

Enough Is Enough

Have you ever had a day...or a week...or sometimes it seems like just a whole period of your life when everything just seems to go wrong...when everything that you had planned fell apart...nothing went right...even those things which you thought you had done well turned out not to live up to your expectations...the results just were not what you had hoped to achieve? Perhaps, sometime during this period, you turned to a friend, or muttered under your breath, or maybe even turned to God and said, "Enough is enough. I am tired of dealing with this problem. I am sick and tired of the way things are going. I am doing the best that I can and it just isn't working." Unless you have had a very unusual life, I imagine you know exactly the feeling that I am describing. I have a library of resources for illustrations as entry points for sermons. One suggested for this test to be used for children had this title: "Harriet's had enough!" which was the seed for this sermon's title. The book by Elissa Haden Guest describes the events in the life of a young raccoon named Harriet which could have come from almost any childhood experience. Young Harriet's response to her emotional overload is to pack a suitcase and run away from home. When I read that book, it reminded me of a time when my father was hospitalized and my mother's sisters came from "out of town" to "help" Mom. But in their efforts to help her, I felt unwanted and in the way in my own home. My response was much like the raccoon Harriet—I announced I was going to run away from home and took off through the pasture next to our home. Like the little raccoon in the story, I it wasn't long and I didn't get far, before my mother found me. When reading today's passage from Elijah's story, that seems like the perspective that Elijah has about this turn of events. He has been a faithful messenger for the Lord, taking an unpopular message and then spending three years in hiding, a couple living by a river being fed by ravens then some time in a foreign land...all to hide from an irate king. Then following instructions, he goes back and with God's power demonstrates to the king and the people the truth of just who is God...he surely has expectations that life is going to be looking up...the drought is over...all should be right with the world. When we think of folks in Scripture who complain to God about their lot in life, we usually quote from the book of Job for examples of unjust pain or suffering. Yet the reality for many of the people chosen for special tasks by God was that their lives were not easy; the places they were told to go, the things they were asked to do, were not comfortable or pleasant. As we examine this story from First Kings, let us look at the description of the prophet's reactions to what happened following the victory the spectacular victory over those priests of Baal at Mount Carmel recorded in Chapter 18. Imagine, if you will, the victory and immediate aftermath. The people of Israel have been gathered there to witness the demonstration: they have seen the vain attempts of Baal priests to ignite even a spark, followed by the powerful response to Elijah's prayer to the LORD. In response to God's action, they have declared: "The LORD is God!" When we read and hear that phrase, we often think that the Israelites understood the Lord and God as interchangeable words for the same being, but when the English word LORD is in all capital letters as it is here, that reference is a specific translation for a special word in Hebrew—YHWH—all consonants—the unpronounceable—not to be actually spoken name of Yahweh, the God of Israel who made covenant with their ancestors. The second word translated as God is Eloheim, which quite accurately is translated as God but has a less specific meaning. It is can

