

Proper XIV Year B: 11/12 August 2018
St. James' Episcopal Church, Clinton NY 13323
The Rev. Gary Cyr

"Are you willing to trust God to lead the way?"

1 Kings 19: 4-8
Ephesians 4: 25-5: 2
John 6: 35, 41-51
Psalm 34: 1-8

"Rather than the anticipated death Elijah is petitioning for, God shows steadfast love and compassion. In the midst of perceived scarcity, God provides nourishment. God sends angels to tend to Elijah. Where Elijah perceives failure through which he experiences ultimate vulnerability, God's grace is able to enter and Elijah's faith grows."

Fail, Fail Again, Fail Better is the title of a book written by the Buddhist nun Pema Chödrön, who wrote the book from a speech she gave at her granddaughter's commencement ceremony. The premise of the book is that we learn best from our failures and not our successes; that failure allows us to become vulnerable to possibility rather than allowing us to cling to certainty. It's a message that is radically different from the one we most often hear in our Western culture where success is measured through material goods, social credibility, and political clout. Try telling the gods of Wall Street and their disciples that failure leads to growth, and see what their reaction is. Pema's assertion – that we need to be better at failing – is very counter-cultural in a truth-telling way that exposes the myth of scarcity and the illusion of misplaced trust.

Elijah is feeling like a failure. He's despondent and depressed having fled for his life to Judah, where he's now a refugee in despair. Earlier in this story, he'd won this incredible battle between the priests of Ba'al and God where the prophets of the cult of Ba'al were struck down in public. But this angered the Queen of Israel, Jezebel, a follower of Ba'al. Though her husband Ahab was King of Israel and as such needed to submit to God's Law, they walked away from that path and as a result were steering Israel away from the Covenant. Hence, the

showdown between God's prophet Elijah and the prophets of Ba'al. When faced with Ahab's and Jezebel's anger, Elijah, indeed, needed to run and hide.

It's in Elijah's perceived failure that a lesson is learned. Israel's leadership didn't turn from its path of apostasy after Elijah vanquished the priests and prophets of Ba'al. Rather, Israel's leadership turned its wrath towards Elijah. Elijah thought he knew what God sought, and when things didn't unfold as Elijah expected, he withdrew, like a dog with his tail between his legs: fearful and in despair. Even the refuge he sought, first in Beersheba, then the desert, didn't offer much – there is very little shade from a solitary tree and meager, if any, rations. It's no wonder that, in his mental state, Elijah asks God to end his life. And what's God's response?

Rather than the anticipated death Elijah is petitioning for, God shows steadfast love and compassion. In the midst of perceived scarcity, God provides nourishment. God sends angels to tend to Elijah. Where Elijah perceives failure through which he experiences ultimate vulnerability, God's grace is able to enter and Elijah's faith grows. This shouldn't come as a surprise to either Elijah or us since we hear in Ecclesiasticus (51.23-27):

²³Draw near to me, you who are uneducated,
and lodge in the house of instruction.

²⁴Why do you say you are lacking in these things,
and why do you endure such great thirst?

²⁵I opened my mouth and said,
Acquire wisdom for yourselves without money.

²⁶Put your neck under her yoke,
and let your souls receive instruction;
it is to be found close by.

²⁷See with your own eyes that I have labored but little
and found for myself much serenity.

You may be more familiar with the words we hear Jesus say in Matthew's Gospel (11.28-30) that recapitulate this passage:

²⁸“Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. ²⁹Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

The message is clear, made so through Elijah’s vulnerability in the face of perceived failure – the author is saying: trust in God’s purpose.

In Elijah’s time, that purpose, the yoke that you put on, the instrument of instruction was the Law. Jesus, however, summarizes that by stating that he himself reveals the Father, the Source-of-our-Being and not the Law. The bread of heaven was the bread that fed the Israelites during their formative time in the desert. Now, Jesus is the bread of life, who makes God known to the people. A subtle shift, yet a very transformative one. One that causes the followers of Jesus to question his intentions.

Jesus isn’t failing, in today’s gospel, his audience *is*. They’re failing to comprehend his message. Further compounding their failure is not allowing for this be a transformative experience that reveals God’s presence in their lives, and thus allowing them to be open to what God is asking of them. They are familiar with the Law revealing God’s intention. Now, Jesus reveals God’s presence. One gives life; the other is life giving. It’s a difficult message for Jesus’ followers to grasp.

What they’re hearing is that Israel and the Law are no longer the source of God’s instruction. Jesus is. Jesus is the one who reveals God, the Source-of-our-Being. And Jesus moves beyond a message for just Israel to one that is universal, one that says whoever hears Jesus’ words and believes experiences the One who sent him, the Source-of-our-Being. No longer is this message just for the Jews, but for all who have ears to hear and an open mind to receive. Hence, the bread of heaven is fulfilled by the bread of life. And the bread of life that Jesus is speaking of, is none other than communion with God.

It’s so easy for us to get lost in our own whims and desires; our own purposes and ideas. Just like Elijah, it’s easy to believe we know what God is asking of us and imposing that belief on the whole community to the point when faced with the failure of the belief, that program,

whatever, we ask what went wrong rather than ask what is God asking of us. Failure, in this instance, offers the opportunity for reflection on our relationship with God and one another. When all seems lost and despair descends upon us, only then are we able to listen for God's voice – God's presence – in the busyness of our lives. Only when we completely fail are we able to discern God's purpose in the wreckage of our perceived ideas and objectives.

All of us, at some point in our lives, have experienced failure; has experienced despair and felt forlorn. It's difficult in the midst of such emotions to see failure as an opportunity for growth. It's counterintuitive to embrace failure as a means of being open to new possibility. And yet, Elijah exemplifies that it's this very emotion that allows for God's Spirit to be most present. It's very counterintuitive for us to understand failure as a means of being open to possibility, yet it's this very inversion of thought that exposes our misplaced trust and belief in scarcity.

Jesus continues to invert this message, challenging us to trust in God's abundance and not in our own abilities and desires. To be drawn into communion with the Source-of-our-Being and be open to what God is asking of us. We don't need to sulk because things aren't what they use to be. We have only to fail, fail again, and fail better so to be vulnerable before our God and open to God's presence and purpose in our lives, and that leaves us with the question: "Who is God inviting us to be?" More importantly: "Are you willing to trust God to lead the way?"