

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
305 EAST MAIN STREET
DURHAM, NC 27701
PHONE: (919) 682-5511



“Elijah Says Enough”
A sermon by Candice Ryals Provey

12th Sunday in Ordinary Time
June 20, 2010
1 Kings 19:1–15a; Ps. 42-43; Gal. 3:23–29; Lk. 8:26–39

Gracious God, startle us anew with your word. Remind us of your promises, and draw us again into the unfolding of your kingdom. In Jesus Christ’s name, we pray. Amen.

It was after midnight, but he couldn’t sleep. So after he had paced the hallway up and down several times, he finally turned and headed for the kitchen to make a pot of coffee. He came to the kitchen table and sat down gingerly, like an old man. He cradled his head in his hands. The Montgomery bus boycott had stretched on for nearly two months at that point, and people were getting restless. King himself, along with others, had been arrested for traffic violations. Money was growing tight, the Klan more aggressive, and the death threats against him had climbed to nearly 40 a day. The reluctant leader sat there in the silence of those morning hours, and he prayed. Some of you may have read the prayer that Martin Luther King, Jr., prayed that morning in the newsletter this past week, saying:

“Lord, I’m down here trying to do what’s right. I still think I’m right. I am here taking a stand for what I believe is right. But Lord, I must confess that I’m weak now, I’m faltering. I’m losing my courage. Now I am afraid. And I can’t let people see me like this because if they see me weak and losing my courage, they will begin to get weak. The people are looking to me for leadership, and if I stand before them without strength and courage, they too will falter. I am at the end of my powers. I have nothing left. I’ve come to the point where I can’t face it alone.”

—Martin Luther King, Jr., January 1956

Elijah is at a similar point in our text for today. He staggers toward the shade of a solitary broombush, like a deer panting after water. He looks wasted and weary. Elijah has been trying to do what's right, but everything seems to be going wrong. And now, he is here, living in the shadow of a solitary bush, on the brink of despair. He is slightly delirious as he lies down and says, "Enough, God. Just take my life."

We're picking up this story in the middle of a drawn-out saga between Elijah, Ahab, and Jezebel. Elijah is the prophet of the Lord, and he first goes to confront King Ahab and his wife, Jezebel, for their idolatry, their worship of the storm god Baal. To prove his point, Elijah tells them that not a single drop of rain, not a single drop of dew will fall on the land except according to his word. To his credit, that's exactly what happens: a famine slowly spreads across the land, and Elijah becomes somewhat unpopular. So he spends most of his days hiding out in the wilderness. God appoints ravens to feed him in the morning and the evening. Later, he takes up camp with a starving widow and her dying child.

These have been rough days for Elijah. He goes again to confront Ahab face-to-face, and this time, his confrontation culminates in a show-down between Elijah himself and 450 prophets of Baal. Elijah emerges victorious but vengeful—just as Jezebel has been cutting down prophets of the Lord, Elijah has her prophets slaughtered in return.

It's no surprise to me that such behavior would warrant a death threat from the queen, but it seems to surprise Elijah. At this point he seems to have thought that that final confrontation was *the* final confrontation, that he has just ushered in a new age where the sovereignty of God is recognized by all and everyone can live at peace and at ease. He sees his life glimmering in front him, like he's never known it before. Gone are the days of hiding out in the wilderness. He can finally take a rest. But that's not how it goes for Elijah. Jezebel's threat shatters his illusions and sends him reeling off in the wilderness, frustrated and frightened.

When he finally gets to Mt. Horeb, forty days later, God asks him the question that maybe some of you were wondering as well: "What are you doing here, Elijah?" God knows what he's doing there. Elijah has come to hide.

The world has refused to yield to his will, and now, he refuses to participate in it. It's the tempting thing to do when things go haywire. One day, you're going along with life as normal, and suddenly, someone starts messing with the dials of the earth's rotational speed. All of a sudden, it's spinning recklessly out of control, and

it's everything you can do just to cling to the nearest bush or kitchen table to keep yourself from flying off the surface. It is the temptation to withdraw, to hunker down, to just hold on. If you can hold on and be still long enough, maybe things will sort themselves out. If you can just lie down and go to sleep, maybe this will all just be the nightmare that you think it is. Elijah is seeking the comfort of a cave that is darker and more hollow than he himself feels at that moment. He has had enough of the world. He is finished.

But not quite finished. When God asks him the question, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" he can't resist the opportunity to file his complaint. He says, "I have surely been zealous for the Lord," and look what it's gotten me! And Israel, they've forsaken your covenant, they've toppled your altars, they've killed all of your prophets, and yet Ahab and Jezebel continue to reign in power!

