



8th Sunday after Pentecost
August 7, 2011
“Losing Focus”

Texts: 1 Kings 19:9-18; Psalm 85:8-13; Romans 10:5-15; Matthew 14:22-33

Don't you feel even a bit sorry for Elijah?

Having engaged in a battle with the prophets of Ba'al as to whose God is greater, and winning this battle, Elijah is now fearing for his life. Queen Jezebel, being a sore loser, has now promised (although threatened would probably be a better description) to do to Elijah what he has done to her prophets: kill them. On top of that, Elijah is angry that the Israelites have ignored his pleas and his calls to repentance, and have proceeded to worship other gods.

Having had enough, Elijah runs away. Only he does not run away – he runs far away so that Jezebel cannot reach him. Elijah runs out of the country, leaving his servant behind in order to be told when Jezebel is no longer searching for him.

Elijah's running takes him forty days and forty nights into the wilderness. Eventually, Elijah reaches Mt. Horeb, the mountain of the Lord, also known as Mt. Sinai.

This trip is not a well planned trip! Elijah has taken nothing with him: no food, no water, no tent, not even a blanket to cover himself at night.

Thinking that he has gone far enough away from his problems, Elijah seeks shelter under a tree, and pleads: "Lord, this is too much – take my life – not that I may live, but that I may die!"

The Lord has other plans for Elijah. The Lord provides sustenance and strength: a meal of bread baked on stones and water. The Lord tells Elijah to eat for there is still a long way ahead of Elijah on the journey. As part of dinner conversation, the Lord asks Elijah, 'what are you doing here?'

By now, Elijah is into a full blown self-pity party. He is jealous on behalf of the Lord. He is angry because he has been left by himself to do the Lord's work. Elijah is even angrier that because he is the only one left doing the Lord's work, that he is now being persecuted for it.

Poor Elijah indeed! In his misery and in his self-pity, he cannot see or remember that the Israelites *not only* helped him rebuild the altar of the Lord, **but also** fell down and worshipped the Lord when the fire of the Lord burnt the altar, the offering that had been placed upon the altar, and the water that was in the trench around the altar. In addition to that, the Israelites then helped Elijah seize the prophets of Ba'al so they would not escape or flee. For Elijah, everybody hates him, nobody likes him, guess he'll go eat worms!

But notice what the Lord does. He gently asks Elijah “What are you doing here?” Elijah defends his cause before the Lord. The Lord does not join Elijah in this pity party. Instead, the Lord tells Elijah where to meet him. Elijah does as he is told: standing on the mountain, in the earthquake, in the wind, before hearing nothing but the sheer sound of silence. Only in the sound of sheer silence does Elijah hear the Lord. The Lord gives Elijah a new direction, and a new sense of purpose of what is yet to come. Where Elijah thinks he is the only one left to listen and hear the way of the Lord, the Lord will leave seven thousand who will not give allegiance to Ba’al or bend the knee. Elijah is also to anoint others as kings and prophets to replace what had been.

All is not lost for Elijah. Nor is all lost for us. There are times where we turn our attention away from God. When we turn our attention away from God, we fail to see or to hear the bigger picture, that ultimately, God is in control. In those times where we hear praise as a whisper, and criticism as a shout, in those times where we find ourselves overwhelmed by the concerns and struggles of daily living; in those times where we think nobody knows the trouble I’ve seen, or that we are the only ones who have it rough, we forget. We forget to lean into the everlasting arms. We forget that there is indeed a wideness in God’s mercy.

In the wideness of God’s mercy is also the reality that while we have never been promised an easy life, God did promise and has promised to always be with us, to never leave us or forsake us.

One of the best loved hymns is the hymn of the day which we will sing shortly. The hymn was written by Horatio Gates Spafford, a prominent Chicago lawyer in the late 1870’s and a close friend to D.L. Moody. Spafford and his family experienced several tragedies back to back. In 1870, Spafford lost his only son at the age of four, to scarlet fever. Spafford then lost most of his real estate investments in the Chicago fire of 1871.

Recognizing he and his family needed a vacation, the family decided to go to England. It so happened that D.L. Moody was preparing to do an evangelical campaign in England, and invited the Spafford’s to join him. The Spafford’s left Chicago, and went to New York to take a steamer from New York to London. A business obligation came up at the last minute for Spafford. His family went on without him.

Nine days later, Spafford received a telegram from his wife stating, “saved alone”. While crossing the Atlantic, the ship that the Spafford family was on collided with another ship. The ship sunk in twelve minutes, claiming the lives of two hundred and twenty six passengers. Of those who were drowned, four were the Spafford’s remaining children. Spafford’s wife was rescued, yet she despaired over the loss of her family. As she later recounted the experience, she would remember someone telling her, “it is easy to be grateful and good when you have so much, but take care you are not a fair weather friend to God.”

Upon hearing the news, Spafford immediately took the next available boat to Britain. As he traveled to comfort his wife, Spafford was called to join the captain on the bridge. The captain informed Spafford they were at the exact location where the ship his family had been on had collided with the other ship.

After being at the spot of losing his family, Spafford returned to his cabin, and proceeded to write the following words:

When peace like a river attendeth my way,
When sorrows like sea billows roll
Whatever my lot, thou has taught me to say,
It is well with my soul, it is well.

In those times where the adversity and trials of life seem too large to handle, may we be able to keep our focus on Jesus, that we too may be able to sing, “it is well, it is well, with my soul!” Thanks be to God! Amen!