

## **“Trouble Fatigue”**

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10-8-17

Based upon 1 Kings 19:1-18; 2 Cor. 12: 1-12

Sometimes you just want to look up at the sky and scream “Uncle!” Have you ever felt that way? I know many people have felt this way lately, including myself. Wildfires are consuming the West; hurricanes have destroyed Houston, parts of Florida, the Virgin Islands, and Puerto Rico. “Uncle!” There have been riots in Charlottesville, turmoil in St. Louis, nuclear threats coming from North Korea, and terrorism and violence in London, Antioch, Tennessee, and of course Las Vegas. Oh how could we not cry “uncle” after Las Vegas? It’s all too much: too horrible to contemplate that so many people are grieving, and so many lives that have been destroyed. It’s hard to wrap our minds around the stuff that is happening, let alone know how best to respond. But even if we knew how to respond, there would still be so many people in need of help. “Uncle, uncle, uncle!”

Those are not the only troubles which weigh on many of us either. We may be among the privileged and blessed, since we have electricity and running water and have been spared the violence in other locations. But there are many here who still have every reason to cry “Uncle!” for personal reasons. Our circle of loved ones in this community includes those who are battling multiple life-threatening or debilitating health concerns. It includes those who are juggling sick spouses and critically sick children at the same time, and those who are grieving lost parents, husbands, and childhood homes. “Uncle, uncle, uncle!” It’s enough to make even strong people feel vulnerable and afraid, or want to run for the hills and hide. Most of us can handle a serious problem every once and a while, but to have crisis after crisis in our nation at the same time that many of us are also experiencing crisis after crisis in our own lives is too much. It’s too much for those who are actively experiencing the crises themselves, and it’s too much for those of us who feel called to intervene and help those who are suffering. Are you feeling that lately?

Elijah the prophet, whose story we heard in today’s Old Testament lesson, knew what it felt like to hit the “too much” mark all too well. He had the very difficult and sometimes dangerous job of being prophet to two of the most evil, unfaithful leaders in Israel’s history, King Ahab and Queen Jezebel. Although they ruled Israel, they were not Yahweh followers; instead they kept 450 prophets of the pagan god Baal on their payroll. But Elijah did not let that stop him. He took on all 450 of them single-handedly by challenging them to a prophetic duel of sorts. He told them to set up two sacrifices, one for the followers of Baal and one for the followers of Yahweh. Then whichever prophet could summon his god to light the sacrifice on fire would win, and prove that his was the true god. Elijah put everything on the line for this contest, even stacking the deck against himself by pouring water all over his wood. But when the time came to summon fire from Yahweh, he won as if it had all been dry kindling. The 450 prophets looked pathetic and he looked triumphant. Yahweh was clearly the real God! Even the crowds could see that, so they switched their loyalty on the spot.

But do you know what Elijah got for all his trouble? Even though he won, all he got was more trouble. Jezebel was a sore loser and told him she would kill him, and the flip flopping of

the fickle crowds made Elijah realize that it would never be enough for him to be a prophet just to kings. He would have to change the hearts of all the people in Israel. It was too much for one man to do! So he took off, running away into the wilderness where no one would find him and no one would expect him to save the day, and where he could just curl up in a ball and allow the desert to kill him instead of Jezebel. Can you blame him?

The apostle Paul knew what it was like to have overwhelming problems too. We don't know that he ever tried to run away from them, but we do know he tried desperately to pray some of them away. You can hardly blame him either. After God called him to share the good news of the Gospel, in about ten seconds flat his life went from being about comfort and power to being about discomfort and life-threatening vulnerability. As he told the Corinthians in the chapter before today's lesson, he was whipped "40 lashes minus one" five times, beaten with rods three times, stoned once, and shipwrecked three times. He was also stranded at sea, mugged, and robbed multiple times. (See 2 Cor. 11:24-29). Moreover, he endured all of this just to discover that some of the churches, including the ones he started in Corinth, did not even appreciate his ministry. After he had done the hard work of setting them up, some slick traveling evangelists came after him and convinced the Corinthian Christians that he wasn't charismatic enough to be the real deal. These so called "super apostles" implied that Paul's troubles and brokenness were a sign that he did not have God's favor. Then, as if that wasn't enough, his own body started betraying him too. He developed a serious health problem; maybe it was recurrent malaria, maybe migraines or vision problems. We don't know. But whatever it was it was big. Paul called the problem "the thorn in his side," using a word which described the kind of sharp stakes used to skewer animals in pit traps, not the word for splinter. Paul's thorn made it hard for him to function and would not go away. So three times Paul prayed, "Enough already, God! Uncle, OK? I know ministry requires sacrifice, but can't you at least get rid of this one trouble?" But God did not.

