

ELIJAH AND ELISHA RESPOND TO GOD  
1 Kings 19: 4-8;19-21; Matthew 4; 1-11

Across the Presbyterian Church (USA) and other denominations, there are vacant pulpits and pastors burning or burned out. Recently two people I know shared a podcast that was like holding a mirror up to my life and the lives of colleagues I know. The podcast was called “Dan White Jr. and the Great Pastor Resignation.” Although it could have been written by a nurse, a teacher, or a school administrator, or a chaplain, it was written by a pastor. Here is the description the “First Person” podcast interviewer offered:

We’re all feeling exhausted- between the stress of the pandemic, the growing political divide, and growing mistrust in institutions; burnout is at an all-time high, especially among those who have been society’s bridge builders. Teachers and health-care workers are quitting in droves. It’s the kind of moment when you might turn to a faith community or to religious leaders for guidance. But those leaders are also struggling. Dan White Jr. grew up in upstate New York, going to a small Baptist Church down the street from his house. He knew early on that he wanted to be a Pastor, a role he imagined as a unifying one. But trying to unify people in these divisive times ultimately led to his physical collapse.

Dan is now leading a retreat center for burned out pastors in Puerto Rico.

I remember a startling article in the Daytona Beach News Journal in December of 2020 of a nurse named Kathryn Ivey. She was 28 and said that at age 24 she shifted gears in her life, wanting to help people. She started nursing school. She showed a picture of herself when she made the decision to help people by being a nurse. She looked young, bright-eyed, and hopeful. Then at her current age of just 28, she took a selfie after a 12-hour night shift in an intensive care unit in Nashville, Tennessee- she had dark unexpressive eyes, matted hair, and no smile at all. Being one of the helpers was much harder and more combative than she believed it would be four years earlier.

Although the time in which he lived was not in a pandemic, powerful people who were threatening the prophet Elijah caused him to break down in First Kings 19. Elijah was a great biblical prophet. Let's see what the Lord did for him when Elijah ceased to be able to function. In addition, although Jesus is our Lord and became the King of kings and Lord of lords, there was a time when he was so tested by Satan that he almost didn't pass the test. He was exhausted at the end of many days trying to survive. Even this month we have heard of worn-out people dying from the heat in different parts of the world. What are your stressors, and how do you cope?

As I said, Elijah was a prophet; prophets had appeared in history from the time of Moses on down the line. Prophets acted as a mouthpiece for God to speak to the world. They proclaimed God's message to the people, messages that often stirred up controversy or even angered people. But in order to receive a message from God, prophets had to *encounter* God. What were those encounters like? Moses encountered God through a bush that burned, yet was not consumed; he also encountered God on the top of Mount Sinai (also called Mount Horeb) to receive the Ten Commandments. Elijah the prophet had done great things: he had predicted a severe drought, and he found a water source, but even that dried up. He then met a widow and directed her to bring him food and water even though she had little. The widow's actions caused God to bless and revive her and heal her son. Elijah stood up to Queen Jezebel who had married King Ahab, but she brought in her beliefs in many gods, while Ahab brought in his belief in the one true God. An unequally yoked couple; a house divided against itself. Elijah challenged Jezebel's prophets of Baal on a Mountain called Carmel, and he won the contest. But that angered the queen who had the ear of the king. She set her sights on Elijah, to break him down. On Mount Carmel, Elijah was a full-throated critic of the Baal gods. One of my favorite religious writers was Frederick Buechner, who died last week, and who

brought the Bible and religious ideas into down to earth expressions. We have many of his books in our church library (Shameless promotion!) In this case he wrote:

Nobody could tell whose victory had been greater, the Lord's or Elijah's! But the sequel of the events seems clear: Queen Jezebel was determined to get even with Elijah for what he had done to her spiritual advisors, and to save his skin, he went into hiding on Mount Horeb. After that came lightning, wind, and earthquake but there wasn't so much as a peep out of Yahweh (The Lord) and Elijah stood there like a ringmaster when the lion won't jump through the hoop. Only when the fireworks were finished and a terrible hush fell over the mountain did Elijah hear something, and what he heard was so much like silence that it was only through the ear of faith that he knew it was Yahweh. Nonetheless, the message came through loud and clear: that there was no longer any question who had been the star at Mount Carmel and that not even Elijah could make the Lord of Hosts jump through a hoop like a lion or pop out like a rabbit from a hat." (From Buechner's hardback book, *Peculiar Treasures*, pp. 29-30.)

