

May what is spoken here and what is heard be spoken and heard in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Back when I was newly ordained and laboring as a Chaplain in that corner of God's Kingdom known as Yale University, I remember none too fondly my first Christmas break. How was I supposed to know that they changed the locks on all the buildings during vacation?

Of course it makes sense, for security reasons, but imagine my surprise, as I tried to get into my own office, and discovered that my key didn't work. My first thought was: 'is this how they fire people around here?'. And that is what I can only imagine must have run through Elijah's mind in the episode we've just heard in our first lesson, from the first Book of the Kings.

"The Lord said to Elijah, 'Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus; when you arrive, ... you shall anoint Elisha ... as prophet in your place.'" What do you suppose Elijah must have thought when God told him to pick his own successor?

I know what I'd have been thinking. "Why do I need a successor? Am I being fired? What did I do wrong? Why is God displeased with me?" And of course, we're as clue-less about what's going on as Elijah was because the lesson that we heard this morning is an odd little snippet in the middle of a much longer story.

Not surprisingly, the little bit we've heard probably doesn't make much sense because it's taken out of context, which is it's a bit like seeing the middle twenty minutes of a movie. But if you think about it, isn't that how our lives are: fragments of a larger story – a story that is often hard to understand while we're in the middle of it. Still, that's how we do live our daily lives - in the midst of those kinds of fragments, much like the story of Elijah.

Elijah's story begins way back when King Ahab and Queen Jezebel – and no, we're not talking about my Cocker Spaniel, Jezebel, but the original Jezebel – forsook God to worship idols. Elijah, the prophet, rants against

them and calls on God to punish them. It's hardly a surprise that Jezebel got thoroughly annoyed and decided to put out a contract on Elijah.

Elijah, being no fool, fled for his life, and on the way, he decided it was all just too much for him. So he lay down under a tree and told God that he was just too worn out to live any more.

Well, God took pity on poor Elijah, which is when Elijah found his way into a cave where he heard the still, small voice of God. And while I'm sure that still, small voice was intended to comfort one very discouraged prophet, it was also a pep talk on God's part. Come on, Elijah, you're discouraged, and I can certainly understand why. But part of the reason you're discouraged is because you think you have to solve the world's problems all by yourself. Elijah, you can't fix the world all by yourself; fixing the world is my job. All I need you to do right now is take care of one tiny part of my plan: go anoint Elisha.

God wasn't firing Elijah; instead, God was making sure that the prophet's voice wouldn't be stilled after Elijah's time on this earth had ended. Something else God did when he had Elijah anoint his own successor was give Elijah two things he didn't have right at the moment. God gave Elijah, first, a sense of direction for the next segment of his ministry. God also gave Elijah a companion.

Elijah, God said, you are not all alone, even though you may feel like it in the face of Jezebel and her armies, and I'm not firing you. Instead I'm asking you to be mentor to Elisha, so he can learn the ropes from you.

Elijah's story, I am absolutely convinced, is our story too. Elijah's story is the story of anyone who's ever been discouraged because they feel they're the only ones who care for issues of righteousness and justice and peace. Elijah's story is the story of all of us who have ever felt at the absolute end of our rope. Elijah's story is the story of anyone who's ever feared being put out to pasture.

Elijah's story is also the story of a God who doesn't necessarily – or even usually – magically remove injustice or poverty or war. Our God doesn't do away with the Jezebels of this world – the human ones, that is.

But, ours is a God who says: "I will give you the strength and the courage you need to deal with the Jezebels of this world. I'm not here to remove your problems, but instead to help you carry them."

Ours is a God, not so much of solutions as a God of companionship. *Com panis*, 'with bread', is the origin of our word 'companion', one who breaks bread with us, and stays with us, no matter what. God with us: a God who strengthens our wobbly knees and our shaken resolve, a God who promises that we need never be alone.

And we are not alone – ever – even though sometimes we feel like it in the face of the trials of this world. We are not alone, because God arrives at our table – to be our *companion* when we're hungry or lonely or discouraged. God also arrives at our table to nurture us so that we may be companions to each other.

And supremely, God arrived in our world - in the person of Jesus Christ – to guarantee that the human Jezebels of this world don't have the last word. God has the last word, and the last word is Love.

We're not being fired by God. Instead, we're being called by God: and called to be companions to each other. called to take our share in helping God's loving plans for this world become reality.

That is indeed a holy calling. Amen.

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