If we read these stories hoping to find a way to escape trouble altogether, we'll be disappointed. If anything, they seem to affirm just the opposite, that serious troubles and discipleship go together. But they are still comforting stories for two reasons. They show us that our spiritual ancestors knew what trouble was too, and they show us how to cope and care when troubles leave us feeling strung out, vulnerable, and scared. The secret to finding the comfort and help in them lies in looking at how God responds to Elijah and Paul after they cry "Uncle!", instead of at how much they suffered.

When Elijah flees to the desert, God does not stop him, send him back immediately to confront Jezebel, or condemn Elijah for his fear or his fatigue. Instead God's first response is to care for Elijah's physical needs. He was exhausted, so God let him sleep, and sent an angel to wake him periodically to make sure that he ate and drank enough to survive and regain his strength. Then once he did, God sent him deeper in the wilderness, all the way to the most holy mountain of all, Mt. Sinai (called by its other name, Mt. Horeb, in this text), where God had given the Ten Commandments to Moses centuries before. Once Elijah was safe in a cave there, instead of speaking to him in a booming, commanding voice, God began his conversation with Elijah with listening. "What are you doing here Elijah?" God asked, even though God knew full well what the answer was. This allowed Elijah the catharsis of venting. "Are you kidding?!" Elijah said,

taking the bait. “I have worked zealously for the Lord. I have defended the covenant, and I have defeated and destroyed the bad prophets. But I am on my own. There is nobody faithful left, and now Jezebel wants to kill me!”

Notice how self-centered Elijah’s venting was? Trouble fatigue will do this to you. It will make you feel as though you alone are carrying the weight of the world. So even though it was God who helped Elijah do all the things he did, including winning the contest, and even though there were other decent prophets around, including one named Obadiah whom Elijah encountered just two chapters earlier, and even though there were faithful Israelites on his side, Elijah couldn’t see that. “No one is faithful, no one is fighting like I am,” he believed. So before God could correct his misperceptions, God had to redirect his focus. God did this by putting on a classic biblical show of divine power: earthquake, storm, and fire. But God was not actually in the show; God was in the stillness that followed it.

“What are you doing here Elijah?” God then asked again, once he had Elijah’s attention focusing outside of the cave instead of on his own problems for a minute. Although Elijah ran through his speech again in response, this time God wasn’t really asking for an explanation for his flight. This time, I think, God was inviting Elijah to consider what or who had really gotten him to that point. “Why are you here? You’re here because *I* kept you from dying in the desert. Why are you here? You’re here because *I* helped you defeat the prophets of Baal even though the odds were one against 450. Why are you here? You’re here because *I* blessed you with the ability to hear my voice, so that you could defend the covenant *I* made with your ancestors on this very mountain years ago. Elijah, don’t you see that you are here because *I* am with you? You don’t need to come out here to find me, and you cannot escape me. I am always with you, which means you are never alone, and you don’t need to save the world. *I* will do that. All I want is for you to do your part. If the current king and your prophetic call are getting to be too much for you, then go anoint a new king and train a new prophet; and by the way, don’t forget that there are 7,000 faithful Israelites whom I will protect, just as I protect you.”

That’s all it took for Elijah to be renewed in his ministry—a little rest, ranting, and reminding that he was not alone and did not have to solve the problems of the world by himself. It seems so simple that it reminds me about a story about a man whose truck went off the road into a ditch. There was a farmhouse nearby, so the truck driver asked the owner if he had a tractor that he could use to pull the truck out. The man said, “No, but I got my mule, Blue.” “I doubt your mule is strong enough to pull out my truck,” the man said. “You don’t know Blue,” said the farmer. So he hitched Blue to the truck and said, “Pull Blue!” Then, when the truck did not move, he said, “Pull Elmer!” Then when the truck moved a little bit, he said, “Pull Biscuit.” And all at once the truck was free. “Thank you so much,” said the man. “But I have one question. Why did you call the mule by three different names?” “Simple,” said the farmer. “Blue is blind. If he thought he was the only one pulling, your truck would still be in the ditch!”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Homileticsonline.com, *Animating Illustrations* linked with sermon “Post-Traumatic Growth”, 7-9-2006, retrieved 10-2-2017 from <https://homileticsonline.com/subscriber>

When multiple crises hit at once, it is easy to feel like you're alone, whether you are the one suffering or the one who's called to help. But we are never alone, and believing that can give us the strength we need to deal with whatever crisis is at hand. Moreover since God is real, and not simply a fake name like the ones in the story, that means that in addition to having our own strength magnified by the knowledge of God's presence, we also have God's strength to draw upon as well, and there are no troubles too big or too powerful for God.

