

**Sunday, August 12 and Wednesday, August 15 + 12<sup>th</sup> week after Pentecost**  
**[1 Kings 19:4-8](#)**

Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Marshall, WI  
Rev. Nancy M Raabe

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This is the week for stories. We have two, one from our time and one from nearly 3,000 years ago.

The first story is from about five years ago. There was a man named Rick who seemed to have it made. He had always loved history, and even though his teenage years had been colored by a lot of party-going and questionable grades, he had straightened himself out, gone to college, gotten his teaching degree and landed a great job as a high school history teacher. The students loved him not only because it was a terrific teacher but because he understood them and treated them like people. Rick became the most popular teacher in school, was an advocate for underprivileged students, and once even led a student protest against the school board. He seemed invincible.

But Rick had dealt for years with hip pain that was becoming unbearable. Unknown to friends and family, he became addicted to pain killers, started behaving erratically at school, and took it badly when the administration told him to sit out a year on medical leave. At home with nothing to do, Rick began venting his anger to school officials in a

series of emails. Finally he wrote something he never should have sent. It was construed as a terrorist threat. He was arrested, thrown into jail, and bail was set at \$1 million. Weeks went by, then months. Even though he poured all the money he had into his legal defense, he was still convicted of a felony. He lost his job, his home, his entire savings, his reputation, virtually all his friends, and most of his retirement benefits. Once invincible, he had sunk about as low as he could go.

Now consider the story of the prophet Elijah from the 9<sup>th</sup> century BC as told in the reading from 1 Kings 19. Actually, we need to go back a chapter to put it into context.

One day earlier, in Chapter 18, Elijah has performed a great miracle that demonstrated his authority as a true prophet of the true God. Under King Ahab, the people had been worshipping an idol named Ba'al instead of God. A terrible drought had gripped the land for three years. To demonstrate the people's sinfulness in worshipping a false god, the Lord told Elijah to go to King Ahab and announce that the famine will be ended by the command of the true God.

So Elijah devised a plan to demonstrate this in a spectacular manner. First, he called together 450 prophets of the false god Ba'al at Mt. Carmel. Then he built two altars, one for the false god Ba'al and one for the true God, laid wood on them and laid an animal sacrifice on top. Elijah then challenged the prophets of Ba'al to pray to their god for fire to light the sacrifice. They prayed all morning long, but nothing happened. At noon, Elijah mocked them, saying, "Cry aloud! Surely he is a god; either he is meditating, or he has wandered away, or he is on a journey, or perhaps he is asleep and

must be awakened.” The priests of Ba’al kept on with their praying until evening fell, still without any success.

Elijah then drenched the altar of God with water, making a fire even harder to start. He prayed to God to accept the sacrifice, and immediately fire fell from the sky, burning everything up. Elijah then prayed for rain, and the heavens opened, drenching the land and ending the drought. What a show! Elijah demonstrated that he was the true prophet of the one true God. Just like Rick the high school teacher, he seemed invincible.

But then things took a turn for him. Perhaps in the excitement of his great victory, Elijah impulsively ordered all 450 priests of Ba’al to be captured. He went to where they were being held, and killed them all with his own hand. There was no need for this; he had already won the challenge, and God didn’t tell him to do it. When King Ahab’s wife Jezebel finds out what Elijah had done, she vowed to have him killed in retribution. Elijah was consumed by with fear and fled into the wilderness.

This is where we find ourselves today. Elijah is hardly the triumphant prophet of just one day ago. Instead, he has fallen into a deep depression that seems to be one step short of suicidal. We’re not sure why; maybe he’s afraid of Jezebel, or he regrets killing all those people for no reason. Elijah laments to God, “It is enough; now, O Lord. take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors.” Invincible just one day before, Elijah had sunk about as low as he could go.

What happened to these two people – Rick the teacher, and Elijah the prophet?

For Rick, the future looked bleak. However, in jail he was unable to feed his addiction to the painkillers, so he slowly he began to be himself again. He became known to the other inmates as “Teach,” and they regularly came to him asking for help with their writing and other projects. During that time, he began to attend daily Narcotics Anonymous meetings. When he finally got out, he committed himself to continue to go to these meetings every day or as often as humanly possible. His entire outlook on life underwent a complete transformation. He became one of the most cheerful, upbeat and positive people you could ever meet. He now has his own tutoring practice, would give anyone the shirt off his back, and just wants to make his corner of the world a better, friendlier, more humane place.

Now let’s return to Elijah. What happened to him, as he was pining away under a solitary broom tree, asking God to allow him to die?

As soon as he fell asleep, our reading tells us, an angel came, tapped him on the arm, and told him to get up and eat. This was real, not a dream. He ate, then lay back down, and the same thing happened again. The strength he gained from those two meals sustained him on the entire 40-day journey to Mt. Horeb. It was there that God revealed himself to Elijah—as the well known story goes, not in the wind, or the earthquake, or the fire, but in the “sound of sheer silence.” This living encounter with God would not have happened but for the touch of that angel. Not only was Elijah was

renewed in strength to continue his ministry, but he went on to identify his successor, Elisha, who will continue the work what Elijah began.

Rick the teacher wasn't nudged by an angel, exactly, but the process of getting clean, regaining his confidence, and committing to organize his life around the NA meetings was surely an act of God's deliverance.

What is important for us to see is that neither rebirth nor reorientation would have happened for either were it not for the deep darkness that had taken over both their lives. In the midst of this, God came to each them in a mysterious way, whether they recognized it or not. It seems that, without darkness, there can be no transformation into light.

It is the same with Jesus' crucifixion. William Temple, former Archbishop of Canterbury, writes of the cross that "The completeness of the victory is due to the completeness of the evil over which it was won. It is the very darkness which enshrouds the cross that makes so glorious the light proceeding from it."

In the same way, it is from the depths of pain, illness, grief, or hopelessness that our experience of God's redeeming love in Jesus Christ is the sweetest, the most fragrant, the most glorious. What sparks that experience? What pulls us up out of the depths of despair?

You may think, "I will never be nudged by an angel." But actually we are, especially when we need it most. These agents of God's transformative love may not look like storybook angels, but they are signs that God sends to us to bring us back to him—even

though these messengers don't even realize they are serving in that capacity. All it takes is for us to be alert to these signs, to welcome them, and to be open to where they are pointing us.

We can find ourselves most ourselves most at risk of falling when we are feeling most invulnerable. Rick was on top of the world with his star status at school; Elijah had just demonstrated fantastically that his God was the true God. But it is the way of the cross, in which we are all walking, that God finds us after we have fallen, when we are feeling most vulnerable. This is exactly what the psalmist is singing about in Psalm 34. The lectionary gives us this psalm for the next three weeks. Here are the first eight verses. Listen for the confidence in God that comes from the recognition of our own vulnerability.

<sup>1</sup>I will bless the LORD at all times;  
his praise shall continually be in my mouth.

<sup>2</sup>My soul makes its boast in the LORD;  
let the humble hear and be glad.

<sup>3</sup>O magnify the LORD with me,  
and let us exalt his name together.

<sup>4</sup>I sought the LORD, and he answered me,  
and delivered me from all my fears.

<sup>5</sup>Look to him, and be radiant;  
so your faces shall never be ashamed.

<sup>6</sup>This poor soul cried, and was heard by the LORD, and was saved from every trouble.

<sup>7</sup>The angel of the LORD encamps  
around those who fear him, and delivers them.

<sup>8</sup>O taste and see that the LORD is good;  
happy are those who take refuge in him.

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