You can hear the implicit challenge behind his words: *I have been zealous, I have been faithful to the covenant, but you, God—why have you forgotten me? why have you forsaken me? why must I walk about mournfully while the enemy oppresses me? How long will this go on?*

Elijah has had enough of the world, but even more, he's had it with God. He has questions about management style and efficiency, systems of benefits, commission, and insurance policies. Somewhere in the midst of it all, he suggests that he himself, Elijah, is *God's* last remaining hope on earth, and God is about to bungle it.

Elijah is blinded by his own radiating righteousness. The glare from his own righteousness has prevented him from being able to see with the proper perspective what's going on in the world. He is tired of God's patience with Israel, and yet he is blind to God's patience with him. He is sick of God's grace; he's *offended* by grace, as Joe said last week, and yet he cannot recognize how much grace he is receiving even now.

Though he has forgotten God's promises, his body has groped his way back, his feet have carried him instinctually even when his memory failed, and he has clawed his way up God's holy mountain. Though he has forgotten God's promises, God has been steadily reminding him all along.

When he first asked to die alone in the wilderness, God instead sent a messenger to nourish him. Barbara Brown Taylor, who was here a few weeks ago, calls this angel food cake, a cake baked on hot stones delivered by an angel right to your

doorstep. It is bread from heaven, just as God rained down manna for Israel as they were departing from slavery in Egypt, wandering the wilderness in an attempt to reach the Holy Land. Here, too, God is nourishing Elijah, providing for him while he is lost and vulnerable.

After he reaches Mt. Horeb, he hides himself in a cave. God parades outside a great wind, the wind that once hovered over the face of the deep and the beginning of creation, the wind that swept away the waters of the Red Sea, granting Israel safe passage. This wind is now howling outside Elijah's cave, cracking down rocks to prove its strength. This wind reminds Elijah that God is one who creates and protects.

After the wind, there is quaking, shaking the foundations of his secure cave, reminding Elijah of the one true Rock, the only refuge that he finds in God.

Then after the quaking, there is fire, the very fire that Elijah himself invoked in that standoff with the prophets of Baal. It was terrific and terrifying the way it rained down from the skies and engulfed the altar and everything around it. And here, it is burning everything in sight, everything is aflame—a thousand burning bushes outside the cave, bidding Elijah to come outside and look!

And then there is silence. Who can say what happened to Elijah in that span of silence? All we know is what happened next. Elijah made a decision. He left the cave, and he went out and stood before the palpable presence of the Lord. Though they exchanged the same words: “What are you doing here, Elijah?” Though his response is verbatim, word-for-word the same, I imagine his tone has changed: “I am the last one, I alone remain, and they seek my life to take it.” Only this time, he is willing to lose it for the sake of the Word.

God's only response is the call. It is the same call that Abraham received so long ago: “Go.” Go on your path through the wilderness, away from all that is secure for you, into the unknown. It is a call that comes with a promise: I will make of you a great nation. I will bless you and make you a blessing to the world. Elijah needed to be reminded. We all need to be reminded, because the threat of death will bring us to that place where we cannot face it alone. I am not just talking about facing our own deaths; the deaths of members of our family, our loved ones, people in our community, the deaths of people we don't know can sometimes shake us in this way. And I am not just talking about political persecution; this is also the threat of death that comes along with accidents, ailments, and aging. When we come face-

to-face with the threat that death holds over us, to alienate us from all we hold dear, we need to be reminded of the promises of God.

As Martin Luther King, Jr., sat in the silence of his kitchen, clinging to that table, he was thinking of escape, “a way to move out of the picture without looking like a coward.”¹ When he heard a voice say, “Martin Luther, stand up for righteousness. Stand up for justice. Stand up for truth. And lo, I will be with you. Even until the ends of the earth.” And he heard the voice of Jesus promise to never leave him alone.

Martin Luther went out again the next day, and the day after that. And the day after his house was bombed, he went out again, and the day after that. And one day, he went out and boarded the Montgomery bus line as the first African-American to ride on an integrated bus. But that wasn't the last confrontation. He went out again and again. Though he was eventually killed, his vision of the beloved community did not die. We too are called to go and proclaim the good news of God's Kingdom. God has called us by name, and we are children of God. When we walk through the waters, God will be with us, and through the rivers, they will not engulf us. God will never leave us alone, never; even unto the ends of the earth, we will never be alone. Jesus will never leave us alone. Thanks be to God. Amen.

Candice Ryals came to Duke as an undergrad. She was active with the Westminster Fellowship at Duke and joined FPC. She entered Duke Divinity School under the care of our congregation and the Presbytery of New Hope. She and Ren Provey were married last summer. Candice graduated from Duke in May, 2010 with honors. She received the 2010 Award for Excellence in Bible for her outstanding work in biblical studies and the Jameson Jones Preaching Award for her exceptional gifts as a preacher. She has served as an intern at FPC for two years, providing leadership for the Crossroads group.

¹ Charles Marsh, *The Beloved Community: How Faith Shapes Social Justice, from the Civil Rights Movement to Today*. (New York: Basic Books, 2005), 31f.