

“God Ruins the Pity Party”

Liturgical Date: Pentecost 3 (Proper 8)-Series C

Primary Text: 1 Kings 19:9b-21

Grace be unto you, and peace from God our Father, and from the Lord Jesus Christ. The primary text for today, the 3rd Sunday after Pentecost, is the Old Testament Lesson from 1 Kings 19. The title of the sermon is “God Ruins the Pity Party”.

In 1963 Lesley Gore had her first hit single, which turned out to be the most successful of her career. This song describes a teenager who had a terrible birthday party when her boyfriend, Johnny, shows up to the celebration with another girl. The hook, *“It’s my party, and I’ll cry if I want to, You would cry to if it happened to you,”* became engraved in American culture. Many of us can relate to a time when things seemed to be going good, but then an event-or often a chain of events-caused to us ignite our own little pity party. And this often means that anyone in earshot gets to hear about how rough we are having it. And the truth is the only person that usually enjoys a pity party is the one that is throwing it.

In today’s Old Testament Reading we hear about a pretty dramatic pity party thrown by none other than Elijah the prophet. Teenage girls “crying if they want to” because their boyfriend found someone new is not really that surprising, but Elijah? The great prophet of God? I mean, when we think about Elijah this is not really the first thing that comes to mind. Elijah, whose name means “The Lord is my God”. Elijah who was the Old Testament John the Baptist. Elijah who was a foreshadowing of Christ. Elijah, one of only two people in the Bible who never died as he was taken directly into heaven in a chariot of fire. Elijah who shows up with Moses at

Jesus' Transfiguration in representing all of the prophets. Yes, that Elijah throws a pity party for the ages.

Out in the wilderness, in a cave, running scared from Jezebel and King Ahab. And the ear that gets to be an audience of one for his pity party is God Himself. "*What are doing here, Elijah?*", the Lord asks. Of course, God knew, but in asking this question we hear what is on Elijah's heart and mind, "*I have been very jealous for the Lord, the God of hosts. For the people of Israel have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword, and I, even I only, am left, and they seek my life to take it away.*" And even after God responds, Elijah then goes out and stands at the entrance of cave and repeats the same "woe is me" words again in verse 14. "I have served you only, Lord. But it hasn't done any good. No one is listening. Everyone else is wicked except me. And now they want to kill me." Alone, frustrated, scared. In verse 4 before our assigned text began, he even asked God to take away his life. As I said, a pity party for the ages.

This is definitely one of the texts that we need to have the context of what led up to this point to grasp more fully what is going on here (you are invited to turn to 1 Kings 19 in your pew Bible). At the beginning of Chapter 19 we see that the wicked Jezebel had sent a messenger to Elijah that she was going to do everything she could to have him killed. Elijah flees into the wilderness. So we can understand the reason that Elijah is feeling so down in the immediate context. But an even broader context is needed to see how this faith-lacking pity party is such a failure of trust in God by Elijah.

Elijah is introduced in 1 Kings 17. He prophesied a three-year drought and it came. But Elijah was preserved by God during it, as the Lord

fed him by ravens delivering food. Then there is the miraculous providing of food through an endless supply of flour and oil for not only him but for the widow of Zarephath and her son. And there's more. The raising of a dead boy to life as God answered Elijah's prayer. Even after Elijah flees in Chapter 19, the angel of the Lord provides food and water that sustains him on a coming 40 day fast.

And Chapter 18 provides the most dramatic example of the true God's power over the false gods whose worship had polluted the devotion of God's people (I love this!). Elijah boldly confronts the wicked King of Israel, Ahab, and tells him to send the 450 prophets of Baal and 400 of Asherah to Mount Carmel. In a showdown that would be more dramatic than any high-noon meeting in a Western movie, Elijah goes toe-to-toe with 850 false prophets. He proclaims to the people in verse 21 of Chapter 18, *"How long halt ye between two opinions? If the Lord be God, follow him: but if Baal, then follow him."*

He says to bring two bulls and he will build an altar and the prophets of Baal will build another. Whichever sacrifice is consumed by fire from above will show which God is real. The prophets of Baal accept the challenge and no fire falls. Elijah mocks them. Maybe Baal is busy, sleeping, on a trip, he even says maybe he is busy going to the bathroom. The false prophets work themselves into a frenzy, even cutting themselves and bleeding thinking this will get a response. But nothing happens. No fire.

Now it's Elijah's turn. Rebuilding a damaged altar with 12 stones, representing the 12 tribes of Israel he orders a trench dug and 4 jars of water poured over the wood around the bull, not once but three times. So much water that the wood was drenched and trench filled. Then he calls out to the

true God in prayer. The fire of the Lord fell not only consuming the bull offering, but turning the wood and stone to dust and evaporating all the water in the trench. The people fell on their faces and said, “*The Lord (YHWH) is the God; the Lord, he is the God.*” (v39) The false prophets are then slain.

Now do you see how pitiful Elijah’s pity party was? Even though Ahab and Jezebel are out for revenge after their false prophets were killed, how could Elijah be reduced to bemoaning we heard? Is this not the same Elijah that had experienced the power and provision of God so many times? The same Elijah that was so bold and confident going up against almost 1,000 false prophets-knowing that his God, the only real and living God, would deliver?