This story reminds us to know that at unexpected times we may encounter God. Perhaps it's through a voice—as I have heard—but perhaps it's through angels God has sent. In I Kings 19: verse 4 and the following, we read; "Elijah went a day's journey into the wilderness and came and sat down under a broom tree" (which gives almost no shade) He asked that he might die. Instead, he fell asleep. And God sent an angel who said to him, "Get up and eat." He ate some things, and drank some water, then lay down again and the angel awakened him telling him about a journey he was to take. Now we can think of angels as God's helpers, or as God's messengers that could be fearful one minute and comforting the next. I wonder if this angel was an invisible being, or could God's angel have been a Bedouin traveler who God enlisted to offer mercy to Elijah? Whichever is the case, Elijah ended up feeling safe, away from the sun and from Jezebel, in the cool of a cave, *the* cave, in fact, where God had connected with Moses! And as we learned from Frederick Buechner, God was in the voice of a whisper, not the sound of thunder.

The times I have heard God's voice were not like thunder, but more like a quiet voice in my head, different from any other. I think Elijah heard that voice and believed God knew that he could not carry on as before. So, God prepared a person to follow him, to whom he could pass his mantle. That kind of handoff happens in situations today too if we are open to the involvement of God in our transitions. In this case in verse 19, we learn that there was the briefest of ceremonies as Elijah cast his mantle (which was a cape worn for warmth at night) onto Elisha. The mantle had been passed and with it, the responsibilities. Elijah would get to rest his weary soul. "Well done, good and faithful servant." "It's times for someone else to have the yoke of responsibility and the mantle of service" God was indicating. Elisha was the one God lined up to follow Elijah. The angel was the one God sent to minister to Elijah in his breakdown. God still sends angels—sometimes I believe, mortal ones, sometimes immortal ones—to minister to those he has called to a task. It might be to a religious profession like a pastor, but God also sends angels to others like chaplains, nurses, school administrators, teachers, and others who answered calls to serve. When I have gone into a cave at the edge of breakdown, it was the still small voice that redirected me. And it was people who cared so much, who responded with their hearts and ministered to me with their love or their words that brought me back. These are not just once in a lifetime encounters. If we have our hearts open, when someone is meeting our needs, we might wonder, to use a Scottish phrase: "be ye my angel unawares?"

As our Lord finished 40 days in the desert with Satan, he too was certainly worn down and in need of some angels. And angels appeared and cared for him in Matthew 4:11, either immortal ones, or perhaps Bedouin mortal ones. But he got stronger, carried out the work for which his Heavenly Father had commissioned him, then passed the mantle to the 12, then to early followers and in our day, he has passed

his mantle to us who seek to follow his direction. He said, and still says in Matthew 28, that I will reference next week in the Great Commission: “Go and make disciples.” If we do that, the way will not be easy. There may be days that you will get discouraged, which is the favorite tool Satan has in his box. We have all gotten discouraged, but we do well not to *stay* discouraged, by receiving the care of angels, and knowing that the mantle presented to you, one day, will be passed to someone else. May we listen to God’s guidance and hear on some days, “stay the course, I will help you,” and on a different day, “Well done. Go in peace.” Both angels and holy words are gifts from God.

Let us pray:

God of the prophets who is also God of our lives: in the loud sounds of televisions, phones, computers, traffic, children, or construction, move us at times into places of sheer silence, not to be overwhelmed by the sounds of silence, but to let the silence wrap-like a mantle-a comforter around us, a place where angels can reach us, and where God can whisper directions to the ears of our soul. In the name of Jesus, who clearly had a soul that could listen. Amen.

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August 21, 2022