

## Down and Out and On the Run

1 Kings 19:1-18

[A sermon preached by the Rev. Stan Gockel at the First  
Presbyterian Church of Portland, Indiana on June 19, 2016]

### I

Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church in New York City is unique in that over the last 110 years the church has been served by just four pastors, all of them outstanding preachers and Christian leaders:

Henry Sloane Coffin, from 1905 until 1926;

George Arthur Buttrick, from 1927 until 1955;

David H.C. Read, from 1956 until 1989;

and Fred R. Anderson, from 1991 until his retirement, just over a year ago.

So let me share a story that Fred Anderson told.

His predecessor, David Read was in his last week of life, and so Pastor Anderson visited him in the hospital and was surprised to hear this noted Christian preacher say,

“After preaching and believing in the resurrection all of these years,  
suddenly I find myself being filled with questions and moments of doubt.”

Fred Anderson did what any good pastor would do for a dying parishioner:  
he read from the psalms:

*“God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble;  
therefore I will not fear.”*

*“I will lift up my eyes to the hills,  
from whence does my help come?  
My help comes from the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth.”*

And, of course, the passage from Mark's gospel when the father of the epileptic boy cries out to Jesus,  
*"Lord, I believe; help my unbelief."*

And Fred Anderson said,

*"The point is, sooner or later, no matter how rock-solid we think our faith is, something in life is going to come along leaving us **down and out and on the run.**"*

## II

*Down and out and on the run.*

Have you ever found yourself in a place like that?

Even the strongest believer confronts moments when what has seemed rock solid,  
 what has sustained us all our lives,  
 suddenly evaporates.

What happens when your courage fails and your assurance of faith collapses?

What was a warning sign and required additional medical tests is no longer a warning; it is reality, and it must be dealt with—  
 surgery,  
 chemo therapy,  
 radiation;  
 all three?

You meet with your financial advisor in order to plan for retirement;  
 you think all your investments are solid,  
 but then the stock market collapses and your thoughts of retirement  
 are out the window.

Life has a way of presenting us with moments and events that can shake our certainties about the absolutes in our lives,  
 leaving us down and out and on the run.

Such was the case with the prophet Elijah.

In today's lesson from 1 Kings 19, this most fearless of prophets is anything but.

This moment in the career of Elijah—  
 fleeing into the wilderness in fear of the wrath of Queen Jezebel—  
 seems so uncharacteristic of him.

Was there ever a more courageous figure in all of the Old Testament,  
 save Moses himself?

Elijah was the prophet of all prophets,  
 the prophet who stood up to King Ahab,  
     called an end to the drought,  
     brought the widow's son back to life,  
 and triumphed over the 450 prophets of Baal.

There on Mt. Carmel, Elijah challenged them to a contest to prove just who was  
 God, Baal or Yahweh.

You remember the story from 1 Kings 18, how...

Altars were built for both Baal and Yahweh and bulls were slaughtered and  
 placed on each altar.

The prophets of Baal spent all day praying and pleading,  
     crying and flagellating themselves,  
 begging for Baal to bring down fire on the altar.

But Baal failed to show.

1 Kings 18:29 records, *“As midday passed, they raved on until the time of  
 the offering of the oblation, but there was no voice, no answer, and no  
 response.”*

### III

*“No voice, no answer, and no response.”*

That sums up the false gods we are constantly tempted to place our trust in—  
 the god of money,  
     the god of career success,  
     the god of political power,  
     corporate power,

and religious power,  
 the god of our own willfulness—  
 going our way instead of God's—  
 the god our own hedonistic pleasures.

And in America, in particular, we continue to sell our souls and the lives of our children to the god of the almighty firearm.

Every time there is a mass shooting,  
 as happened in Orlando last Sunday morning,  
 it starts all over.

The NRA apologists and their fellow travelers trot out the same canards—

“Guns don’t kill people; people do.”  
 (But a person with an AR-15 can kill a hell of a lot of them).

“The only way to stop a bad guy with a gun is a good guy with a gun.”  
 (How about not letting the bad guy get the gun in the first place?)

“If we outlaw guns, only outlaws will have them.”  
 (Data from other countries indicates that more restrictions on gun ownership mean fewer gun deaths.)

