

Pentecost 11, August 8, 2021 (Jo 6:35, 41-51; I Ki 19:4-8; Ps 34:108; Eph 4:25-5:2)

When Christians are going through a tough time, whatever the cause, we say we're "wandering in the wilderness." That's what happened to God's chosen people after Moses led them out of Egypt, where they were slaves in Pharaoh's brickyard. That's what happened to Jesus when the Spirit led him out to the wilderness, where he ate nothing and was tempted by the devil for 40 days. For many people, last year's social shut-down because of COVID was a sort of wilderness.

It's hard to orient yourself in the wilderness. Familiar landmarks seem strange, and relationships feel different. Uncertainty becomes a frequent companion. What's going on? How long will it last? Will things be the same when it ends? Will *I* be the same?

An angel of God visited the prophet Elijah, who was indeed in the wilderness. You need to understand the context. Elijah had just had a major confrontation with the 450 prophets of Ba'al, a false god of weather and fertility. Ba'al worship was introduced to the Jews by Jezebel, a gentile princess, wife of the Jewish King Ahab. Jezebel was a powerful missionary for Ba'al, trying to get the Jews to stop worshiping *their* God, and start worshiping hers.

But Elijah *demolished* the prophets of Ba'al in an incredible display of the power of the Lord, the one *true* God. It's a wonderful story, and you can read all about it in I Kings, chapter 18, right before this episode in today's text.

Jezebel pursued Elijah to get revenge. After his victory Elijah had run—literally *run*, with the power of God on him—seventeen miles to the entrance of the valley of Jezreel. There he received a message from Jezebel that he would soon suffer the same fate as the 450 prophets he had killed.

So once more Elijah fled for his life, running over a hundred miles south, to Beersheba. There he left his servant, and went a day's journey into the wilderness, where he sat down under a solitary broom tree to die.

Despair, exhaustion, hopelessness—*ugly* feelings, but very human feelings. Elijah had done everything God demanded of him, but it seemed it wasn't enough. He felt like he couldn't go on any longer. He just wanted to die.

Have you ever felt like Elijah? Done in, worn out, given up? It's a pretty common human feeling.

- You've given all you had and it wasn't enough, and there's no point in going on. . .
- You've tried your hardest and failed to reach your goal, so why bother anymore?
- You've taken all the bullying, all the harassment, all the pain you can bear, and you just can't do it anymore.

Sometimes you just want to lie down and die.

Depression, despair, and anxiety are just three aspects of mental health. If you followed women's gymnastics in the Olympic Games, you heard about the struggles Simone Biles was having. The pressure of being the "greatest of all time" was too much for her, and she chose to withdraw from most of the competition. She was tended by a physician, who cared for her physical *and* mental health.

For many people, depression is a fact of life, sort of like allergies or migraines. Taking medications for depression or anxiety or any other mental health issue is like taking insulin for diabetes, or a medication for high blood pressure. There's no shame in admitting you suffer from mental health concerns, no shame in asking for help.

How many suicides have there been in Marathon County in the last couple of years? How many people, of all ages, have reached the end of their rope and simply been unable to bear the pain anymore?

Most of you know I've suffered from depression since 8th grade. For 50 years I was off and on medications multiple times, until finally a wise doctor in Green Bay told me to just stay on meds. The meds helped some. I've also seen at least 20 counselors: three psychiatrists, 4 pastors, and the rest with all sorts of alphabet soup after their names: MSW, DCP, LCC, and others. The counseling also helped, especially when I wised up to the fact that if I wanted healing, I had to be open and honest with the counselor.

When I was 23 I had my first of four episodes of wanting to die, and of actually planning how I would end my suffering. Each time an angel of God came to me. In 1970 my grad school classmate Diane sat with me from midnight until the University Health Clinic opened at 8:00.

Then in 1980 my counselor stayed on the phone with me till the emotional crisis passed. In 1992 Henry, an ex-con recovering alcoholic dropped in to visit me, found me sobbing, and made me a cup of coffee. In 1993 my son's godfather, Julio, sat on the porch with me, chatting until I was more stable.

Each of those crises was *acute*, as opposed to *chronic*. The underlying depression was always there, but something triggered the suicidal "ideation," the suicidal thoughts and plans. There was a short time when I was capable of taking my own life, but once someone helped me focus away from that, I was out of danger. I do not think I would have survived without those four incarnate angels of God.

It's scary when the world, or the people around you, or the powers that be, or situation after situation overwhelms you with pain. Sometimes that pain is too much to bear, and like Elijah, we just want to die. We want it to end.

When that time comes, it's *so very important* to have someone to talk to, someone to call, someone who can remind you that there is life and peace, wholeness and even happiness in your future. Suicide is a permanent solution to a temporary problem.

If you feel unloved, or unworthy of love, remember that God loves each of us, every single person in the world, with unconditional love. We don't *have* to be worthy, because Jesus has already provided our salvation. You can't outrun God's love. You can't out-sin God's forgiveness. Remember "what a friend we have in Jesus."

Elijah lay down under a solitary broom tree to die. But God wasn't finished with him, and this is where an angel of God came into the story, to minister to this weary man. While he slept, the angel baked a barley cake on stones burning from the desert sun and put a jar of water next to it. Then the angel touched the sleeping prophet and said, "Get up and eat."

Elijah ate the cake and drank the water, and then immediately fell into a deep sleep again. He slept the sleep of the exhausted until the angel woke him a second time, saying, "Elijah, get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you!"

You may have been an angel of God to someone at some time, without knowing it. My friend Henry wasn't a touchy-feely person, and he had never before come to my home. But I'm sure God sent him to me that day.

I understand the feeling that life isn't worth living, that the unbearable hurt or sorrow or fear is too much to handle even a moment longer. My words today are for all of you who've ever experienced that kind of black despair, the hopelessness, the brokenness of believing it will never end unless you end it.

And my words today are for all of you who know someone who might be experiencing acute depression. We're good at hiding it, you know. It's easier to maintain the façade of being okay than to risk telling someone how desperately you're hurting. God helped me heal from my depression, but at least for me, the human "angels" were necessary at those times of crisis.

There are times we all feel like Elijah, just wanting to lie down and die. But God is bigger than your pain. God is just waiting till you're able to turn to him, to let *him* be your guardian angel.

Thanks be to God!