

“All Alone?”

A meditation based on 1 Kings 19:1-18 and Psalm 42

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Redlands United Church of Christ

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The Southern California coast was shrouded in fog on the morning of 4th July, 1952. Twenty-one miles to the west, on Catalina Island, a 34-year old woman waded into the water and started swimming towards the mainland, determined to become the first woman ever to swim the 21-mile strait. The name of the young woman was Florence Chadwick, and she had already been the first woman to swim the English Channel in both directions.

The water was typically cold that morning, and the fog so thick that she could hardly see the boats of her own party who were accompanying her, keeping the sharks at bay. As the hours passed, she swam on. The bone-chilling cold had never before been a problem to her, but what added to her discouragement today was the dense fog, which made her completely unable to determine her progress. More than 15 hours later, numb with cold and discouragement, she asked to be taken out of the water. Her trainer and her mother, in a boat beside her, encouraged her to continue swimming, as they were getting close to the shore. But all she could see was gray fog. A few minutes later, after being taken out of the water, realizing she was only $\frac{1}{2}$ a mile from shore, she exclaimed, “I’m not excusing myself, but if I could have seen the shore, I might have made it.”

Florence Chadwick had been licked, not by the cold or even the fatigue, but by the fog. The fog had obscured her goal; it had blinded her reason and her eyes. (We can happily add that she subsequently managed to swim the strait — 3 times!)

Our main lectionary reading today is the dramatic story of the prophet Elijah, whom scripture called a man, “a human like us” (James 5:17). While I don’t think too many of us would generally agree with James that Elijah was truly a “human like us”, today’s scripture narrative is in many ways just as interesting as the previous dramatic chapters we discover in First Kings. For it is here we read of a man who actually became discouraged, actually was ready to give up on his plans, desperately wanting to end it all. He seems far more flesh-and-blood than the otherworldly figure who stood up to king Ahab and the notorious prophets of Baal.

But we are probably getting ahead of our story.

The story of Elijah is one of the most profoundly moving narratives we find anywhere in scripture. I can remember from nearly as far back as my memory can go of hearing and being thrilled by the drama of this Old Testament prophet, a man revered in Jewish legend probably

second only to the lawgiver Moses. And who has not had shivers running down their back on hearing Mendelssohn's *Elijah* as the prophets of Baal plead desperately for a sign from the gods, only to be outdone by the heavenly fire consuming the drenched sacrifice offered by Elijah himself?

Today's lectionary reading makes the unusual leap of moving *backwards* a couple of chapters in First Kings, from last Sunday's readings of chapter 21 to today's chapter 19. In a sense, today's reading is almost anticlimactic. Elijah had been at the pinnacle of his career, both before and after today's chapter 19, but today he is at a low point. He has reached what the Spanish mystic John of the Cross (1542–1591) first coined as the "dark night of the soul." And it is precisely at this low point in Elijah's life that he hears God's voice calling him out of the stillness of his soul. Sandwiched between the drama of calling fire from heaven and of rebuking the king of Israel is today's account of a man who runs away from a cruel queen, wishing only to be left alone to die.

Everything had been going so well for him. In front of King Ahab and all Israel he had successfully defeated and killed the 450 prophets of Baal in a face-to-face contest that pitted Yahweh against the worship of Baal, god of rain and fertility. He had successfully brought to a close the 3^{1/2}-year drought in the land. He had run in front of Ahab's chariot in a pelting rain-and-lightning storm all 17 miles from Mt. Carmel to the king's winter palace in Jezreel.

Now here he was, being threatened by a pagan queen, Jezebel, who was understandably furious with Elijah for murdering her special prophets and making a laughingstock of her Phoenician religion. And she issued to him a type of *fatwa*, a warning of less than 24 hours to make good on her promise to murder him as he had murdered her protégés. (Incidentally, there are scholars who really doubt that she intended on killing Elijah, thereby making him a respected martyr; in the story she gives an oath, which in the original language is incomplete, indicating that she may only have intended to make Elijah scared enough to run for his life and thus lose some of his credibility and respect with the people of Israel. Can you really imagine otherwise why, if she really intended to kill him, she would send a messenger to say in effect, "Here's a heads-up Elijah: run away now and you'll be safe from me!" Wouldn't she instead have sent an assassin, not an ordinary messenger, or perhaps an arresting officer to take him on the spot?)

