

**“When victory isn’t enough” a sermon based on 1 Kings 19:1-4, 8-15a, Galatians 3:23-29 and Luke 8:26-39, preached by Kerry Enright at Knox Church Dunedin New Zealand on 23 June 2019.**

I’m grateful to Frederick Buechner whose masterful retelling of the Elijah story I have adapted for today.

In the contest between Elijah and the prophets of Baal to see whose God was the real thing, Elijah won the first round hands down. Starting out early in the morning on Mt. Carmel, the prophets of Baal pulled out all the stops to get their candidate to set fire to the sacrificial offering. They danced around the altar till their feet were sore. They made themselves hoarse shouting instructions and encouragement at the sky. They jabbed at themselves with knives thinking that the sight of blood would start things moving if anything would, but they might as well have saved themselves the trouble. And Elijah couldn't resist getting in a few digs. "Maybe Baal's flown to Fiji for the weekend," he said. "Maybe he's taking a nap." With such goading, the prophets whipped themselves into a greater and greater frenzy, but by mid-afternoon the sacrificial offering had begun to get a little high, and there was still no sign of fire from above.

Then it was Elijah's turn to show what Yahweh could do. First he had a trench dug around the altar and filled with water. Then he got a bucket brigade going, to give the offering a good dowsing. Then as soon as they'd finished, he got them to do it again for good measure. By the time they'd finished a third go-round, the whole place was awash, and Elijah looked as if he'd just swum Cook Strait. He then gave Yahweh the word to show his stuff. Elijah jumped back just in time. Lightning flashed. The water in the trench fizzed like fat on a hot stove. All that was left of the offering was a pile of ashes and a smell like an old hangi. The onlookers were beside themselves with enthusiasm and at a signal from Elijah demolished the losing team down to the last prophet.

Nobody could say whose victory had been greater, Yahweh's or Elijah's.

But it was clear they had won. Baal had been conquered. Victory was theirs. Or was it?

The same two people remained in power – Ahab and Jezebel. Queen Jezebel was determined to get even with Elijah for what he had done to her spiritual advisers. Having heard her threats, to save his skin Elijah escaped south, to Beersheba in Judah. He went from the mountain to the valley. from apparent victory, to a feeling of defeat. from what felt like success, to a sense of failure. A day's journey into the wilderness, he finds a solitary broom tree. "It is enough now, O Lord, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors." It is as if he saying: I thought I had achieved the decisive breakthrough, turned the corner, brought decisive change, but now I am being pursued.

Elijah slept. In the powerlessness of sleep - when he stopped imagining he had won or that he had lost, stopped focusing on what he had achieved or what he had not achieved, an angel touches him and feeds him. He lays down again, but the angel said, "Get up and eat otherwise the journey will be too much for you."

Ahh, the journey. Not a momentary win or a quick victory or a decisive turning point – it's a journey we are on. Forty days and forty nights – it's a long time – longer than you imagine, longer than you had planned for, longer than you can sustain on your own.

And then he came to the cave, a place of retreat. Dark, cold, isolated, hidden. He is shrinking himself so he cannot be found. Reducing his size so we can't be picked on ... except Yahweh. Yahweh calls him to the mountain. "Go and stand on the mountain before the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by."

And on the mountain Elijah experiences the pyrotechnics Moses had experienced. The lightning flashed, and after that a wind came up that almost blew Elijah off his feet, and after that the earth gave such a shake that it almost knocked him silly. But there wasn't so much as a peep out of Yahweh. Elijah stood there like a ringmaster when the lion won't jump through the hoop. Only when the fireworks were finished and a terrible hush fell over the mountain did Elijah hear something, and what he heard was so much like silence that it was only through the ear of faith that he knew it was Yahweh.

What worked for Moses wasn't for Elijah – a different person, a different call. It was clear now who had been the star at Mt. Carmel. Not even Elijah could make the Lord God of Hosts jump through a hoop like a lion or pop out like a rabbit from a hat.

He knew it was Yahweh, and Yahweh says: “Go back to the wilderness of Damascus.” Go back. To the long haul. To a deeper change than a single victory achieves. To the changing of the power structures.

Because the principalities and powers are there for the long haul. The international corporations have lobbyists at work year after year, decade by decade.

It is inspiring that children and young people march to address climate change and let's see it as an invitation to keep pressing fossil fuel companies to invest in a green economy, consumers to shift to sustainability and leaders to shift our economy from a focus on growth. We can lament the damage smoking does, and we need to keep challenging the influence of tobacco companies. We can lament what excessive drinking does, and we need to keep challenging the influence of the liquor lobby. We can persuade politicians to adopt enlightened policies, and we need to keep inviting the New Zealanders who vote for them to a vision of justice and equity. We can celebrate In one service 150 years of the University of Otago, and we need to keep helping students and staff come to faith in Jesus Christ with the interior shift in power that results. We can celebrate signs of growth in the church, and we need to keep living by the power of Christ and not other powers.

Paul wrote to the Galatians about a change in power structure – In Christ there is no longer Jew or Greek.

The story of the Gerasene demoniac is about a change of power. What possesses the Gerasene are legion, as powerful and as numerous as a Roman contingent. Demons are powers that have been corrupted to destroy, powers that destroy creation, that perpetuate the cycle of poverty, that trap people in violence, that lead churches to demean and diminish particular segments of our society.

These powers are not conquered in one battle or one win. For we are aiming for the day humankind will sit, clothed and in its right mind. We believe that, over time, social change can come from divine words and those won to them, that ongoing social critique can topple and transform oppressive power structures.

Christ forms communities for the long haul, to speak year after year and generation after generation, to look for the presence of God in the sheer silence of our insufficiency and the sufficiency of Christ.

Yahweh says – “You are not alone. I care for you. Return to the fray.”

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