

I've Had It!
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Introduction

This morning, once again, we engage with the Elijah story in the book of First Kings. I consider this one of the great soap operas of the Bible! Elijah has just bested four hundred prophets of Baal on the summit of Mt. Carmel. He has one-upped Ahab by outrunning the king's chariots on their return journey to Jezreel. Then Ahab tells Jezebel of Elijah's exploits, and she becomes enraged. She declares against Elijah in the typical words of an ancient Near Eastern oath: "So may the gods do to me, and more also, if I do not make your life like the life of one of them by this time tomorrow" (1 Kings 19:2). In other words, "May the gods take my life if I have not taken yours by this time tomorrow."

When Elijah heard Jezebel's words, he "was afraid; he got up and fled for his life."

Elijah's journey was not a short one. He traveled from Jezreel, located in the valley that lies between Mt. Carmel and the Sea of Galilee, to the southern city of Beersheba, a distance of about one hundred miles. While that distance does not seem all that great to the average person. But this journey was an enormous undertaking in a world of foot-travel with an occasional lift on a donkey's back. Yes, Elijah had had it! He's been fighting the system and the power structure and the religious establishment for a long time. He had been winning and making progress, when Jezebel stepped in with words and plans of revenge. Jezebel had a reputation for getting her way, so Elijah figured he'd better go as far from her reach as possible. Yes, he'd had it! He was burned out and it was survival time! Elijah didn't quite know what to do next, but he knew he had to bring his present life to a halt and figure some things out.

Examples of our "I've had it's"

Has this sort of thing ever happened to you? Have you found yourself dealing with some issue in life, and finally tired of it! It may be the demands of family, from which there seems to be no let up or vacation. It may be that, in the generosity of your heart, you have overcommitted yourself to good works in church and community? (I once had a woman friend in a community far from here who was on numerous town committees. She gave them 110 percent. Then after several years, she would call me up and say, "well, I've done it. I've resigned from everything!" That was a rather drastic step, but I didn't blame her. However, this hiatus in her life didn't last long. In less than 6 months she was again involved in some social action projects.

The process of God's intervention

The Elijah story is one of my favorites for giving us some insight into an approach to sorting out new directions in life. Let's look at the story and see what was going on.

Elijah goes on retreat

First, Elijah goes on retreat. He goes far away and up near the top of Mt. Horeb. He wants to be alone. I also think, he wants to be able to talk with God. He wants to get away from the distractions of his normal hectic and stressful life. He wants to get away from one of his problems named Jezebel!

He withdraws from society into the cave

At first, Elijah withdraws from everything. He goes into the cave. He doesn't even sit out on the brow of the mountain and become inspired by the view of the valley below. I suspect that he is deeply depressed. I think he needs to just unwind and sleep for several days. At some point God figures it's time to prod Elijah into action. It's ok to regroup, re-energize and rejuvenate, but eventually God will want Elijah to get back to work.

God calls him out to pay attention

God says the equivalent of “hey Elijah, wake up” “What are you doing “stuck there in the cave?” “Come out and talk to me!” So, reluctantly, and without much enthusiasm, Elijah drags himself out of the cave. He’s probably thinking, “every time I take another assignment from God, it’s a tough one and it gets me in trouble. Do I really want to know what’s next?” “Let’s see,” he thinks, “where do we usually find God? So he listens for the roar of an earthquake. No earthquake.. So he looks for fire and lighting. But it’s a sunny day. Then he begins to discern the voice of God in the silence. He finds God in the silence and listens. I think the important thing about listening to God in the silence, is that listening for the “still small voice of God” is hard work. It can be so easy to find the clues to advice of some kind, or maybe God’s advice. We can watch videos in this multimedia world. We can talk with our most trusted friends. We can read a self-help book. We can even read the Bible – a very good idea. Looking within, we can draw on our own personal private conversation with God - - that’s hard work. And the clue that this story gives is that such hard personal spiritual work can only be done well without the many distractions of everyday life.

One of the reasons I like to practice meditation is because the goal is to focus on the present moment. In the process of focusing on the present moment, one’s mind is challenged to stay away from memories of the past or plans for the future. Without these mental and emotional distractions, God has a chance to enter in through the cracks of our mental armor.

Personal Retreats

It is for this reason that you have already heard me talk about the importance of taking a personal retreat. It is for this reason that I suggest that the agenda is a conversation with God. Programmed retreats led by someone with a “magic bullet” set of ideas are out. Nice, but all that stuff gets in the way of the God conversation!

As I have said before, there are 3 basic questions to answer in your conversation with God:

1. What’s been happening in the last year? How did I get to this point in my life?
2. Where am I now? What’s going on? Pro and Con. Good and not so good?
3. Where is God leading me?

I also strongly suggest a retreat to a monastery. There are several critically important reasons for choosing a monastery. First, there is worship, and worship several times a day, so you are constantly coming back to God. In the monastery, there’s the constant environment, full of reminders of God’s presence. Thirdly, in some places, such as the Society of St. John the Evangelist monastery, they encourage the rule of silence among guests.

God gives Elijah a new job

Let us now return to Elijah’s story to see what God was telling him in his still small voice. This is what God told Elijah to do next:

“Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus; when you arrive, you shall anoint Hazael as king over Aram. Also you shall anoint Jehu son of Nimshi as king over Israel; and you shall anoint Elisha son of Shaphat of Abel-meholah as prophet in your place. “

God sent Elijah back to where he’d been, but he gave him a new job, and told him to retire from his present work, and commission a new prophet to take over. Sometimes, we go back to our life as it was, re-energized by our retreat, and affirmed in our current roles in life. But sometimes, God points us in a new direction. That is why it is so important to listen to God in the silence. That is why it is so important to listen to God through forms of revelation that may be new and unfamiliar. So, when I go on retreat at the New Skete Monastery, for

example, I live in the worship tradition of the Orthodox Church of America, and so I experience God's presence in a quite different way from worship here at the United Church. It is not that one way is better than the other. It is that they are different. And because they are different, they feed different spiritual needs. For we need a variety of spiritual food to have a wholesome diet.

Commendations to congregation

Now I have some suggestions for you as you take this story to heart and apply it to your own life. It may be that you cannot practically take the time to drive the 4 hours to New Skete or Silver Bay Association. However, you can find a quiet place outside your own house. You can come to this sanctuary on a week day. (Just let me know and I'll unlock the church and leave you alone with God.) I know from personal experience that there are some quiet nooks at the Norwich University library, where you can sit in a comfortable chair and relax. Where you can look at the mountains of God which surround Northfield, and be at peace. There, in quiet and calm, you can listen for the still small voice of God. There are some other options.

Perhaps you have a peaceful backyard, with a view of flowers and trees. But if you go there, don't bring your cellphone or laptop. If the phone rings, let the answering machine take care of it.

Then, listen and pray. Take a notebook, and write down my three basic questions and begin to answer them.

Perhaps God will affirm the path you are already on. Then you are assured with the blessings of God, and with true spiritual confidence, that you can continue on your present spiritual path.

However, God may have another path. Then look for guidance for the ways to transition and begin the new journey.

May these summer days bring you many opportunities to listen gently for the still small voice of God. Amen.