This is what God tried to explain to Paul after rejecting his thorn removal prayers. "My grace is sufficient for you;" God said, "for my power is perfected in weakness." This was a hard lesson for Paul to accept. He was raised with understandings of power and success similar to our own, and lest he doubt, he had the super apostles rubbing those standards and his failure to meet them in his face all day. But God was not looking for camera-ready, charismatic salesmen to share the Gospel. God was looking for people who could embody the Gospel Christ embodied on the cross, and Paul did this beautifully. Through his weakness, vulnerability, and brokenness, he demonstrated the sustaining power of God's grace in Christ. The weaker he was, the more God was with him, and the more the power of God's grace showed through him.

It's so easy for us to forget this too when crises hit. We get preoccupied with why God did not prevent the trouble because we do not like feeling vulnerable, broken, or weak. But in those times, we are never closer to God. Our God died in an acute state of broken vulnerability to make sure we understood this. Christ did not come to make the powerful more powerful. He came so that we would know that when we are weak, we are surrounded by the powerful, transforming grace of God. He came so that we might be saved in vulnerability, not strength.

Martin Luther King Jr. described the night this lesson hit home for him in his book Stride Toward Freedom.<sup>2</sup> In the middle of the Montgomery bus boycott in 1956, King came home exhausted one night only to receive an anonymous sneering phone call from someone telling him to leave Montgomery immediately or be prepared to be killed with his family in three days. He had been threatened before, but this one got to him as much as Jezebel's got to Elijah. He sat in his kitchen desperately tired, contemplating the challenges ahead, and yearning for a way to quit what he was doing without looking like a coward. Then something happened that changed his life forever. He said:

*Something said to me, 'You can't call on Daddy now, you can't even call on Mama. You've got to call on that something in that person that your Daddy used to tell you about, that power that can make a way out of no way.' With my head in my hands, I bowed over the kitchen table and prayed aloud... 'Lord, I'm down here trying to do what's right. I think I'm right. I am here taking a stand for what I believe is right. But Lord, I must confess that I'm weak right now. I'm faltering. I'm losing my courage. Now, I'm afraid.... The people are looking to me for leadership, and if I stand before them without strength and courage, they too will falter. I am at the end of my powers. I have nothing left. I've come to the point where I can't face it alone.' At that moment I experienced the presence of the Divine as I have never experienced him before. It seemed*

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<sup>2</sup> King, Martin Luther, Jr., Carson, Clayborn, Stride Toward Freedom (Boston: Beacon Press, 1958), 124-25.

*as though I could hear the quiet assurance of an inner voice saying: 'Martin Luther, stand up for righteousness. Stand up for justice. Stand up for truth. And God will be at your side forever.' Almost at once my fears began to go. My uncertainty disappeared. I was ready to face anything.*<sup>3</sup>

Three days later King's house was bombed. But his family survived, and by then King's experience had changed him enough to take the news calmly. He was not only committed to his ministry of justice, he made his first act after the bombing the act of stopping the angry crowds that had risen in his defense from destroying the city in retaliation.

When you feel yourself getting overwhelmed by the size of the troubles in our world, or the constant reminders of our vulnerability, remember that it's not up to any of us to solve the problems single-handedly. By the grace of God in Jesus Christ, it is only up to us to do our part. So if you want to run away, take a break to get some rest. Get out in nature and away from the news. Keep well fed and hydrated. Then focus on the one who is the real reason why you are here. God is with you, and will show you what you can do to contribute and make a difference.

If you feel like you just can't catch a break in your own life between the crises, calamities, and stakes in your side, remember that it is God's power, not your own, that will carry you through no matter what happens. We worship a God who became vulnerable to the point of death, so that we could have strength beyond our ability. Trust in the sustaining power of God's grace, ask for help, and know that you are heard. You are never closer to God in this life, than when you are too tired and overwhelmed to keep going. God will give you the strength you need.

It's OK to cry "Uncle!" when life gets you down or when the troubles of the world seem overwhelming. We know that God does not mind when we rant or weep. But never forget that troubles are not a sign of God's absence, just the opposite. God is with us when troubles build, and is more powerful than all that threatens us. Put your trust in the one who saved the world through Christ so that we wouldn't have to, and who even now is showering us with the grace we need to endure our suffering, help the hurting, and transform our world. Thanks be to God! Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*