

Psalm 42            A Gentle Reminder  
June 23, 2019

The story of Elijah and his relationship with Ahab and Jezebel is very challenging. Everything goes wrong and he is forced to run for his life. He escapes out into the wilderness which is, well, the wilderness, only slightly safer than Jezebel's wrath.

If one is attentive, one can predict where the story is headed.

Elijah as escaped Jezebel and her husband. He is frustrated and discouraged. It is not only the King and Queen that have opposed him, but the whole people of Israel, the Northern Kingdom. He has had enough. "I have had enough," he says, "take my life, I am no better than my ancestors." And then, exhausted, he fell asleep.

#### God's Care

Interestingly, God does not offer him a stinging rebuke or a severe punishment for having run away, for being unwilling to die at Jezebel's hand but begging for God to take his life. Instead, God sent an angel who awakened him and gave him something to eat. This happened twice which indicates God's patience, waiting for Elijah to be restored.

One can see where this is headed.

Then, after having given Elijah some time to regain his strength the wilderness itself becomes a violent storm with wind and earthquake and fire, but God was not in the wind and the earthquake and the fire. Finally there was a whisper, and a conversation.

One can see where this is going.

After a hard question, "what are you doing here? He talks to God and says that he has been obedient and done all that he has been asked to do, only to see everything come to wreck and ruin.

Then we come to these words:

"Go back the way you came . . ." Go back!

#### The Lion King

I am reminded of the great Disney story about the Lion King, which has been remade this summer as a live action movie, for those of you who are interested. The young cub Simba was traumatized and like Elijah forced to run for his life.

Also, like Elijah, he went out into the wilderness where he was befriended by a meerkat and a warthog, who helped him to live a life of relative ease and pleasure, "Hakuna Matata," it means "no worries." (even though it flies in the face of the fact that there are, of course, many things to worry about in the jungle).

It is clear throughout the whole story, to those who are attentive, that Simba is going to have to face the same

music as Elijah, that because of the trouble left behind in his homeland and he being the rightful king, he will also have to go back.

There are two facets of this story that are important for the spiritual life; one is that the time in the wilderness away from the trouble is not merely a vacation, it is a time of contending with God, a time of growth, learning lessons, gaining strength. The other is the inevitability of the return, going back to the danger, the struggle, the place of vulnerability.

### Psalm 42

It is the 42nd Psalm that helps us understand the time of nurture and renewal. It begins with an expression of what is supposed to be the quintessential human desire. It states right there in simple language what ought to be the driving force of all human striving.

“As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. Where can I go and meet with God?”

And the images set forth in this psalm reflect the heart-wrenching results of placing something other than God in the center of life.

“My tears have been my food, day and night . . . why are you so downcast, O my soul, why so disturbed within me? . . . Deep calls to deep in the roar of your waterfalls; All your waves and breakers have swept over me . . . Why must I go about mourning,

oppressed by the enemy? . . . My bones suffer *mortal agony*.” Whew!

One can almost imagine Elijah out in the wilderness speaking those words. One can maybe imagine ourselves . . .

### A Little About the Wilderness

Let us take for granted that though for Elijah, and Jesus, and others, the wilderness was a real place where they lived for awhile, at a time of great spiritual, and sometimes physical crisis. For most of us it is a metaphor for the vulnerability, the danger, the sense of threat that accompanies life all the way through even when we are home and safely tucked into our suburban beds. It is the general state of things.

From time to time the vulnerability intensifies, and in a variety of ways; family crisis, financial crisis, trouble at work, disease, accidents, war, etc. And also from time-to-time we are exhausted by it all, burned out, in need of a rest, some sanctuary, more than a vacation.

Often we try to change our circumstances if we can. Getting away leads to an encounter with God, somewhere deep down knowing where it is all going to lead. And that is, back into the fray, for that is where life is lived; or else we diminish ourselves as people of faith, as people at all.

### A Beautiful Prayer

After the heart-wrenching psycho-therapeutic couch talk where the psalmist confesses pain and doubt and does the liberating complaining like singing the blues (sad songs say so much, that is an old Elton John song and I think of him because he also composed the music for the Lion King, ie. Hakuna Matata), There is a gentle reminder worthy of our attention. It begins with a question:

“Why are you so downcast, O my soul? Why so disturbed within me?” And then it gives the gentle answer, so easy to miss, to overlook:

“Put your hope in God, . . . ,

It is almost too gentle to hear. Down the years of reading devotionals and praying everyday, of church services and sermons by the thousands, we are still able, maybe even prone, to put our hope in other things:

In our own abilities to work and make a living and solve problems,  
In the health of our local, which means the world’s economy, our jobs, the financial system,  
In the government, even though we complain about it all the time, yet;  
The power comes on when we flip the switch, the water comes on when we turn the knob. The schools are open, as well as the roads . . . we come to trust them and take them for granted, the world is open for business.

We put our hopes in our families, the ones we love and come to be unable to live without.

And we end up anxious nonetheless, sometimes even to the point of illness, neurosis and sometimes psychosis, traumatized by life with its precarious vulnerability.

Then the words come quietly, when we have turned to contend with God, after pitching a fit or two, and some rest, taking in a little sustenance. “What are you doing here?”

All these other sources of security are real, but not ultimate, and that is why when we trust them and hope in them we end up all out of sorts and conflicted, torn asunder by our own anxiety.

Maybe the first stunning realization is that even with all of the religious wrappings we have put around our lives we have still put our hopes in the other things, and that is why the opposition we sometimes face, the storm with the wind and earthquake and fire, are so disquieting. “Put your hope in God.”

Now then, go back the way you came. You will find the way has already been prepared, the replacements are in place. Go back to the life you were given and to which you belong, at least for now. “For I will yet praise . . . my savior and God.

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