

Barre Congregational Church

August 8, 2021: A Pastoral Message by Pastor Margaret Keyser

~ Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost ~

“To be Strengthened by the Lord.”

Our services can be found on our website at www.barrechurch.com and Facebook page.

Scripture Reading: 1 Kings 19 v 1-9

I. Introduction:

There are different reasons why we sometimes need to be strengthened in our body and our minds. Going through an illness can cause one to feel weak, which makes it important to rest and recuperate with the right nutrients and a little bit of exercise to get back on one's feet. Going through a stressful period at work, or family difficulties can make one feel rundown, with the need to be strengthened. Other life changing situations such as a big move from one place to another, for young people to go to college, losing a job can bring upon exhaustion and emotional stress that cause one to feel the need to rest and recuperate.

Sometimes one just needs a break from the regular routines of life and work. It is still summer, and July and August are the two months where many feel the need and have the opportunity to take that break, have a getaway and to rest and recuperate.

Elijah in our story finds himself at a moment in his life as a prophet when he needed strength and found it in a very special way. Let's have a look.

II. Elijah and Ahab

The Prophet Elijah's story is about the direct conflict between him and King Ahab, who during his reign of the Northern Kingdom, Israel from 869 – 850 BC worshipped the god Baal, under the influence of his wife Jezebel. He set up an altar for Baal and worshipped him, to provoke Yahweh, the God of Israel, says Chapter 16 v 33. Baal was the Canaanite god of storms, and the guardian of the rains and ensured the fertility of the soil, ensuring the abundance of crops, animals, and children. It is therefore to be understood that the Israelites would find this kind of

religion an appeal, because of their own survival in new environments, with a new agricultural way of life says J.R. Porter in his Illustrated Guide to the Bible.

Ahab was a king of tolerance, says Bernard Anderson in his book, "Understanding the Old Testament", but he also wanted to give his wife her freedom of worship. Jezebel was from the Phoenician religion and imported many Baal prophets from the Phoenician region and in the process, they cut off the number of prophets from Yahweh. The altars of Yahweh were torn down, prophets were killed, and the remaining followers went into hiding. Elijah saw what was going on and gave this word to Ahab in Chapter 17 v 1, "As the Lord, the God of Israel, lives, whom I serve, there will be neither dew nor rain in the next few years except at my word." You can imagine what this must have meant and done to Ahab and Jezebel, hearing these words. The Lord then ordered Elijah to leave the area and travel Eastward, knowing that his life would be in danger. We see later the contest between Elijah and the 400 plus prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel, whereby he challenged the prophets of Baal to call upon their god to bring fire on the bulls that he prepared as sacrifice. They were unsuccessful in their calls and shouts and dances. Instead, Elijah's call upon Yahweh to bring fire on the bulls he prepared with soaking wet water came to the ears of Yahweh, and fire came down on the bulls and burned up the sacrifice, the wood, the stones and the soil, and water in the trench around it. After that Elijah called for all the prophets of Baal to be killed. What a story, and what revenge he would encounter by Ahab and his wife Jezebel. That's where we find Elijah, when he fled from the hands of Jezebel, knowing he would not survive. He had fled from the North to the South in Judah, afraid and looking for safety. "I have had enough, Lord. Take my life," he said.

God promises to always reach out to those who call upon God's Name. We see that in the Book of Psalms all the time. That is what Elijah did. He called upon God, not for help, but that he might die, acknowledging that he was no better than his ancestors. We saw quite a bit of victoriousness in him as he was ordering the Baal prophets to be killed after they failed to have their god Baal set fire to their sacrifice. So, he is feeling like a wretch, a murderer himself, filled with shame and remorse. Yahweh's response is not of rejection, but of compassion, sending an angel twice to feed and give water to Elijah. In his exhaustion and fear he called upon God. He would not die but find his strength there from the hands of God, for the journey ahead.

III. Conclusion: The Story of Elijah and us

When God asked Elijah what he was doing there, he acknowledged that he was zealous in his following of God. He thought he was doing everything to fight for the Name of Yahweh against those who wanted to destroy the Name of Yahweh. God asked him twice what he was doing there, and he repeated himself. I have been zealous for your Name, Lord!

We all are here, because we follow God, and we tirelessly serve God through all that we do for the church. We are tired sometimes, from trying to make everything look good, and sound good, because we love our church, and we love God. I am tired sometimes, and I am wondering whether you find yourself tired also, from doing what you feel you are called to do, whether for the church, or your work, your loved ones, your friends, because you live your life in service of God and others? We may not be a Prophet Elijah and we may not be encountering Kings and presidents and all those in power, but we are called by God to spread the Good News of God's Son, Jesus Christ and we are called to live a life that pleases God. On this journey of life with God, we may be asked by God in the silence of the night, "What are you doing here?" We may or may not have a response, but we can be assured that God sees our zeal and our commitment. In addition, it is important to lay down when we feel tired and vulnerable, and to know that we are strengthened by the Lord, as our theme this morning says.

We have an opportunity to check in with one another, and see who is tired, who needs a break from an illness, struggles in their family, and this long journey through the pandemic, where everyone was working so hard to serve God and our community inside and outside the church. We are still working, and maybe God wants us to rest some, scale down and find our strength from God.

It is summer, and soon it will be fall. As Pastor, I encourage all of us to take care of ourselves, and each other. Allow ourselves to be healed by the other. Let us heal ourselves and one another, and may the Hand of God serve us, feed us, soothe us, and give us peace.

Amen