

Two amazing moments captured in time in the witness of Scripture.

Two men, standing on the edge of fear, the hour of greatest trial at hand. Two men poised to have their faith tested.

Elijah, hidden in a cave, fearful for his life.

Jesus, praying in a garden, praying that his life might be spared.

Elijah, who thought that he had been through enough – who had asked God to take his life that he might escape this world.

Jesus, who knew what awaited him in Pilate's courts, asking God to spare his life.

For Elijah – a wind, an earthquake, and a fire, followed by a still, small voice.

For Jesus – he hoped he would find at least some comfort in his friends, but they could not even keep their eyes open.

Each arrived in their journey in very different ways. In one of the most .... colorful... stories in the Old Testament, Elijah had challenged the prophets of Ba'al to a type of duel. They were to call on their god to rain fire from the sky. The prophets of Ba'al prayed from morning til noon, with no response. Elijah was not a good example of self-restraint. He taunted the prophets when their god did not answer them:

“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.” [1 Kings 18:27]

Finally Elijah called on God, and instantly fire came down from heaven. Surely an awesome display of the God of Israel's strength and power. Elijah responds by rounding up all the prophets of Ba'al and having them killed. Swift justice, indeed.

It was that violence which caused Jezebel to call for Elijah's life, and that threat which caused Elijah to flee for his life. His response was to have an angel sent to him to guide him on his journey, to find safe shelter from the storm, and to hear the still small voice from God.

Compare that with Jesus. Ever faithful, Jesus spends His last night with His friends at the Passover meal, preparing to be the one eternal sacrifice for all. After the meal He goes out to pray, bringing his closest friends with him. Jesus, in the garden, on the night when he would be

arrested. Praying that he could be spared the task that lay before him. Jesus feared for His life. He had seen what was to come. You remember the rest of the story -- he went back to find his closest friends had fallen asleep, they could not even stay awake one hour. Jesus admonished them and went back to pray a second time. He found his friends asleep once again and this time he did not even bother to wake them. He went back to pray a third time with the same plea and the same promise, "If it is possible, let it pass.... if it is not possible, I will follow your will."

Elijah had been – zealous – if not entirely righteous in the way he dealt with those who disagreed with him. He was given protection and comfort.

Jesus had been righteous, showing the love of God in all that He did and said. He prayed fervently. Luke's Gospel records that Jesus' prayer was so intense that blood came from his forehead. Three times He prayed. No earthquake. No fire. No wind. No still small voice.

Elijah stood at the edge of the mountain cave and heard the voice of God. What response did Jesus receive? What word of comfort came to Him in His hour of greatest need? None.

Can you think of the time in your life when you felt yourself standing at that place? It may not have looked anything like what either Elijah or Jesus experienced, in fact it almost certainly didn't. But the one universal truth that we can all relate to is that time in our life which we consider to be our darkest hour. It may be that those are the experiences which (more than any other) connect us to one another. Yet they are the experiences that we also find most difficult to share with each other. Hence another paradox of human existence – that which might bring us closest to each other is exactly that which we struggle most to discuss.

I have no training in psychology or anything like it, so I cannot attempt an answer as to why we have such trouble talking about that which is closest to us. It may be because we like to consider ourselves in control – and those times when we suffer most remind us that we are clearly not in control. There are plenty of possibilities, and probably more than one of them touch the truth.

Now I will not be suggesting any group therapy activity here today where we share those experiences together. Those experience can be both helpful and rewarding, but that is not why we are here this morning.

Instead I would like to offer a model for us during these trials, a reminder from the witness of Scripture that I hope will be a comfort and strength during those times when they come. The first is to pray – and pray without worrying about what your prayer actually says. When we come together for worship it is fitting and appropriate to have prayers that are carefully crafted and reverential. In your own prayer life, however, the most important element of prayer is not the high eloquence of the language but the sincerity of the heart. Remember Elijah prayed that he might die. It may not have been a prayer we would want to *encourage* but it was an honest prayer from the heart.

So the first thing that we must do is pray. This may also be the hardest thing to do with all the emotions that may be threaten to overcome us. But pray we must – whatever words come out, we just let them, to say whatever they will or even what Paul talked about in Romans chapter 8

Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

There is no need to worry that God won't understand our prayer, even if the words seem to fail us.

The second thing we must do when standing at the edge of fear is realize that sometimes we will feel that we have been heard – as Elijah did. And there are sometimes that we will feel that we have not been heard, as Jesus did.

Why pray? Why pray when there is so much else that needs to be done? First it reminds us that we are not the ultimate power in our lives. When we want to grip the reins tightly and steer the course, it is precisely then that we need to be reminded that God is at the wheel – God is not our co-pilot unless we have refused to recognize His rightful spot.

We pray also because it changes us. It may not change our situation, it may not change the outcome, it may not change anyone else – but it can change us. When Elijah prayed to God, he was changed from wanting to run away to being willing to go where God sent him.

When Jesus prayed to God, although His request was not granted, it solidified His commitment to the will of God – so that what He was asked to give, He gave freely. He prayed for His life and then laid it down for us. Jesus' prayer was answered – although perhaps not in the way that Jesus' expected. Jesus' life was not spared, but His life was not truly lost either.

God's ways are higher than our ways. We know this. Paul wrote about this as well when he said

We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose

That requires faith, and not an “easy answers” faith, but a faith that will be nurtured by the God who created you, loves you, and keeps you.