

“Under Construction”

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1 Kings 19:1-15a

Luke 8:26-39

*‘...[Elijah] walked another whole day into the desert.*

*Finally, he came to a large bush and sat down in its shade.*

*He begged the Lord,*

*“I’ve had enough. Just let me die! I’m no better off than my ancestors.”*

*Then he lay down in the shade and fell asleep. Suddenly an angel woke him up and said,*

*“Get up and eat.”*

*1 Kings 19:4<sup>b</sup>-5*

Let us pray... O God,

Help us remember that – at those times when

life seems to be in pieces round about us and we are feeling far away from you,  
even then, you are just not finished working with us yet.

Amen

Recently, I spoke with a colleague

who is undergoing a lot of stress at a personal level, overwhelmed by concerns  
for her spouse’s health and other life issues.

I acknowledged that she was in a tough place right now – a ‘desert time’

and I urged her to stay open to what lessons there may be for her to learn –  
and to be ready when she comes through it.

She thanked me and we parted saying, “God bless”...

I can speak from experience about such feelings when it is hard to see the way ahead.

Such times are called the ‘dark night of the soul’ – or a ‘desert time’  
and when you are in it, it is no fun.

Even a spiritually mature person like Mother Teresa –

or especially a spiritual person like her, knows what this is like,  
at times calling her own faith into question.

It is part of the territory of ministry that is everyone’s spiritual journey,

and the better we church workers get at traversing it,  
the better we are able to recognize those ‘desert times’ in others and help.

The Prophet Elijah had had enough...

He boldly challenged the entire cadre of Jezebel’s priests of Baal  
and defeated them in a contest, and put them all to the sword.

But Jezebel was furious at this and resolved to do the same to Elijah.

Hassled and harried once again,

Elijah escapes into the wilderness and is at the point of despair.

In the midst of the physical desert and his own emotional desolation,

Elijah is awakened and he finds a jar of water and some bread  
had been set out for him.

Willard, p.2

Think back to a time when you were in some distress,  
and out of the blue, you received some gift  
as someone's act of kindness – or a coincidence,  
like a cup of coffee or a cookie, a beautiful bird or a sunset  
that showed up at the right time to lift your spirit.

Books sometimes do that for me – or movies or artwork or music.  
Shopping or eating or video-gaming or talking with friends  
on the phone or internet, can be stress-relieving diversions  
to take us out of the desert to an oasis.

The trouble comes, though, when you want to stay at the oasis  
and not get out of the desert...

Centuries before Elijah,  
Abraham came into the land of the Canaanites,  
but when there was a famine, he took his family to Egypt.  
After the famine was over, they returned to their homeland.

The story of Joseph and his brothers tells about another famine  
that forces the Hebrew people to seek refuge again in Egypt –  
but this time they stay.

Years and years pass, until the time when the Hebrew people realized  
they were trapped as Pharaoh's slaves.

That's the pattern of addiction in which  
someone starts out taking a drink or a drug to feel great,  
taking one's mind off the loneliness, pain,  
and sheer boredom of the desert,  
only to find oneself in a worse situation –  
out of the frying pan and into the fire.

But even then,  
God is able to help.

Elijah was refreshed by the water and bread, but fell back to sleep  
in the middle of the desert.

The messenger angel from God woke him again,  
goading him to get up and chiding him to keep going.

Elijah does this and is on the move for 40 days,  
deep into the Sinai desert where he finds shelter in a cave  
on the mountain where God gave Moses the Ten Commandments.

But Elijah hasn't found refuge, yet –  
he hasn't found his sacred place of sanctuary to be with God.

Willard, p.3

In our lesson from 1<sup>st</sup> Kings today,

Elijah experiences the violence of windstorm, earthquake, and fire –  
just like we might hear on the evening news.

Then there is a gentle breeze – a cool wind,

1<sup>st</sup> Kings 19:12 RSV describes it as: *a still small voice*.  
and Elijah recognizes God's presence.

God hears Elijah's lament – and self-pity,

but God doesn't let Elijah off so easily,

pushing him back out into the world, with things yet to do.

That will include finding someone to replace him,

which is to be the prophet Elisha who will literally take up Elijah's mantle.

When was the last time you had had enough,

but circumstances called for you to hang in there?

When did you want to get out of a tough situation –

but it turned out to be an occasion for you to grow?

It is not easy when you are in that 'desert time',

yet it can be the occasion for joy when you have come through it,  
especially, from the vantage point of passing time.

But what happens when someone can't escape that 'desert' –

whether it is one of their own making or as a situation beyond their control?

Consider the person in the Gospel story who lived in the tombs

and whom the townspeople of Gerasa tried to restrain  
because of his mental illness.

This was someone who was a prisoner to his inner demons –

which could be a metaphor for psychosis or addiction

or some other oppressive situation or relationship.

Jesus gets to the heart of the matter and drives out the demons

with little more effort than just giving them permission to leave.

Though it seems effortless on Jesus' part,

we get a sense of the amount of pain this person had been going through

in the form of 2,000 pigs that rushed down a cliff

to drown themselves in the sea!

The whole town comes out to see what happened

and instead of rejoicing that the man is healed, they all ask Jesus to leave.

In an internet essay on "Biblical peacemaking",

Jim Warren suggests this individual served as a scapegoat for that town.

Rather than a boogeyman, he is made out to be more like a "town drunk",

as someone to point to – and away from, that society's own faults.

[http://www.biblicalpeacemaking.org/Jesus\\_and\\_the\\_Demoniac.pdf](http://www.biblicalpeacemaking.org/Jesus_and_the_Demoniac.pdf)

Willard, p.4

When Jesus heals this person, the Gerasenes are suddenly without a sensational problem to unify them – so they ask Jesus to leave.

