



August 8, 2021
Rev. Dr. Thomas Evans
I Kings 19:4-8
"Touched By An Angel"



While he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness. He came to a broom bush, sat down under it and prayed that he might die. "I have had enough, Lord," he said. "Take my life; I am no better than my ancestors." Then he lay down under the bush and fell asleep. All at once an angel touched him and said, "Get up and eat." He looked around, and there by his head was some bread baked over hot coals, and a jar of water. He ate and drank and then lay down again. The angel of the Lord came back a second time and touched him and said, "Get up and eat, for the journey is too much for you." So he got up and ate and drank. Strengthened by that food, he traveled forty days and forty nights until he reached Horeb, the mountain of God. I Kings 19:4-8

Certainly God can be found anywhere, but there are so-called "thin places" in which God's presence is more readily available to us and Elijah desperately needed such a place.

He is on a pilgrimage, for he is returning to the place of his ancestors where they received the Ten Commandments and where Moses spoke with God. Curiously enough, he is taking this journey in reverse. They made their way from Egypt to Horeb to the Promised Land. But Elijah is leaving this sacred home to find the place of deep encounter. It is a homecoming of sorts, a spiritual homecoming, as he journeys to the place of deep memory for his people.

Before I was born in the heart of Brazil, my family experienced a tragedy known to many missionaries. Robert and Abigail Evans' third child, Rachel, died for lack of modern medicine. Several years later, after I was born and still an infant, the

family had to flee Brazil to escape an increasingly repressive government and fundamentalist church.

Nineteen years later we made a pilgrimage in which the stories of my family came to life, as we canoed down the Amazon, toured Rio, and finally came to Chapeco, the village where they lived and worked. My mother's stories took on new meaning and my heritage became a deeper part of me, as I walked the same earth, experienced the same smells, and saw the same sights. But the next event we would do for the first time all together. Neither my mother, nor my brothers ever saw Rachel's grave. We scoured the cemetery for what felt like hours and after giving up, finally the groundskeeper found it. On her headstone are the words from Psalm 1, "She shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of waters that brings forth its fruit in its season." I finally felt connected to the sister I never knew. In retracing the steps of our

ancestors, we actually meet ourselves, who share our DNA and our stories.

But Elijah would make his journey alone. Terrified, he is the last of the prophets and the queen has promised to kill him. He feels an utter failure. Not because he didn't succeed. He defeated the prophets of Baal in a historically spectacular fashion, but as soon as he was threatened, he folded in fear. The seemingly invincible Elijah is fleeing for his life.

It feels inexplicable to us – that someone who can stand down hundreds of foes and vanquish them with confidence can wilt under the pressure in a moment.

But there has been a lot of that lately. Simone Biles, the most decorated gymnast in all history, seemingly invincible, whose every vault, and floor routine set new records, too found herself needing her own private moment of sorts. Shocking the world, she withdrew from most all events at this year's Olympics. The *twisties* had gotten in her head, a condition in which the gymnast, while flipping and twisting, loses her orientation, no longer knows which way is up, and can just as easily land on her head as her feet. The critics came out in droves, calling her weak.

But to see what she has overcome, through the sexual abuse of Dr. Nassar, and how she insists on holding not only Dr.

Nassar, but also those complicit accountable – I cannot imagine a more brave nor courageous person. And remember, she is only 24 years old. Every person on this planet has a breaking point. And sympathy and support is what they need when it happens, and that is exactly what God was giving to Elijah.

What Elijah and Simone Biles truly needed was a pause. Alice Walker wrote, "Wisdom requires a pause." She writes:

One of the many gifts I received from strangers after writing "The Color Purple" was a bright yellow volume of the I Ching. It opened to the 63rd hexagram: "After Completion." This is a time when a major transition from confusion to order has been completed ...according to the I Ching, this is a time not of relaxation, but of caution.

...Wisdom, however, requests a pause. If we cannot give ourselves such a pause, the Universe will likely give it to us. In the form of illness, in the form of a massive Mercury in retrograde, in the form of our car breaking down, our roof starting to leak, our garden starting to dry up. Our government collapsing. And we find ourselves required to stop, to sit down, to reflect. This is the time of "the

pause,” the universal place of stopping. The universal moment of reflection.

I encourage you not to fear it. And why is it important not to fear the pause? Because some of the most courageous people on earth are scared of it, as I have been myself.

At the moment Elijah had been forced to pause – after his spectacular success he would reflect on his soul.

For Elijah, the weakness of his people is replayed; except they wanted to go back to Egypt to avoid dying of hunger, he fled God’s enemy not trusting in divine protection, but both wound up at Horeb.

Despite God’s mighty acts, he feared Jezebel, who promised to kill him, more than he trusted God. But he knows the stories and the power of Horeb. If he goes to the central place of revelation, to the mountain of God, perhaps it will be the place that can restore his courage and his faith.

But the journey is long and the road is hard. He fled so fast, he is without food and water, and he is not going to make it. The mountain is 40 days in the distance and he cannot possibly gather the strength nor the willpower to make it one more step. He has given up, lays down under a broom tree, and yearns for death.

Elijah has come to a realization. He is not the great hero he thought he was.

He opines, “I am no better than my ancestors.” He knows it because, like them, he saw God work wonders. In Egypt, it was the plagues, and with Elijah, it was fire from heaven to consume the offering and the enemies of God.

Many people grow up pledging they will not become their mothers, or they will not become their fathers, but most of them discover they were mistaken.

This journey has revealed to Elijah something about his character; he is weaker than he knows. But this journey will also reveal something about the character of God; with even a small cake, you can make it through.

The theme of bread is carried throughout scripture. For the last two weeks, at the feeding of the 5,000 in John’s gospel, it was a red herring. It confused the people and led them to follow Jesus for the wrong reasons. In today’s passage, it stands front and center, for it will miraculously sustain Elijah for 40 days and nights through the punishing wilderness.

The wilderness is a time of deprivation and despair. But oddly enough, a place punctuated by moments of simple provision that empower your soul to greater strength and heights than you

knew before – for it is the moment that you learn to trust.

In Buffalo New York, cancer had stricken a good friend in the church. She endured the many rounds of chemo, lost her hair, and held onto her faith. It went into remission for several years and she felt stronger and clearer-eyed from the experience. But it came back. Harder than before. She didn't want to endure chemo again. She was ready to accept, perhaps what was her fate. She was ready to leave this life and move onto the next. But still...to leave her husband, to leave her daughter, to leave her son. It was too soon.

Her cloudy mood was reflected by the cloudy, stormy sky. But God would grant her a gift. Instead of small cake, it was a clear sky. She stepped outside ready to rail at God, and as soon as she did, for a brief moment, the clouds parted and a dazzling full rainbow graced the sky. She saw that ancient sign of promise as a promise for her. God was going to be with her each step of the way, and despite knowing it would be a long hard journey like Elijah's, she screwed up her courage and kept that rainbow in her heart.

But God did not do it alone.

For Elijah, God sent a messenger that is an angel. The angel touched him, rousing him from his slumber unto death. So many of you have been that angel for others.

Whether it is washing your elderly parents' feet, wiping their chin, or singing the good 'ole hymns, your acts of love and compassion are a message from God – the world has not forgotten them. The world still needs them. They are loved. You will be with them all through that wilderness until they too scale the mountain of God. Amen.