

The Broom Tree (1 Kings 19:1-15a)

Elijah, as you can tell, finds himself in a world of trouble. Queen Jezebel has sent word to him that she's about to lower the boom. As a matter of fact, Jezebel has taken a solemn oath to relieve both Elijah **and** the world of his meddling self.

Upon hearing this, Elijah goes on the lam, hoping against hope that he can outrun the troubles that pursue him. But his problems are as relentless as **he** is desperate. Finally, tired of the chase, he goes out into the wilderness and prays, "Lord, I've run as far as I can run; I've endured as much as I'm likely to endure; the race is finished. Please, if you have any mercy, bring me home. And if home is not a place I'm worthy of coming, at least get me out of **here**." Alone in the wasteland, Elijah prepares to die.

But to understand how Elijah finds himself under the broom tree, looking to check out his otherwise bleak existence, we need to take a moment to see how he's gotten here.

Back at the end of chapter 16, we get a short synopsis of the way things are going for the Northern Kingdom of Israel. Ahab, son of Omri, has become king. He marries a gentile woman named Jezebel. Jezebel worships the fertility gods, Baal and Asherah—annoying, as one might imagine, the God of Israel.

Consequently, Elijah the Tishbite arrives on the scene with a word from the Lord about the ramifications of Ahab's poor decision-making skills in opening Israel up to the worship of other gods: "As the LORD the God of Israel lives, before whom I stand, there shall be neither dew nor rain these years, except by my word" (1 Kings 17:1). God has shut up the heavens against Israel, and Elijah is the unfortunate bearer of bad tidings.

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After three years of drought, God comes to Elijah and says, "Go, present yourself to Ahab; I will send rain upon the earth." Clearly, Elijah has not been the toast of the town. In fact, Ahab has been hunting him for three years.

So when Elijah finally shows up on Ahab's doorstep, the first thing Ahab says is, "Aha! Is it you, you troubler of Israel?"

To which Elijah replies, "I have not troubled Israel; but you have, and your father's house, because you have forsaken the commandments of the LORD and followed the Baals."

After this little impertinence, Elijah takes center stage in the well-known Sunday School story about the contest to bring fire from heaven. Remember that one?

Elijah challenges 450 prophets of Baal to lay a bull on an altar on top of Mt. Carmel and to pray to their god, imploring their god to speak.

Narrator: He does not, in fact, speak.

Elijah mocks them, "Maybe he's asleep. Maybe he's gone for a walk. Call him again; maybe he hasn't checked his voicemail." And on and on and on.

All this wailing goes on for most of the day until Elijah finally tells the people to lay a bull on the altar of the LORD, wet it down, and stand back. He prays, and fire comes from heaven, consuming the burnt offering, the wood, the stones, and the dust. This, apparently, being proof enough, Elijah has all the false prophets executed and tells Ahab that it's about to rain.

The problem is that the prophets belong to Ahab's wife, Jezebel, and she wasn't in on the decision to have them all rubbed out.

Accordingly, and suffice it to say, she is more than a little put out with Elijah. Elijah heads for the hills, and she sends a messenger to tell him that she's going to make his life, as Thomas Hobbes said, "nasty, brutish, and short," which is how Elijah comes to find himself under the broom tree, contemplating an early retirement.

Upon reading this story, one question that arises for me is the fairly obvious one, "How does a person get to the point where even being wiped from the face of the earth looks preferable to spending another day of pain in it?"

Ever get that far down? Ever just wander out into the wilderness, sit down under the broom tree, and wait to die?

The phone rings, and you get up from the floor where you've been playing Uno with your granddaughter. You don't want to

answer the phone, but you know you can't take another night of not knowing. Your palms are slippery against the hard plastic as the voice on the other end of the line tells you, "We've gotten back the results of your biopsy."

"And? What did they say?"

"I'd really rather talk to you about it in my office. Can you come in tomorrow?"

You call your son to pick up your granddaughter and sit in your living room beneath the broom tree.

The car finally pulls into the driveway. Your spouse, whom you haven't seen for what seems like days, steps out of the car and walks up the sidewalk. You knew it was bad, even if you successfully avoided admitting it to yourself for so long. There

weren't many ***fights*** anymore—just a lot of silence. But the last fight you had felt big.

The door opens. You see the face you've seen walk through the door a thousand times before. You weren't expecting flowers or a new table saw, but you sure didn't think you'd get this: "Honey, I've been doing some thinking. This just isn't working. I think we need to spend some time apart."

You exhale as you collapse into the Lazy Boy in the shadow of the broom tree.

You're finishing up that last bit of work before taking off for the weekend when your secretary says the words no parent ever wants to hear, "The police are on line one for you."

A thousand things race through your mind as you reach to punch the button marked "Line 1," and strangely enough, none of them

are good. What now? What could it possibly be now? We've done the best we know how.

"Hello?"

