

“The Bravest Thing”

Based on 1 Kings 19:1-15a and Luke 8:26-39

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Rev. Dr. Kevin Orr

Elijah had just been a hero. If we looked back to 1 Kings 18, we would have heard the story of how Elijah mocked the god Baal and his prophets. He concocted a showdown between God and Baal. He told the prophets to build an altar, put wood on it, and then call on Baal to send down fire to light up the wood. They prayed, cried out, cut themselves, and just carried on while Elijah trash talked. “Maybe Baal is busy! Maybe he is asleep!” Finally, all the prophets gave up. It was Elijah’s turn. He built the altar, piled wood on it, and dug a trench around the altar. Then he had the prophets of Baal pour water on the wood and keep pouring until the trench was overflowing with water. Then, with one simple prayer, he asked God to send down fire and instantly flames fell down from heaven, turning the soaked wood into a raging inferno. Having mocked Baal and his prophets, Elijah then had executed all 450 prophets of Baal. A grisly scene to be sure. And a humiliating spectacle for worshippers of Baal. Elijah surely stood tall and proud.

The word, of course, got back to Queen Jezebel. She did not receive the news well. Instead, she made it clear that she wanted Elijah hunted down, seized, and treated just like he had the prophets of Baal. He was a wanted man set for execution.

All of a sudden, Elijah the brave became Elijah the fearful. In a panic, he fled from the land of the Queen, getting himself as far away from her as possible. He feared for his life. But not just that, he fears for God. What I mean is, Elijah had it in his head that he was the last of the prophets of God. And if he was killed, there would no longer be any prophet God could work through. God’s purposes would be permanently frustrated. God, in a way, would be powerless. Elijah thought he was indispensable. So he ran, not only for his own sake, but for God’s sake.

Before we break down what was in Elijah’s head, let us consider this: if Elijah had known in advance what the consequences would be for his brave actions against Baal, would he have done it? Surely Elijah

would have known that not everyone would have been happy about what he did or suddenly given up on Baal and converted to worshipping God. But perhaps it didn't cross his mind that his brave deed would give him a death sentence. If he had known what he was risking beforehand, I am not sure if he would have done what he did. I don't think Elijah meant to put his life on the line and, as he sees it, put the fulfillment of God's purposes on the line. He thought he was too indispensable to take such a risk. What he experienced was unintended consequences of his actions.

We all know what it is like to experience unintended consequences. This common experience has even been turned into a proverb: no good deed goes unpunished. You thought you were helping someone out and then find out you have gotten way over your head. The person you are helping has needs way beyond what you can manage. The sacrifice is too great. Your intentions were good but then in the process of helping out you get in trouble or someone chastises you. You choose to do the right thing, to take a stand for justice, and lose friends because they don't understand or they disagree with your position. And you didn't see that coming. How many times have we asked ourselves, "If I knew then what I know now, I wouldn't have done that, even though my intentions were good." Sometimes people have been burned so bad by unintended consequences that they become hesitant to ever get involved in helping others or really doing anything until they are convinced they know how things will turn out before starting. They don't want any surprises. They want to know exactly how everything is going to go, a guaranteed result, fool proof. And if there is no guarantee that everything will go according to plan then they will not even try. Unintended consequences can really set us back. It's much harder to be brave and daring when you have been burned in the past. Playing it safe becomes much more appealing.

In his fear, Elijah runs away. But, of course, he can't run away from God. Look at how God is there for him in his running. God sends an angel to provide food for Elijah to sustain him in his flight. God even tells him where he can go to hide out. Elijah is told to go to Mount Horeb, which is where Moses received the Ten Commandments, and to hide in a cave there. No matter what God may think about Elijah's

perceived indispensability, God knows the state that Elijah is in. God acknowledges his fear, even his panic. So God's grace kicks in, providing Elijah what he needs while he is in his panicked state.

How great is God's grace. I suspect all of us have gone through times of running. Maybe we are running from doing something we know we should do, or making a decision we know we need to make. We find ourselves running from responsibilities. Sometimes we have even been running from God. Whenever this happens in our lives, the good news is that in fact we can't run from God. And that is a good thing. God is always at work in our lives, doing everything God can to provide for our well-being. Of course, that doesn't mean bad things don't happen to us. But God does provide the means to keep us going. God responds to whatever state we are in. God responds in a number of ways. Maybe God puts certain people in our lives that can support us in our struggle and fears. Or God gives us inner prompts to remind us that we are still loved, that no matter what happens things will be ok. Maybe God will lead us to a place where we do check out for a while, to go on retreat or to talk to a therapist, whatever we need to overcome our fears and do what we know we need to do. Whatever is going on in our lives, God is still present and at work to provide for us what we need. God's grace is sufficient.

