depths of his crisis, he comes upon a solitary broom tree in the middle of the desert (have operator change slide to the broom tree). “He sits down in the shade under the tree, and he tells God that he’s had enough, that he’s at the end of his rope, that he’s no longer running for his life, but that he has had enough of life, that he’s ready to die (Cooperrider, p124).” Let that sink in a moment. He went from the highest of highs to the lowest of lows in a very short time. I don’t know about you, but I’ve had that happen more often than I care to share.

Daniel Cooperrider relates, “This is one of the many instances in which the Bible takes an unrelentingly realist look at the human condition and fearlessly

plumbs the depths of grief, suffering, and despair. [Cooperrider] finds it interesting that when Elijah asks God to take his life, God doesn't respond to Elijah in a direct way, like God had in helping the prophet win the duel. God doesn't solve the problem in a straightforward way by sweeping away the despair. Instead, Elijah just sits with these feelings for a while under the broom tree until he falls asleep. With his head resting on a pillow of leaves and his legs stretching out on a bed of tree roots, the prophet turns his despair over to the dark dream world and offers up his sighs to the low broom branches between him and the starry night (Cooperrider, pp124-125)."

"The broom tree, also known as the white broom and the white weeping broom tree, is a short, dense desert tree indigenous to the Middle East and North Africa. Although called a tree, to many it might appear more like a large shrub or bush with a broad canopy. From January to April, the broom tree is one of the most beautiful sights in the desert, as it adorns itself in a profusion of white flowers emitting a fragrant, sweet honey scent. As one of the first desert plants to bloom in the winter, the broom tree is a symbol of renewal. Its seeds speak of renewal as well with their thick coating that allows them to lie dormant for years. The seeds can survive fires and indeed mass germinations occur only after fire destroys the seed coats (Cooperrider, p130)."

The broom tree would have provided Elijah protection from the sun during the day, but also many resources that would have kept him warm at night and provided softer ground on which to sleep. Under the broom tree, Elijah found a lot more than comfort in a physical sense, he also found hope in a hopeless place, and he's given his life back to him. He learns that God isn't done with him yet, his purpose and passion, his calling and his joy. Let's return to the story.

"Sometime in the night, an angel from God visits the prophet. Shaking Elijah awake, the angel tells him to get up and eat. Behold, there is a pitcher of water and a hot cake baking on some coals. Elijah eats, drinks, and promptly falls asleep again (Cooperrider, p125)." I wonder if sometimes we just need a long sleep when life gets the best of us. Not for days and weeks, perhaps, but maybe an extended night or two of sleep to rest not only from the work we did that was going well, but also to gather our strength to deal with what lay ahead. Psychologists could argue how much is good for us, but the need for sleep in such a situation may be a good prescription.

The angel returns a second time and shakes Elijah awake again. A "second breakfast" is provided. The angel offers both physical and spiritual nourishment in Elijah's hour of need. "You need this food and water, the angel says, because

you've got a long journey ahead of you. In other words, God isn't done with you yet. This is, in my opinion, a life-saving moment for the prophet, a moment in which Elijah's sense of purpose or vocation is restored, a moment when life takes on the color of meaning again. Cooperrider tells us that, "One of the ancient legends about this scripture says that when the angel visited the prophet the second time, the broom tree burst into bloom (p125)."

We are told that there's "an uncanny way in which trees seem to provide exactly what we need. From oxygen for breathing to fruits and nuts for eating to sap for drinking and sweetening to wood for building and heating and shade for cooling, trees meet us and provide for us in our most basic creaturely needs (Cooperrider, p125)." We know that they also provide a host of medicines. What I find to be true is borne out by science, our presence amid trees can provide spiritual and mental health remedies as well. Cooperrider lays out studies from hospitals, where patients recover better when they can see the trees, to "forest bathing" in Japan, where people spend time in the woods to relieve stress.

Here in Northern Michigan, we are blessed with many trees. And this weekend, despite the weather, is at or near peak for the colors that the trees provide. Life has its ups and downs, maybe not always as dramatically as the

Elijah story we've spoken of this morning, but no matter how dramatic the roller-coaster of life, right outside our window is something that can remind us, too, of our purpose, our calling, and of the presence of God. We can entertain angels in the forest, and not even know it. Or maybe not consciously know it but know it in the depths of our soul.

I don't know that today is the best day to lay outside under a tree, but that day will come as the weather will get better. We'll have some nice fall days before all the leaves are gone. Even when they're all gone, and perhaps there's a layer of snow on the ground, trees can still, even in the quiet stillness of winter, speak to us in ways that are beyond consciousness as well as within it.

When life hits you and hits you hard as it will from time to time, and you're reeling from all that has occurred. I invite you to be like Elijah and spend some time among the trees. I pray that you'll find there what he did: purpose, imagination, angels, sustenance, and hope. Most of all, may you learn that God isn't done with you yet. May you find your purpose and passion, you're calling and your joy.

In the many blessed names of God. Amen.