"Yes. Hello. This is Officer Jefferson. I'm sorry to be the one to have to tell you this, but there's been an accident."

Your head falls into your hands, and out of the corner of your eye, you glance at the broom tree planted outside your office window next to the rhododendron.

Ever feel like just curling up in a ball and ceasing to exist? The fear in the pit of Elijah's stomach is a fear known to too many of us. Elijah goes to God in the wilderness and says, "I've done the best I know how. And now this? I can't do this anymore."

Elijah goes to God seeking, if not redress of his grievances, then at least a way out. If you're not going to get rid of Ahab and Jezebel, at least do me the service of not keeping me around to see what they'll do to me when they **find** me.

Ever feel that way? God, if you can't fix my world, then at least take me out of it.

If you can't remove the source of my anxiety and pain, then at least take **me** away from **it**. I don't think I can do it anymore. I have neither the energy nor the stamina nor perhaps even the faith to stand any longer.

Or, as Elijah puts it, "It is enough." His cry is all the more poignant and real because we've cried it ourselves. I think we've all gotten to the point where we've had "enough," and going on in the same way feels impossible.

But how does God answer Elijah's prayer?

What is it that God does in the face of his righteous complaint?

Not a whole lot.

Elijah no longer has any desire to deal with Ahab and Jezebel, but not only are they still **out** there, they're also seeking his life with all the crazed determination of a five-year-old trying to figure out how to get the cookies Mom hid on top of the fridge.

Alright then, if God won't deal with Ahab and Jezebel, at least take care of Elijah by taking him **home**—by taking him anywhere that every waking moment isn't filled with the terrifying thoughts of finding himself as the star in his own nightmare. Which is to say, "Lord, if you can't take care of my misery, at least put me out of it."

So, fine, But what does God **do**? How does God deal with the very real trauma Elijah faces?

God tells Elijah, "Go out and stand on the mountain before the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by."

Doesn't that seem odd to you? Here Elijah is, all done in, ready to sell the farm, bewildered, desperate, defeated, asking for a little help, a little relief—and all God can do is say, "Go on over there, I'm fixin' to make an appearance."

Do you see?

God doesn't do for Elijah what God often doesn't do for us.

God doesn't say, "I'll fix it."

God doesn't say, "I'll get you out of it."

All God says is, "I'll stand by your side when standing is the last thing you think you can do."

The key to understanding these verses is recognizing that they fail to make any visible difference in Elijah's situation. **After** the theophany, Elijah is in exactly the same place as before, complaining in exactly the same words.

God's presence doesn't promise that everything will suddenly be all better in the way that seems best to us. It doesn't straighten out Jezebel (She still wants to nail his hide to the wall). And perhaps just as importantly, God's passing by apparently doesn't even give Elijah a peace he didn't know before.

Elijah goes to God seeking relief, a remedy for the great weariness he feels in his bones. He wants God to change the world, but all God offers to do is change **him**. Presumably, being

in God's presence is of greater value to us in our pain and despair than any stop-gap measures or dime-store remedies we could conjure up on our own.

We often want God to fix the world or take us **out** of it, but what God offers to do is to stand with us **in** it.

Theologian Amy Oden writes:

*What is it about wilderness that is so fertile? First, it is a **no-place**. The wilderness is a spacious, blank page without agenda or expectation. It can be disorienting and uncomfortable, but it can also be a place of possibility, where the old ways no longer work and the "next thing" hasn't yet consumed our vision. The spareness of a **no-place** creates a spaciousness, unburdened by over-stimulation.*

Wilderness can also be fertile as a place of unknowing. We get the sense from Elijah that he's done all he can in service to the Lord and now, unable to see a way forward, a future, he is resigned. We need to be willing to be in such places of not-knowing, where there are no easy answers or quick fixes. Again, while this can be uncomfortable, it can also be freeing. Sitting with our un-knowing can open us up for Holy Presence. Rather than getting busy planning, managing, figuring it all out, we can become simple, aware of all we do not know, and surrender to this spacious wilderness, trusting God to meet us here.

The situation faced by Elijah and the situations we often face are neither singular nor unique—pain, fear, and disappointment are universal. But what those situations **point** to is singular and unique.

There once was a time when the whole world had played out its hand. Humanity's isolation was real and without hope. God heard the cries of despair, and instead of fixing it or even taking humanity out of the world, God came and sat down under the broom tree with us as a wild-eyed carpenter from Nazareth.

God heard our cry and came to us, born of a virgin, born in a manger—a Jewish revolutionary, nailed to the broom tree in the name of political expediency—**that's** God's idea of fixing things.

God's remedy rarely fixes things the way **we** would if **we** were running the show.

God's remedy hardly even **looks** like a remedy at all—and it's rarely the one we ask for—but the remedy God provides is **always** the one we need.

Because if God comes to sit beside you ... you'll soon realize there's no safer place, no more creative space than under the broom tree.

-Amen.