Once Elijah arrives at his hideout, his place of retreat, God asks him an excellent question. "What are you doing here?" Mind you, this is the place where God instructed him to go. But I don't think the question is about geography. The question God is asking Elijah has to do with why Elijah was running in the first place. It is sort of like the question that any of us who have seen a counselor have had to answer: "What brings you here to see me?". God wants Elijah to name the state of his mind, what has motivated him to run away.

This is a great question to sit with whenever you have an opportunity to go to your hideout, to a place of retreat. You can call it retreat, or vacation, or taking a mental health day, whatever you want to call it. We all need times where we can step away from our daily lives, to go on retreat, so we can breathe, so we can be still for a minute, so we can reflect on our lives. And to start that time of reflection God has

given us a great prompt: “What are you doing here?” Once again, God provides Elijah and us just what we need. God’s grace is sufficient.

Elijah’s answer reveals the state of his mind. He talks of how he fears for his life, that he is the only prophet left, and if he is killed, it’s all over. There is no hope. He identifies himself as indispensable. Without him, God’s project will all fall apart. We may laugh at Elijah’s sense of self importance, that everything depends on him. But let’s not be too hard on him. Haven’t we all been there? I know I have. I have worried that if I’m not around, if I’m not in charge, then it’s all going to fall apart. I have sometimes felt indispensable. Have you? I think all of us have been in Elijah’s state of mind from time to time. I humbly suggest that when we have felt indispensable it reveals a lack of trust in the power of God. Elijah had slipped into thinking that God could not accomplish God’s purposes without him. He lacked trust in God’s ability to make adjustments and find other people to get the job done. I think that in most situations when we are tempted to feel like we are indispensable, it reveals a lack of trust, trust in the capacity of others and even a lack of trust in God to see things through.

At the same time, let’s be honest. Elijah is a big deal. He is an amazing prophet. We saw what God could do through him when he alone faced down 450 prophets of Baal. He worked miracles. God even used him to bring a young boy back to life. I mean Elijah is one of the greatest prophets of all time. The loss of his life really would be a big deal. Yes, how he responds to God’s question does seem a bit overblown, the notion that everything depends on him. Still, Elijah’s loss would leave a huge hole to fill. So it is certainly reasonable for Elijah to fear for his life and not be cavalier about that. It is reasonable for him to recognize the risk that he is under and how that would affect God’s purposes from being fulfilled.

That said, and how it appears Elijah has some doubts about God’s power, God doesn’t let Elijah stay on retreat for long. He gives Elijah an assignment. In spite of his fears and uncertainties, Elijah still has work to do. He still has responsibilities. He is still God’s prophet. He can’t stay in his hideout forever. He must go to the wilderness of Damascus to anoint someone to be a king. Duty calls.

And so, Elijah goes. And as he heads out to the wilderness of Damascus, let me first note that this task continues to keep him far away from Jezebel. So it's not like God is sending Elijah back to where he came from. He has work to do but he will remain in a safe location. God knows the risks to Elijah's life as well! But also, Elijah does not yet know what else God has planned. He does not know how God will arrange for Jezebel to die before she can get to Elijah. And he doesn't know how God will set it up for Elijah to literally pass his mantle to Elisha who will continue the prophetic work. Without knowing how God is going to make everything work out, Elijah goes forth, leaving his place of retreat, to continue the work.

Even though we find ourselves in fearful times, and are sometimes uncertain of God's power, God still has an assignment for us. I am not just thinking about this time of transition for us as a church with me leaving and another pastor coming. And I certainly don't see myself as indispensable! Under the new pastor's leadership, and with God's help, this church will be fine. But I know there is some anxiety. And it's not just St. Luke's but we fret about the future of the United Methodist Church. And we fret about the United States, especially now that we are moving into election season. There are plenty of things to fret and worry about. Still, God has an assignment for each of us. We all still have good work to do, people to help, encouraging words to share, love and support to demonstrate. We don't know how God is going to make everything work out, just like Elijah didn't know when he left his cave. But we can trust that somehow God's purposes will be achieved: God's purposes for St. Luke's, God's purposes for the United Methodist Church, God's purposes for the United States, God's purposes for anything. My mom used to say, "There's more than one way to skin a cat." Sorry to all you cat lovers. God has more than one way to achieve God's purposes, of that we can be sure. And we still have something to contribute to the fulfilment of those purposes, in spite of our anxiety and uncertainty.