be also be used in the same way that we use god with a little “g”. So Elijah has seen the people of Israel acknowledge that YHWH, the LORD he serves, is the true God with a capital G, the ONE GOD who is to be worshiped. He has survived persecutions, the only prophet not to be destroyed by Jezebel, his work as a prophet of the true God is vindicated by God in front of Ahab and the people of Israel. With the people’s support, Elijah destroys the prophets of Baal, announces to Ahab that rain is coming to end the three year drought and send Ahab back down the mountain so he won’t be caught in the coming storm. Elijah, at this moment is so elated and so filled with the power of the LORD that he runs in front of Ahab’s chariot back to the entrance to the Jaz’re’el valley. How triumphant! How justified in the things he has said and done as the LORD’s prophet. How successful as the people have returned to the LORD! Baal priests defeated and gone; he is home; that time away in Sidon now a distant memory. Can you imagine how he must have been savoring and anticipating the changed conditions of his life through the power of God? But Elijah was not able to savor the triumph recorded in Chapter 18 very long, for as we read in this passage from chapter 19, Jezebel, Ahab’s queen, when she learned what happened was not convinced at all that the LORD of Israel was indeed God. No, she is furious that the priest of Baal, the god she worshiped had been defeated. Instead of seeing YHWH’s power in the events at Mount Carmel, she focuses on Elijah as her enemy and vows to destroy him. In fear for his life, Elijah feels he must flee again. What a different outcome from what he must have been expecting. How depressing to still be in such danger. In contrast to his previous flight, when the LORD gave him instructions, Elijah flees on his own. Elijah being fearful runs away from the situation. In fact, he runs a very long way. He leaves Israel and goes into the southern kingdom of Judea to the southernmost city called Beersheba far away from Israel’s queen’s reach. He is accompanied by a servant for this part of the journey, but still is insecure and leaves the servant behind and goes even a day’s journey even further into the wilderness at the desert’s edge. In some sense, he is running not only from Jezebel, but also from the work the LORD has given him as a prophet. At day’s end when he has walked to the edge of the desert in the wilderness boundary of Judea, Elijah sits down under a solitary broom tree. A broom tree is actually more of a shrub than a tree and the solitary nature is an indication of the barrenness of the area where Elijah stops. The scene is one of emptiness, perhaps reflecting the internal emptiness Elijah is feeling deep inside. Here, Elijah makes another request of the LORD, but a very different one than that made at Carmel. Here Elijah says, “It is enough; now, O LORD, take away my life.” He does not actively seek to kill himself, but it seems that he is ready to give up his role as a prophet and seeks release from the duty. After this request, Elijah lies down and goes to sleep, which is often a metaphor for preparing to die. But as before, he is provided with food and water by an angel of the Lord. God has sent a messenger to minister to him who says he must eat or the journey he must make will be too much for him. The text does not explain what the journey is or why Elijah now gets up and travels further into the wilderness after asking for release, but he does. Elijah is again up and moving. He travels for forty days and forty nights and arrives at Mount Horeb, known as the Mountain of God, the mountain where God spoke to Moses from the burning bush, where the people received the Ten Commandments. Reaching the mountain and still unhappy with the events that have happened, Elijah goes into a cave to spend the night. He has not yet recovered from his discouragement, overcome his fear, or decided to resume his role. But he

has made some progress as when the Lord speaks to him in the cave, he does not repeat his request to have his life taken. The Lord asks Elijah this question: “What are you doing here, Elijah?” Or in other words: Why did you get up and flee? Why did you not trust? Why did you think I do not have more work for you? Elijah, does not answer the Lord. Instead, he responds with his complaint, his list of grievances against the people of Israel for not listening to his message. In effect, Elijah is telling God, I have done what you have asked of me and my reward is my life is threatened. The Lord hears the complaint, but does not directly respond. Instead, Elijah is told to go stand outside “before the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by.” The text next describes the passing of a powerful great wind capable of splitting the mountain and breaking rocks. But God was not in the wind. Then there was an earthquake, but the Lord was not there either, which was followed by a fire, but the Lord did not speak from the fire. These resembled the dramatic signs at Mount Carmel, but the Lord did not choose to appear to Elijah through them. Instead, after all this “sound and fury” there came what the NRSV calls the “sound of sheer silence” while the RSV terms it “a still small voice”. Whichever translation you prefer, the contrast is obvious. The Lord speaks not only in the spectacular, but also in the soft and gentle whisper. Elijah again is asked: “What are you doing here, Elijah?” Elijah’s response is the same. “I have been very zealous for the Lord, the God of hosts. The Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life to take it away.” The complaint doesn’t seem to have changed. Same question. Same response. Yet now the Lord gives Elijah several tasks—go to Damascus, anoint a king, and although not part of today’s reading, Elijah will anoint a new king over Israel and take on an apprentice, Elisha. Elijah may have thought he was going to give up, but the Lord still had work for him to do. Elijah may have thought that the spectacular and the dramatic was the only way to accomplish the Lord’s work in the world, but these tasks were given in a quiet whisper. And they were ordinary tasks which were done without great audiences, but they too were the Lord’s work. Nothing has really changed. Jezebel still seeks to kill Elijah. His life remains on the line. God refuses to grant him divine immunity to the hardships inherent in being a prophet to the world bent on silencing the word of the Lord. Nothing, on the surface, in outward circumstances, has changed. But Elijah goes back to face that from which he fled, equipped only with the gift of God’s presence and word, enough assurance to get him out of the cave, off the mountain, and through the wilderness, prepared to do the work of the Lord. Outward circumstances, no matter how desperate or dire, cannot define the attitudes and actions of those who’ve experienced the presence and call of the Most High God, so in an entirely difference sense...enough is enough....God’s presence with us is enough for all that we may face. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.