I am not opposed to gun ownership; in fact, my former church was the only one in the presbytery with its own rifle team.

But I wonder, when will we the people of this country rise up and demand an end to the NRA hegemony over our government and our society in its approach to gun violence?

The god of the almighty firearm is just one of the many false gods that, like Baal of old, promise much but deliver only futility, destruction, and death.

And when we are down and out and on the run and turn to these false gods for help and support in our time of need, inevitably there is...

“no voice, no answer, and no response.”

#### IV

Then comes Elijah’s turn

He instructs the people to drench the altar with water,  
not once but three times.

Then Elijah prays and calls on the name of the Lord,  
fire falls from heaven,  
and the sacrifice is consumed.

Thereupon, Elijah instructs the people to seize the prophets of Baal,  
drag them to the Wadi Kishon,  
and there kill all 450 of them—  
which they did.

As King Ahab recounts the massacre to his Queen, Jezebel, she wastes no time in  
announcing that Elijah will soon meet the same fate at her hand as did her  
prophets.

Now we would expect Elijah,  
God's boldest mouth-piece,  
the one Old Testament scholar Thomas Dozeman called the "Rambo"  
of all prophets,  
to stand up to Jezebel.

But what happens?

Elijah's knees buckle.

The Rambo of prophets has a severe failure of nerve.

[By the way, if you recall the "Rambo" movies, John Rambo is a really  
tough dude, but also a really troubled one.]

So Elijah,  
filled with fear and foreboding,  
goes on the run.

He heads south to Beersheba, on the southern edge of Judah.

Leaving his servant there,  
he runs further,

a full day's journey into the southern wilderness.

There he finds a broom tree—  
 a shrub, really—  
 with enough protection from the hot desert sun to shelter him as he  
 lies down to die.

V

Let that sink in for a moment.

Here is the man who will ultimately be carried off to heaven in a fiery chariot,  
 God's champion of champions,  
 running in fear to the point of exhaustion,  
 collapsing under a shrub in complete and utter defeat.

And in his delirium of massive fatigue we can hear Elijah praying,

*"It is enough, O Lord, now take away my life,  
 for I am no better than my fathers."*

It makes our moments of doubt and passing fears seem infantile.

Yes, except when we find ourselves caught tightly in their grip.

That is when our doubts are the most real  
 and our fears are the most powerful thing in the world.

It is not unlike depression.

Have any of you had times in your life when you struggled with depression?

I'm guessing most of us have.

Sometimes you fall so deep into depression that it is impossible to shake on your  
 own and you cannot envision any other state in life.

You find it impossible to believe that anything can help.

It is impossible to even think of a future.

This is precisely where Elijah is—  
 slumbering in the valley of the shadow of death.

Suddenly, he is awakened by a messenger—  
 that's what an angel is, a divine messenger.

The angel points to a cake baking on hot stones and a jar of water next to them,  
 and commands Elijah to get up and eat.

Elijah does, but no sooner has he washed down the bread with the last swallow of  
 water than he is back fast asleep.

After more rest, the angel appears a second time with the same command:  
 "Get up and eat."

But now there is a new twist—  
 "otherwise the journey will be too much for you."

Journey! You mean there is more?

Yes, there is.

Note that it is in the wilderness,  
 when Elijah thinks he is at the lowest and last moments of his life—  
 that God's messenger appears,  
     first with sustenance,  
             and then with the word that there is more that God has in  
             store for him—  
             and for us!

You see, Elijah was no more the master of his own life than we are.

And often, it is only when we reach the end of our veritable rope,  
 when we find ourselves in the wilderness of defeat and despair,  
 that we are finally able to hear such an encouraging, life-sustaining word.

How many times must we go through such moments to learn this truth?

Too many, I fear.

## VI

Elijah does as he is told: he obeys the angel's instructions and eats the food that is provided.

It must have been some kind of super-carb, calorie-loaded meal,  
for we are told,

*"...he went in the strength of that food, forty days and forty nights to Horeb,  
the mountain of God."*

And again we see the significance of the biblical number 40:

Moses spent 40 days on Mt. Sinai;  
Israel spent 40 years wandering in the wilderness;  
later Jesus will spend 40 days in the wilderness being tempted by the devil;  
and here Elijah travels 40 days and nights to Mt. Horeb.