And it can be messy. We all know we have to keep on keeping on in our discipleship. We still have to help people, act out of love, do what we can for the well-being of others even as we pray and read our Bibles and come to worship. But just because we keep focused on living a

Christian life doesn't mean everything is going to be just fine. A great example is what we heard in the gospel reading this morning. What Jesus did was a great thing. He cast a legion of demons out of that man. But there was collateral damage. Those swineherds lost all their hogs. And that was their livelihood. What are they going to do now? This man's healing from demon possession also caused real hardship for those swineherds. The good news of this man's healing wasn't good news for everyone. It was messy.

Not only can things get messy when we do good work, we also don't always get what we want. It is interesting in this story of the healing of this man. When Jesus comes up to him, the demons already know who Jesus is. They beg Jesus to send them into the herd of pigs instead of sending them to the abyss. Amazingly, Jesus grants their request. On the other hand, the man who was healed asked to continue on with Jesus as he went on his journey, but Jesus turned him down. The demons got what they wanted but not the man who was healed. That doesn't seem fair.

I wonder why the man wanted to follow Jesus. Maybe he wanted to be his disciple, to learn from Jesus. Or maybe he wanted to stay by Jesus in case the demons came back. It would be comforting to know that if the demon possession happened again that his savior would be by his side to cast them out again. At any rate, the man had his reasons for following Jesus. It doesn't seem much to ask. Surely Jesus wouldn't have a problem having him come along.

But if he had followed Jesus, the people in the town would not have had to deal with him and come to terms with the fact that this man was healed. Everyone in the town came out to see for themselves what the swineherds had told them about what Jesus had done. It was right there before their eyes. And they got scared. There is a lot of fear in the stories we have heard today, isn't there. Their response is to tell Jesus to move on. He has caused enough ruckus, in spite of the fact that this man who had lived naked in the tombs as a raving lunatic was now clothed and in his right mind. They probably would have been fine if the man went with Jesus too so they could just move on as a community and forget that any of this happened. Easier to return to status quo that way.

But with the man staying in their community, a continuous reminder that he had been healed by Jesus, well they couldn't go back to the way things were. They would be regularly reminded of what Jesus had done for him. They would remember all those pigs that died in the process and the hardship that created for the community. They would be reminded of the messy situation that was this man's healing. And they would have to come to terms with it, to come to realize this man was no longer who he had been. He deserved his rightful place in the community. As long as this man lived among them their community would be unsettled until they made peace with what had happened and incorporated him fully into their life together. Only then would the community be made whole. The man needed to stay in the town for their own good. Even though he wanted to leave that town behind and go with Jesus, he needed to stay for their sake.

Elijah was told to go. The man was told to stay. Both had to contend with their own fears and find their ways through messy situations. Elijah feared for his life and lived as a wanted man as a consequence of facing off against 450 prophets of Baal. The man was afraid the demons might come back and instead had to remain in a town that partially blamed him for the loss of a herd of pigs as a consequence of his healing. They were messy situations. But they understood what their task was before them. And they faithfully followed through with their assignments. The same can be true for us in our own messy situations, contending with unforeseen consequences as a result of doing ministry, with our own fears and uncertainties. We all still have tasks to complete, good works to perform, ministry to be done, stories of God's healing and grace to be shared.

So this is our challenge as we continue forward in the weeks, months and years ahead. Our challenge is to trust God, to trust that there is more than one way for God to achieve God's purposes, to trust that what God directs us to do is part of the achieving of God's purposes, to trust that somehow God's going to make sure that things work out even though we may not get what we want. Our challenge is to remain attentive to God, to be open to what God is directing us to do, the tasks that God places before us. And as we become clear on what our task is,

we do the work of following through in spite of our fears and uncertainties. Elijah was brave when he faced down those 450 prophets. Perhaps he was even more brave to leave the cave and go on with the work in spite of his fears and uncertainties. It is in our faithfulness to the work that God places before us in spite of our fears and uncertainties that is the bravest thing any of us can do.