

This is what winning the biggest fight of your life looks like: “Enough now, Lord. Take my life, for I am no better than my ancestors.” Elijah pleads for death, lays down and goes to sleep under a broom tree. The broom tree, like a large umbrella, provided shade in desert climes.

What brought Elijah to despair? Fear! The people of Israel were led astray by their king and queen, Ahab and Jezebel. Jezebel was a devotee of Baal, a Canaanite god of fertility. Elijah confronts the Israelites over their dalliance with Baal. Elijah, lone prophet of the Lord, confronts four hundred and fifty prophets of Baal.

Elijah proposes a contest. Two bulls are killed and cut up. Elijah puts one bull on a wood pile he constructs, and the prophets of Baal put the other bull on a wood pile they construct. For aficionados of the Food Network, this is the prototype of “Man, Fire, Food,” “Prophet, Fire, Bull.”

The catch is that neither Elijah nor the prophets of Baal can set fire to the wood. The challenge is to see whose god will ignite the fire. The prophets of Baal call on their god from morning to noon saying, “O Baal, answer us!” No answer comes.

Elijah mocks them: “Call out in a loud voice. Perhaps he is chatting or occupied or off on a journey. Perhaps he is sleeping and will awake.” So the prophets call out in a loud voice and gouge themselves with swords and spears until blood spills upon them. Still, nothing.

By mid afternoon, Elijah has the Israelites drench his wood with water. He commands them to drench the wood a second time. Elijah prays to the Lord and fire comes down and consumes the bull, the wood, the dirt, and licks up the water in the trench.

The people fall on their faces and acknowledge the Lord as the true God. For good measure, Elijah commands the people to seize the prophets of Baal who are taken down to the Wadi of Kishon and slaughtered.

Ahab runs home to tell Jezebel what has happened to her fertility cult. Jezebel sends a message to Elijah, “So may the gods do to me, and even more, if by this time tomorrow I do not make your life like the life of the prophets of Baal.”

Great victories produce new enemies. Jezebel’s legitimacy as queen has been undermined and she is not happy. Elijah flees in fear. One has to wonder why Elijah doesn’t call down fire upon Ahab and Jezebel and be down with it?

If after his tremendous performance publicly demonstrating that the Lord is God, the royal couple still seek to kill him and remain unrepentant in the idolatrous ways they have fostered in Israel,

his prophetic mission has been a failure, and there is no point in his going one. Elijah won the battle but lost the war.

In despair, Elijah asks the Lord to take his life. He would rather die at the hands of the Lord than at the hands of Jezebel. Suddenly, an angel intervenes and commands Elijah to sit up and eat some matzo ball soup. Apparently, the angel believes food is good for despair.

Elijah eats and lays back down to sleep. A second time the angel commands him to get up and eat. Why? Because Elijah has an appointment with God on Mount Horeb, a forty days journey. Horeb is two-hundred miles from Elijah's broom tree. How depressed was Elijah? He could only walk five miles a day!

What happens when Elijah arrives at Horeb reminds me of the cartoons of pilgrims trekking up a mountain to see a guru to discover the meaning of life. In one, a guru sends the pilgrim back down the mountain to the receptionist for insurance information.

When Elijah arrives at Horeb, he hears "What are you doing here?" Divine therapy is not very comforting. This is a long way from, "The Lord is my shepherd." The angel tells a depressed man to walk 200 miles to see his therapist who asks, "What are you doing here?" Maybe the walk was the therapy.

Kierkegaard wrote in a letter to his sister-in-law, "Above all, do not lose your desire to walk: every day I walk myself into a state of well-being and walk away from every illness; I have walked myself into my best thoughts, and I know of no thought so burdensome that one cannot walk away from it."

Elijah does not walk himself into a state of well-being. He laments; he is still depressed. He hides in a cave on Mount Horeb. He hears a voice command him to leave the cave, to let go of his supposed security. Elijah is to come out into the open, stand up, and wait for the Lord who promises to "pass by."

Pass by? Moses sat in the presence of God for forty days and forty nights. Moses saw grand displays of God's power. Elijah walks two-hundred miles to see the Lord and all he gets is the "sound of sheer silence" as the Lord passes by.

An old hymn of the church perfectly describes Elijah's experience:

Hello darkness, my old friend,  
I've come to talk with you again,  
Because a vision softly creeping,  
Left its seeds while I was sleeping,  
And the vision that was planted in my brain  
Still remains  
Within the sound of silence.

A second time Elijah is asked, “What are you doing here?” Notice how everything in this story happens a second time. It is hard to reach a depressed person. Elijah laments that he is the only one in Israel who still serves the Lord, who hasn’t bowed the knee to Baal.

Depression darkens and distorts our vision of reality. Often the first step into the light is helping the sufferer know he is not alone, not the only one experiencing what he is feeling. The divine voice assures Elijah there are seven-thousand others in Israel who have not bowed the knee to Baal.

Elijah is commanded to go back the way he came and rejoin the fight for what is true and good and beautiful. This may be the divine version of “hair of the dog.” Treatment of a rabid dog bite consisted of placing hair from the dog in the bite wound.

Elijah was “bitten” by fear of Jezebel. God sends Elijah back to confront Jezebel. The divine therapy for Elijah is to face his fear, walk right back into the line of fire to speak the prophetic word, and to do so without any guarantee for his safety.

The murdered prophets, from ancient Israel to the present, are sufficient evidence that everything will not necessarily turn out as you like. Faith is about learning a proper “fear” of God, about finding security in insecurity. Faith is fearing a larger fear; it is fearing God more than Jezebel.