And so it is with our pity parties. Our sinful nature rears its ugly head when we don’t trust God to provide and deliver. We so easily forgot all of the blessings that God has given us previously-blessings we don’t deserve by the way-but only receive from His grace and mercy-filled hand. Now I in no way seek to make light of painful and difficult situations, but think about some things. We complain when we sit down to pay bills and there is one we can’t pay, when God has provided the means to pay the others. We complain if something in our meal does not turn out right, even though God has given us food. We get angry at loved ones when they let us down, rather than thinking about all the times of joy we have shared with them. We get frustrated when cars break down or are damaged in an accident when for countless other drives everything went fine.

And so it is in the church. You hear so much today about how “the millennials” are lacking in the demographics of many congregations. “Remember back in the 1950s and 60s when there were so many children in

church?” We wonder how we will meet budget obligations and keep churches and schools open. And some have indeed closed. We celebrate Independence Day this week and there is a focus on the great history of our nation. And many lament current situations including a lack of civility, morality, and God-fearing. Go to a 4th of July parade and fireworks display and even in a small town you will see thousands of people. We shake our heads and wonder why many of these people are not interested in filling the pews Sunday morning. Yes, we face challenges in our lives, the church, and in our nation. But is the answer to follow the lead of Lesley Gore and Elijah and throw a pity party?

We had a great Hymn of the Day today. But unfortunately, many people stop at the title “O God Our Help in Ages Past” and think “yes God did some great things before, but now its bad.” We must continue on and take in the whole message of that hymn, *“O God, our help in ages past, our hope for years to come, Our shelter from the stormy blast, And our eternal home.”*

You see, you have to be careful about inviting God to your pity party. Because, guess what? He is going to crash it. He is going to ruin it. Elijah learned that and we need to as well. And how does God put an end to Elijah’s pity party? Sometimes God speaks very loudly as He has in wind (Ezekiel 1:4), earthquakes (Numbers 16:31), and fire (Exodus 19:8). This represents the thundering of the Law. But after the Law comes the Gospel. See verse 12 that God speaks to Elijah in this way, *“And after the fire the sound of a low whisper.”*

This “low whisper” is all God needs to shake us from self-centered complaints. God would deliver Elijah. Not to be too crass here, but in effect God tells Elijah get up off your pity pot, flush it, and go forth. He tells him

that Elisha will be raised up to carry on His work. Ahab and Jezebel will fall. And a key verse here is an answer to Elijah's lament that he is alone, that everyone else has turned away from God. Verse 18, "*Yet I will leave seven thousand in Israel, all the knees that have not bowed to Baal, and every mouth that has not kissed him.*"

Many Christians can feel isolated in our ever growing more secular and decadent culture "I am the only Christian at work, school, etc. Our church is small, what impact can we have?" But let me ask you this. Are there more than 7,000 faithful Bible-believing Christians in our land? Certainly. And if God could preserve Israel and thus the line of the Messiah with 7,000 there is no doubt He will accomplish His purpose today. This is why we need to be united in faith and regularly gather with our fellow believers for prayer, worship, evangelism, study, and service. We are not alone and we should not isolate ourselves.

Let me tell you that I have listened to some Christian speakers and even attended conferences where the main thing you hear is "gloom and doom" about the state of the church or our church body. It is as if statistics should send us into "panic mood." I find this very annoying and actually ironic because these statements are often made to rooms full of Christians! I want to stand up and say, "Yet I will leave seven thousand who have not bowed to Baal." I appreciate that our Synodical President, Rev. Harrison, has consistently said "It's time. Let's go." End the pity party. Get off the pity pots. As Joshua said, "*but as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.*" (24:15) Stop complaining and let God use those faithful to reach out. And as we heard in our Scripture readings, don't go back. Go forward. Listen to that "low whisper."

An old joke is that a man was trapped on top of a house as flood waters rose. He prayed that God would save him. A large log floated by. Again, the man prayed that God would save him. A boat pulled up and urged him to get in. The man refused, telling them that he was trusting in God to save him. He prayed a third time that God would rescue him. Finally a helicopter descended, lowering a rescue rope-but still the man refused to go. The flood waters rose and man drowned. Upon reaching heaven he asked God, "Why didn't you answer my prayer to save me?" God replied, "I sent a log, a boat, and even a helicopter. What more did you want?"

That still small voice of God. So sweet. So powerful. Listen to that voice. Listen to it when finances are strained. Listen to it when there is family discord. Listen to it when health is failing. Listen to it when you feel alone. Listen to it when you feel you unworthy of God's grace. Because God has spoken. He has showed up. He has provided for you in countless ways that we often easily forget, instead focusing on the challenges. The bad news is that Elijah forgot that when he decided to throw his own personal pity party in a desert cave. But the good news is that when God spoke, Elijah's pity party ended.

God thunders the Law and whispers the Gospel. In that whisper everything changes. The forgiveness of sins has been accomplished in Jesus. God uses seemingly ordinary means to bring faith and forgiveness to us: words, water, bread, and wine. All special delivered by the Holy Ghost. Don't be like the foolish man in that story that drowned because he didn't recognize the means that God was sending.

The low whisper of God calls out to you today. When God shows up He ruins the pity party. And to that we say...Amen.