

1 Kings 19:3-8, 15-18 2 Corinthians 1:3-5

When Elijah saw how things were, he ran for dear life to Beersheba, far in the south of Judah. He left his young servant there and then went on into the desert another day's journey. He came to a lone 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.

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."

He got up, ate and drank his fill, and set out. Nourished by that meal, he walked forty days and nights, all the way to the mountain of God, to Horeb.

GOD said, "Go back the way you came through the desert to Damascus. When you get there anoint Hazael; make him king over Aram. Then anoint Jehu son of Nimshi; make him king over Israel. Finally, anoint Elisha son of Shaphat from Abel Meholah to succeed you as prophet. Anyone who escapes death by Hazael will be killed by Jehu; and anyone who escapes death by Jehu will be killed by Elisha. Meanwhile, I'm preserving for myself seven thousand souls: the knees that haven't bowed to the god Baal, the mouths that haven't kissed his image."

God Consoles Us

Have you ever had those days that you wished would just end? Miserable days. In my adolescence and young adulthood my worst days generally happened when romantic relationships that fell apart. Sentences like, "I think we should stop seeing each other," or "Let's just be friends" were devastating to me, because I was the sort of person who became totally emotionally dependent upon that other person, and when the relationship ended I felt completely lost.

Well I outgrew that phase of my life, fortunately, and I'm happy to say that Hyesun and I have a good relationship that is not based on need so much as it is on mutual support of one another. I may have a miserable day if Hyesun and I are not in harmony, but after 26 years we've come to a place where we are both willing to do whatever it takes to fix whatever may be broken in our relationship. So the misery that I used to suffer on account of relationships has faded.

But there is something that gets me upset...and it gets Hyesun upset too...and that is IDOLATRY.

What is idolatry? Idolatry has to be defined in terms of belief in God, which Hyesun and I both have, and you do too. Not everyone has such belief, but if you have it, and if you're a Christian, or a Muslim, or a practicing Jew, GOD IS YOUR PRIORITY. The Bible tells us we should love God with all our heart, all our mind, all our soul, and all our strength. And IDOLATRY is when we love anything else more than we love God. In effect we are making THAT THING our god.

Now I understand that people are confused about God. There are hundreds of churches on Staten Island, several mosques and a lot of synagogues not to mention Buddhist and Hindu temples and whatever other places of worship. And all of them believe in a God, and my interaction with leaders of many faith traditions has led me to believe that we are all generally worshiping the same God. But the more we understand about another church or another religion, the more differences we are able to identify, and sometimes those differences are huge. If you told some people that you go to Bethel United Methodist Church, there are some people who would roll their eyes and say, "Oh no! Don't go there!" And likewise if you told me that you were going to such-and-such a place to worship I might say the same thing: "Oh no! Don't go there!" This is one of the big reasons attendance at most places of worship in the United States is declining; people are confused and very often disillusioned by organized religion, and they would just as soon go to a movie as they would go to a worship service.

But what we all need to realize is we are all limited in our ability to truly love God and worship God. I believe that at its very best, Christianity is humanity's best religion, the one that comes closest to defining the true nature of God – a God who loves and cares for humanity so much that he/she enters our world to teach and to demonstrate that love as no mere human being ever could. That is why I am a Christian. But I look at the Christian Church and I see people misrepresenting God on a huge scale. People talk about Christian unity, and I struggle to stand beside some priests and pastors because I believe they have truly lost their way, though they may be very successful and influential, which to me is an even greater tragedy because it means that they have led a lot of their flocks astray. I think of Jesus looking out over the crowds in Galilee and feeling sadness, because, the Bible tells us, "They were like sheep without a shepherd."

And I think of Elijah in today's scripture lesson. Elijah was a man of God who lived in a time and place where the church had really gone astray. The king and queen of Israel were more into worshiping two different fertility gods than they were into worshiping the One True God. There's nothing wrong with fertility, but the people were so focused on sex that their churches were like houses of

prostitution. And those who spoke out against this practice and spoke out for true worship of the one true, loving God were being murdered by the royal police. That's where we find Elijah at the beginning of this scripture passage. He has just incited a revolt against the leaders of the religions that worshiped these fertility gods, causing the people to kill 450 of these false prophets. That enraged the queen who sent a posse out to kill Elijah who is running for his life, and now he is tired and feeling very alone, because in his mind he is the only true prophet in all of Israel. The country has gone to pot, and he feels so miserable that he tells God to just let him die there in the desert.

But God doesn't let him die. God first of all provides him with food and water, then God sends him on a mission, to anoint several kings and a prophet who will be Elijah's successor. Furthermore God tells him that the kings he anoints are going to kill those who follow in the worship of these false Gods, and that God has preserved 7,000 who have not fallen into idolatry. Lo and behold Elijah is not alone! And God has shown him, that as miserable as Elijah may be at the current time, the tide is turning against the false gods and the idolaters who are currently in charge of Israel.

And that's what I want to share with you today. You and I strive to love God with all our hearts and all our mind and all our souls and all our strength, yet we can see those who do not – those who instead of striving for the One true God strive for pleasure or power or wealth – and pleasure and power and wealth are IDOLS. We live in a world where so many people, both inside the church and outside the church, are IDOLATERS, and that can be discouraging for us, as it was for Elijah. But don't give up! Know that God will prevail, and that you and I are not alone in our yearning to serve the One true God. Furthermore, God feeds us to keep us strong for the task ahead of us. The fact that we are alive tells us that God is not through with us. We have tasks to accomplish. We have people to reach. We have opportunities to share God's love and God's truth with others who are either misguided or discouraged or both. We have a truth to proclaim: God so loves you that he sent Jesus to die for you that you might have new life in him. We proclaim that love in all that we say and all that we do, and we serve the One true God with all our hearts and minds and soul and strength, and we invite all others to do the same. Be encouraged. God does not leave us alone, and he will prevail.