But the man who had been troubled by 2,000-pigs' worth of demons, asks to go with Jesus.

Instead, Jesus sends him back to his home – to those who loved him, where he would become an apostle to the people of that town to help heal them of the wasteland they had become.

In the lesson from 1<sup>st</sup> Kings,

Elijah hides in a cave from the windstorm, earthquake, and fire, but recognizes God's presence in the still, small voice.

In Psalm 46, God has immense power, yet God is also a refuge.

When God speaks most powerfully, it is in the whispered insights that calm our worst fears.

Jesus, through the power of God, drove out the demons with a word and healed that man living in a graveyard of fear and a desert of desolation, though he failed to heal the dysfunctional Gerasenes.

Even communities can find themselves caught in their own desert times and become wastelands until they are willing to recognize – and do something about, their own spiritual emptiness.

As we may find ourselves in an emotional and spiritual desert from time to time, the first thing to do is be patient, but keep moving to get through it.

We need to welcome those oases that we find – or that show up as a gift of grace, but when we're tempted to stay instead of continuing on to the Promised Land, it may take the intervention of family, friends, and counselors, to give us that insight that gets us back to life.

Whether we sense God's presence or not, we must continually remember that God is always here.

This truth and those dynamic events faced by Elijah and demonstrated by Jesus are reflected in these verses of Psalm 46...

*[1] God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.*

*[2] Therefore we will not fear though the earth should change, though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea;*

*[3] though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble with its tumult.*

*[6] The nations rage, the kingdoms totter; [God] utters his voice, the earth melts.*

*[10] "Be still, and know that I am God.*

*I am exalted among the nations, I am exalted in the earth!"*

Be still and be patient, remember and trust that God is still at work with you.

Amen

*Our lesson today is from 1 Kings 19:1-15a and tells about the dynamic prophet Elijah who defeated the prophets of Baal in a contest of faith, but was then harassed into hiding by their enraged benefactor, Jezebel. In this passage, we also learn how God's presence was made known to Elijah even in the midst of his distress...*

1 Ahab told his wife Jezebel what Elijah had done and that he had killed the prophets.

2 She sent a message to Elijah:

“You killed my prophets. Now I’m going to kill you!

I pray that the gods will punish me even more severely  
if I don’t do it by this time tomorrow.”

3 Elijah was afraid when he got her message,

and he ran to the town of Beersheba in Judah.

He left his servant there, 4 then walked another whole day into the desert.

Finally, he came to a large bush and sat down in its shade.

He begged the Lord,

“I’ve had enough. Just let me die! I’m no better off than my ancestors.”

5 Then he lay down in the shade and fell asleep.

Suddenly an angel woke him up and said,

“Get up and eat.”

6 Elijah looked around, and by his head was a jar of water and some baked bread.

He sat up, ate and drank, then lay down and went back to sleep.

7 Soon the Lord’s angel woke him again and said,

“Get up and eat, or else you’ll get too tired to travel.”

8 So Elijah sat up and ate and drank.

The food and water made him strong enough to walk forty more days.

At last, he reached Mount Sinai, the mountain of God, 9 and he spent the night there in a cave.

While Elijah was on Mount Sinai, the Lord asked,

“Elijah, why are you here?”

10 He answered,

“Lord God All-Powerful, I’ve always done my best to obey you.

But your people have broken their solemn promise to you.

They have torn down your altars and killed all your prophets, except me.

And now they are even trying to kill me!”

11 “Go out and stand on the mountain,” the Lord replied.

“I want you to see me when I pass by.”

All at once, a strong wind shook the mountain and shattered the rocks.

But the Lord was not in the wind.

Next, there was an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake.

12 Then there was a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire.

Finally, there was a gentle breeze, 13 and when Elijah heard it, he covered his face with his coat.

He went out and stood at the entrance to the cave.

The Lord asked,

“Elijah, why are you here?”

14 Elijah answered,

“Lord God All-Powerful, I’ve always done my best to obey you.

But your people have broken their solemn promise to you.

They have torn down your altars and killed all your prophets, except me.

And now they are even trying to kill me!”

15 The Lord said:

Elijah, you can go back to the desert near Damascus.

Luke 8:26-39

[26] Then they arrived at the country of the Ger'asenes,  
which is opposite Galilee.

[27] And as he stepped out on land,  
there met him a man from the city who had demons;  
for a long time he had worn no clothes,  
and he lived not in a house but among the tombs.

[28] When he saw Jesus, he cried out and fell down before him,  
and said with a loud voice,  
"What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God?  
I beseech you, do not torment me."

[29] For he had commanded the unclean spirit to come out of the man.  
(For many a time it had seized him; he was kept under guard,  
and bound with chains and fetters,  
but he broke the bonds and was driven by the demon into the desert.)

[30] Jesus then asked him,  
"What is your name?"

And he said,  
"Legion"; for many demons had entered him.

[31] And they begged him not to command them to depart into the abyss.

[32] Now a large herd of swine was feeding there on the hillside;  
and they begged him to let them enter these. So he gave them leave.

[33] Then the demons came out of the man and entered the swine,  
and the herd rushed down the steep bank into the lake and were drowned.

[34] When the herdsmen saw what had happened, they fled,  
and told it in the city and in the country.

[35] Then people went out to see what had happened, and they came to Jesus,  
and found the man from whom the demons had gone,  
sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed and in his right mind;  
and they were afraid.

[36] And those who had seen it told them how  
he who had been possessed with demons was healed.

[37] Then all the people of the surrounding country of the Ger'asenes  
asked him to depart from them;  
for they were seized with great fear; so he got into the boat and returned.

[38] The man from whom the demons had gone  
begged that he might be with him; but he sent him away, saying,  
[39] "Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you."

And he went away, proclaiming throughout the whole city  
how much Jesus had done for him.