

“Because He Was Faithful”

1 Kings 19:1-15a

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When I was a student in seminary, I had a friend who returned to school after the summer break with a prized possession.

“Hey, Ben” he said as he was unpacking boxes, moving into his room. “Check this out!” And he handed me a bottle of water. Not like you buy from the store...it was a water bottle, like you’d fill up from your tap to drink and take with you to work.

On closer inspection, however, it clearly wasn’t tap water.

It was kind of murky water.

It looked like it might have things floating in it.

I shrugged my shoulders. “What’s so special about this water?”

“Oh,” my friend replied. “This isn’t just any water. This water is from the SEA OF GALILEE! You know, in ISRAEL! My parents were in the Middle East this summer, and they brought back some holy water to me as a gift. This is HOLY WATER!”

Well, about a week or so later, my friend and I were with a group of guys, we were in my friend’s dorm room, we’d just gotten done with a game of basketball.

My friend left the room for a moment.

One of the guys with us said, “Man, am I thirsty.”

And he opened the refrigerator, pulled out a bottle of water, and drank it all.

My friend came back...and he looked at the empty bottle.

It wasn’t just any bottle. It was THE bottle.

“Who drank MY HOLY WATER??!!”

“What do you mean...Holy Water?”

“That water you drank...that was from the Sea of Galilee!”

“The Sea of Galilee? Why did you put water from the Sea of Galilee IN YOUR REFRIGERATOR??”

Now I didn't have a dog in this fight, so I was kind of enjoying the moment.

But if I had been in the shoes of my friend, I'm not sure I would have been enjoying the moment.

He didn't OFFER the guy that water.

The guy just took the water.

And if I had been the one to drink the water, I'm not so sure I would have been enjoying the moment.

Why put water from the Sea of Galilee in your refrigerator?

In other words, neither person did ANYTHING wrong...but both my friend and our seminary classmate ended up in a place that they did not plan or want or intend to be.

Now I know that's just a silly story about some Sea of Galilee water.

But what happens when it's not a silly story?

Have you ever found yourself in the position of doing something that you thought was a harmless thing to do, or the right thing to do, or perhaps a challenging and FAITHFUL thing to do...

and yet instead of ending up in a good place,
you end up in a difficult place,

a place that you did not want to be?

Some of you may have seen the movie *Concussion* that came out a number of years ago. It was a book before it was a movie. Good book.

It tells the story of Dr. Bennet Omalu, a forensic pathologist who discovered a new disease—CTE—Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy. CTE is well known today, but back then...no one had seen it.

Dr. Omalu discovered it in the brains of deceased professional football players. These players, like the Hall of Fame Center Mike Webster, had retired from football and then died at a far-too-early age because of repeated concussions to their brains.

Dr. Omalu is from Nigeria, and knew nothing about football at the time. But he was working in Pittsburgh, and when he discovered the disease in the brains of these deceased players, he thought that the NFL would be glad, that they would welcome the information so that they could do something to prevent and solve the problem.

Of course, that's not what happened.

The NFL saw Dr. Omalu's discovery as a threat to their industry. They could lose money. Publicity would be bad. They immediately tried to discredit him, calling him a fraud.

Now Dr. Omalu is a person of faith, and he recounts how during that time, he was getting very discouraged. His professional reputation, his livelihood—it was all at stake.

He was just doing his job, and he found himself in a place he did not want to be.¹

¹ Jeanne Marie Laskas, *Concussion*, New York: Random House, 2015.

Have you ever experienced this?

You were just doing your job, trying to live a faithful life, and suddenly you found yourself in a place you never wanted to be?

I raise all this because it's the problem that the prophet Elijah was dealing with in our text for today.

In chapter 18, Elijah has just made a mockery of the false prophets of Baal. You can read it after worship, but the short version is that Elijah humiliates them—in front of all these Israelites, Elijah proved that the prophets of Baal were false prophets following a false god.

And what happens next?

Does King Ahab honor Elijah?

Do the people of Israel give thanks for Elijah? No...

“Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done....Then Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah, saying, ‘So may the gods do to me, and more also, if I do not make your life like the life of one of them by this time tomorrow.’”

In other words, Jezebel—a follower of Baal—wants to kill Elijah.

So Elijah flees for his life.

He goes a day's journey into the wilderness.

And he says:

“It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life...”

I mean, whew.

Elijah is done.

He's depressed, he's despondent, he's in the dumps.

But Elijah's problem today is not so much psychological.
It's THEOLOGICAL.

Why didn't God reward Elijah for the good work that Elijah just did on behalf of God?

I do not know the answer to that question.
I do know that Elijah is not alone in this regard.

Look through Scripture.

Time and again, those who listen to God,
and are faithful to God,
and do what God asks them to do—
they do not find themselves with more comfort.

