

Eleventh Weekend After Pentecost (RCL/B): "Elijah: 'Take Me Now!'; God: 'No Way!'"
1 Kings 19:4-8; Psalm 34:1-8; John 6:35, 41-51
August 7-8, 2021
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

Depression has a life of its own and sometimes, often, doesn't make sense from the outside looking in. Here's a lead from Friday's paper, with a date line of Tokyo:

Kenichiro Fumita was crying so hard that he could barely get the words out.

"I wanted to return my gratitude to the concerned people and volunteers who are running the Olympics during this difficult time." Fumita, a Greco-Roman wrestler, said between sobs after finishing his final bout at the Games this week.

"I ended up with this shameful result," he said, bobbing his head abjectly. "I'm truly sorry."

Fumita, 25, had just won a silver medal.

In what has become a familiar – and, at times, wrenching – sight during the Tokyo Olympics, many Japanese athletes have wept through post-competition interviews, apologizing for any result short of gold. Even some who had won a medal, like Fumita, lamented that they had let down their team, their supporters, even their country.¹

Wow. What a sad state of affairs, that you can be second best in international competition and still feel like a failure. From the outside looking in, we don't understand it, even after we learn that Japanese culture demands daily apologies as a sign of common courtesy, to the extent of a train conductor apologizing profusely for an arrival that's just a couple minutes late, or even for one that's a couple minutes **early**. I hope counseling will be available for those athletes for whom anything but gold feels "shameful."

Now hit the rewind button and travel back 3,000 years to poor Elijah who's got a classic case of depression. He's just learned that Jezebel, the queen of Israel, has put a hit out on his life, because he's killed her darlings, priests of the pagan god Baal. He hightails it down to Judah, out of Jezebel's reach, sends his servant packing, and travels way into the desert. Here's what happens next, according to *The Message*:

[Elijah] came to a long broom bush and collapsed in its shade, wanting in the worst way to be done with it all – to just die: “Enough of this, GOD! Take my life – I’m ready to join my ancestors in the grave!” Exhausted, he fell asleep under the lone broom bush. (1 Kings 19:3-4)

Elijah is tired beyond words. He’s hopeless. He sees only negatives on the ledger sheet of his life. He prays to go to sleep and not wake up.

Maybe at times you’ve felt that way, too. Depression is common, not unusual. True, some people seem immune, inoculated against it. But many of us flirt with it from time to time – or know depression as an intimate acquaintance -- a black dog that tags along everywhere. (We’ve all heard how the pandemic has sent the incidence of depression and anxiety through the roof.)

When I was still in my 20’s, my oldest sister Sharon died. She had been a second mother to me after our mother died, and her death was a devastating loss to me. I was working as a hospital chaplain-in-training at the time, and asked my supervisor if I could go home early one day. I got permission, biked back to my apartment, and went straight to bed, the only way I knew to escape wrenching grief and experience a measure of peace. I had a dream in which my sister comforted me. Then the ringing of the phone woke me up. It was my boss, reaching out in concern. I was aggravated to be pulled back to reality. But the next day I returned to work and refocused on caring for others. My heart hurt for a long time after that, but I found helpful distraction and healing meaning in comforting and accompanying others. Sometimes medication, even hospitalization, is necessary and part of God’s plan, but for non-clinical depression it is often helpful and healing to focus off ourselves and onto others, especially if we actively help those who need what we have to give: time, love, companionship, childcare or eldercare, a bag of food, a ride to the doctor, school supplies, a warm coat, a bed to sleep in, a voice to advocate for them.

Back to Elijah snoring away:

Suddenly an angel shook him awake and said, "Get up and eat!" He looked around, and to his surprise, right by his head were a loaf of bread baked on some coals and a jug of water. He ate the meal and went back to sleep.

The angel of God came back, shook him awake again, and said, "Get up and eat some more – you've got a long journey ahead of you." (1 Kings 19:6-7)

The second rude awakening, the second delivery of divine Uber Eats, is enough to dispel some of Elijah's depressive fog and to kick him back into gear. He travels 40 days and 40 nights to Horeb, called God's mountain, and there he goes to sleep again.... This time it's God's voice that wakes him up: *"So Elijah, what are you doing here?"* (1 Kings 19:9) God asks that of Elijah twice, and each time Elijah answers out of his depression:

"I've been working my heart out for [You, God]. The people of Israel have abandoned your covenant, destroyed the places of worship, and murdered your prophets. I'm the only one left, and now they're trying to kill me."

(1 Kings 19:10, 14)

The Lord counters the grim picture Elijah paints with the fact that there are actually 7,000 faithful people who have **not** abandoned God's covenant. The Lord doesn't even bother to mention that there are also at least a hundred surviving prophets of Yahweh. Mostly what the Lord does is to give Elijah more work to do, like recruiting Elisha as his successor, and anointing a new king. God will not take Elijah's "No!" under the broom tree as a legitimate answer. God will not accept Elijah's resignation as a prophet. God gives Elijah a reason to live and not die.

Last week we gathered for the first installment of our Lutheran/Roman Catholic Bible study on canticles. We looked at the Nunc Dimittis canticle, Simeon's song in the Temple as he looks upon the infant Messiah, the fulfillment of God's promise to him. Filled with the Holy Spirit, he prays, *"Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace...."*

(Luke 2:29) Simeon's life is complete, and he's able to say, "Thank you, Lord, thank you. Any time, now, Lord, any time...." Elijah's situation was very different. His case wasn't a matter of "work completed" but of "hope depleted"! God didn't accept Elijah's resignation and God doesn't accept ours when we're tempted to give up prematurely, when we're depressed by a lack of results, when we're frightened of repercussions for being faithful, when we're simply dog-tired and in need of Sabbath rest, not retirement.

God sends angels to invite us to "Taste and see" in the words of this weekend's Psalm 34. The bread offered to us is the sacrament of Holy Communion and the Word of God as well. The water to quench our spiritual thirst and to hydrate our parched souls is the living water of the Holy Spirit who washed us in Holy Baptism and who is winging around and working tirelessly, daily, to raise us up from sin and make abundant life possible **now**, and not just later. We don't have to wait to die. Eternal life is **already** ours.

Life has some exceedingly depressing days and even chapters. We can make a good case that the loss of a gold medal is minor compared to the loss of a loved one, or of a livelihood, or of one's mental or physical health. But our God specializes in raising the living dead, burning through the mist of depression, dispelling the anxiety in our hearts like He calmed wind and waves: "Peace! Be still!" And when we find ourselves in the valley of the shadows, the Good Shepherd accompanies and protects us, though His footfall be silent and His presence invisible. Amen

¹Motoko Rich, "Japanese Tears and Apologies Over 'Shameful' Silver Medal," *NY Times* (August 6, 2021, A1, B14), A1.

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