And run Elijah does! A 100-mile run, all the way from the kingdom of Israel to Beersheba, on the southern edge of the neighboring kingdom of Judah — out of reach of the despotic queen. And, on the point of collapse, Elijah lies down under a solitary tree and wishes to die. (I think by that time I probably would have too!) And he starts wallowing in a pool of self-pity, convinced he is the only one left who follows Yahweh, the only one who has done anything for the cause of truth. And after a couple of meals, provided conveniently by the angel ("messenger"), Elijah continues the proverbial 40 days and 40 nights for another 200 miles, all the way to Mt. Sinai (Mt. Horeb), at or very near the same place where Moses heard the voice of God and received the Ten Commandments.

And it is here, at the very depths of despair and discouragement, at a time when Elijah feels there is nothing worth living or fighting for, that he perceives the presence of God passing by. First there is a mighty wind that splits the mountains and breaks rocks everywhere — but God was not in the wind. Then there was an earthquake, which should have made him feel very much at

home if he had been a Californian! — but God was not in the earthquake. Next comes a consuming fire, but once more there is no sign of God. And then, almost like an afterthought, there is what scripture calls the “still, small voice”, or as the NRSV translation puts it, “*a sound of sheer silence*”. It is in this complete absence of any outward bravado or showmanship that God’s presence and strength is made known. Just when the prophet feels there is no more hope, nothing worth fighting for, that the Divine Spirit reveals God’s ultimate plan.

Yesterday a group of us went to see a movie that has just been released. The film describes the 2008 political efforts of a certain denomination during Proposition 8 to do everything in their power to ensure that not all people are treated equally, especially not those who are LGBT. It is a movie that can, and does, make one want to cry.

Another news item of interest that caught my attention this week, was an article in Wednesday’s *San Francisco Chronicle* [June 16], which says: “As the trial over California’s prohibition on same-sex marriage enters its final stage today, the ban’s sponsors are urging the judge to go a step further and revoke state recognition of the marriages of 18,000 gay and lesbian couples who wed before voters passed Proposition 8. Such an order would honor ‘the expressed will of the people,’ backers of the November 2008 ballot measure said Tuesday in their final written filing before Chief U.S. District Judge Vaughn Walker.”

It is unbelievable — truly incredible — the lengths to which church and other authorities will go to deny basic human rights to other people. Like Elijah, it is tempting to reply, “It is enough. I am discouraged, disheartened, ready to give up.” But like Elijah we must be willing to “wait on God”, to hear the “still, small voice” or the “voice of silence” speaking to us.

The *New Interpreter’s Bible Commentary* says that: “The answer to the threat posed by Jezebel will not come in the spectacular and immediate manner, as on Mt. Carmel. It does not come by way of a fire from on high. It does not come by way of a rainstorm. Rather, it is to come in a quiet fashion, through the rather unspectacular ... working out of divine will in the historical process.”

As Sharon and I were reminded in our Process Theology classes last week, the seemingly insignificant events and actions in our lives often have far-reaching consequences on other people and even on God in ways we can only begin to imagine. We witness the “rather unspectacular working out of the divine will” in our personal lives as well as in world events.

Or, to put it in another way that most UCCers will resonate with, “God is still speaking” in many ways, through human, as well as divine, interaction. By being willing to hear the “voice of silence” we become partners in discernment with God.

I am also reminded and immensely encouraged by another event this past week, this time through the support and love and prayers of many of you who attended this church’s “Celebration of Marriage Equality”. It reminds me once more that, in the words of Martin Luther King, Jr.: “The arc of history is long, but it bends towards justice.” I take comfort in the quiet assurance, that over time we each can make a difference for each other in the world in which we live.

Life is challenging. Life can at times be disheartening. Sometimes our suffering is personal and private; at other times it assumes global proportions. Ill health, family, politics, finances — all may at times confuse and confound us. Working with Measure “O” or combating Proposition 8 may be draining. At such times we may proclaim together with the Psalmist: “Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise God, my help and my Redeemer” (Ps. 42). The song embodies the ideal of hope for which it longs; the song itself becomes the first step in the creative transformation of the singer’s pain into renewed praise.

In the silence, like Elijah, we rediscover God and discern God’s intentions with our lives. Through the fog we catch a new glimpse of our goal and like Florence Chadwick swim bravely on.

Amen — and may it so be!