What some Old Testament texts call Horeb, especially Deuteronomy, others call Sinai.

Mt. Sinai is where Moses first encountered the Lord at the burning bush  
and where he later received the Ten Commandments.

This is the place where God makes God's self known,  
where God makes covenant with the people and gives laws and instructions.

Elijah climbs up to the top of Horeb and holds up in a cave.

Although no longer ready to die,  
he is still down and out and in hiding.

But there is no hiding from the God of Israel.

In the apparent safety of that cave,  
the Word of the Lord comes to him:  
"Elijah, what are you doing here?"

It is less a question than a judgment, and Elijah knows it.

Note that his response is both defensive and self-pitying.

*“I have been very zealous for the LORD, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I, I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away.”*

We might call this Elijah’s prophetic pout.

“I, I alone am left.” Sound familiar?

Have you had moments of hardship in which you were convinced that you were the only one to bear such trouble,  
that nobody else was facing what you had to face?

The truth of the matter is that sometimes, we like the darkness of the cave.

Sometimes we want to surround ourselves in our own version of Elijah’s prophetic pout, and feel sorry for ourselves.

But God won’t stand for it.

“Go,” says God, “get out of this cave and stand before me. I am about to pass by.”

And so Elijah moves to the mouth of the cave.

As he does, all of the physical manifestations of God’s presence appear:  
wind, earthquake, fire—  
each a classic response of creation to the glory and power of God’s presence.

But, God is not to be found in any of them.

Finally, Elijah feels a gentle breeze,  
and then comes the sound of sheer silence.

The phrase in v. 12 that reads in the NRSV “...the sound of sheer silence” has been translated in various ways.

In the King James Version it is “a still, small voice.”

In the Living Bible it is “the sound of a gentle whisper.”

In the Common English Bible, "...there was a sound. Thin. Quiet."

In the Message, "...a gentle and quiet whisper."

The point here is that God speaks,  
 but not in the usual ways—  
     not in the wind, earthquake, or fire—  
     but in a gentle, quiet whisper.

You have to quiet your heart and your soul in order to hear such a sound.

The stage is now set and Elijah knows it.

The God he serves,  
     the God who has spoken through him to kings, queens, false prophets and  
     God's people,  
     is about to speak again.

Wrapping his face in his mantel, Elijah stands at the mouth of the cave and listens.

As he does, he discovers the One who has called him,  
     who has nurtured him,  
     who has cared for him,  
         who has worked and spoken through him,  
             is sending him back into the world to take actions  
             that will change the course of history.

Elijah is not alone,  
     as he had thought,  
     nor is he God's only faithful servant left.

For there are seven thousand others who have not bowed the knee to Baal.

The work God has for Elijah to do is critical to what God is up to in the world.

God is sending him back to set into motion a series of events that will ultimately bring about the downfall of Ahab, Jezebel and their entire dynasty.

## VII

Sometimes in our most difficult moments we discover,

like Elijah,  
 that God is at work for purposes that we may not yet understand.

And it means bearing the darkness and the silence and the doubt,  
 confident that against all signs to the contrary,  
 God is walking with us through this valley of the shadow of death;  
 God will not give up on us,  
 even when we feel like giving up on God.

This is what faith in God means:  
 hoping against hope that God is there and will never abandon us.

As Fred Anderson listened to David Read's expressions of fear and doubt, he thought back to his former church and a parishioner named Harry, who had been a bricklayer all of his life; small, but wiry and strong.

He had been a member of the men's Bible Class for fifty years.

Harry's diabetes had finally gotten the best of him  
 and now he was about to have both legs amputated.

When Pastor Anderson visited him before the surgery to pray with him, he said,  
 "Harry, are you afraid?"

And Harry said, "No; I've trusted the Lord all these years; now is no time to stop."

And so Fred Anderson was able to say to David H.C. Read, one of the greatest preachers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century,

*"David, you've trusted in the Lord all these years;  
 now is no time to stop!"*

Hoping against hope is what it means to trust in the Lord,  
 especially when you are down and out and on the run.

Amen.

Sources:

Fred R. Anderson, "Down and Out and on the Run," sermon preached June 20, 2010, New York City, retrieved from <http://www.mapc.com/worship/sermons/2010/06/20/down-and-out-and-on-the-run>.