They find themselves knee-deep in calamity.

Do you remember the prophet Jeremiah?

Because Jeremiah did what God told him to do, this mighty prophet was put in stocks, he was put in prison, he was charged with treason...and left to die in the mud.

Or how about the Apostle Paul—do you remember how Paul described what it was like to be an early builder of God's Church?

Did it mean lots of likes on his social media page?

Did it mean a nice retirement from the Board of Pensions of the PC(USA)?

Here's how Paul described his job:

“Five times I have received the forty lashes minus one...Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I received a stoning.”

“Three times I was shipwrecked; for a night and a day I was adrift at sea...in danger from rivers, danger from bandits, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers and sisters...

Or just look at our first text for today.

The disciples get into a boat with Jesus.

The boat runs into a storm.

Jesus is sleeping, they wake Jesus up, so Jesus stills the storm and then he rebukes the disciples.

Of course, the most curious part of this story is how the disciples found themselves in that boat. Why did they get into the boat? Jesus told them to get into the boat. Jesus said: Let's go across to the other side of the lake.

They were just doing what Jesus told them to do. And instead of taking them on a gentle little journey, following Jesus led them straight into a storm!

Let me get at it like this.

Once upon a time there was a retiree who purchased a modest home near a junior high school. He spent the first few weeks of his retirement in peace and contentment. But then the new school year began.

The very next afternoon, three young boys, full of youthful, after-school enthusiasm, came down his street, beating merrily on ever trash can they encountered. The crashing percussion continued day after day,

until finally this newly retired gentleman decided it was time to take some action.

The next afternoon, he walked out to meet the young percussionists as they banged their way down the street. He said to them:

“You kids are a lot of fun. I like to see you express your exuberance like that. In fact, I used to do the same thing when I was your age. Will you do me a favor? I’ll give you each a dollar if you’ll promise to come around every day and do your thing.”

The kids were elated and continued to do a bang-up job on the trashcans.

After a few days, the old-timer greeted the kids again, but this time he had a sad smile on his face:

“This recession has really put a dent in my income,” he told them. “From now on, I’ll only be able to pay you 50 cents to beat on the cans.”

The noisemakers were obviously displeased, but they accepted his offer and continued with their afternoon ruckus. A few days later, this wily retiree approached them again as they drummed their way down the street.

“Look,” he said, “I haven’t received my Social Security check yet, so I’m not going to be able to give you more than 25 cents. Will that be okay?”

“A lousy quarter?” the drum leader exclaimed. “If you think we’re going to waste our time beating these dumb cans for a quarter, you’re nuts! No way, dude. We quit!”

And the retiree lived in peace and serenity the remainder of his days.

Now it's tempting to think like that.
To imagine that peace and serenity is the goal of discipleship or even the goal of God's Church.

But I don't think that's true.

Getting back to Dr. Omalu for a moment...

In the midst of his discouragement, he called his sister one day and said, "You know what? I'm getting tired. Before Mike Webster...I did my own thing. I led a very simple, easy life. ...I wish I never met Mike Webster."

And she said, "No, Bennet. You think it's by chance that this is happening. Everybody has a calling [from God]...with your knowledge, you can help these people..."²

In other words, Dr. Omalu's sister told him:
God has a job for you.
God is the one who is **SENDING** you into this storm.

Many years ago, I was at a Presbytery meeting and heard about a Presbyterian church that ran into a storm. It wasn't a big storm, it was a small storm.

² Omalu's conversation with his sister is told in a "Frontline" interview from March 25, 2013, and can be found at <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/sports/league-of-denial/the-frontline-interview-dr-bennet-omalu/>.

This church was adjacent to a high school, and it happened that some of the teenagers at the high school were avoiding school in the church parking lot, doing things that they should not have been doing when they should have been in class.

So some folks in the church got together, and they came up with a plan: we'll police our parking lot.

Next time those knuckleheads come our way, we'll catch 'em.
And we'll call the school.
And that will be the end of our problem.

Everyone agreed to the plan, but driving home from the church, one of the members says that God spoke to him. And God told him that God did not want the church to police those students. God wanted the church to minister to those students.

And the church member driving his car home, he said to God, "Uh, God, don't you think you've got the wrong guy here? I don't LIKE teenagers. I don't even like MY OWN teenager!"

But God would not listen to him.

So the man went back and told his church, and they decided to set up a ministry...not to convert the students, but just to offer some hospitality...some donuts and juice before school started.

They got to know the teenagers.

And now instead of a problem, that church found itself with a new set of friends that it never had before.

Do you see what we're talking about this morning?

Look, I don't know what storms you might be facing at this moment.

Maybe you're dealing with aging parents.

Maybe you're barely keeping your head above water with one of your children.

Maybe you just feel adrift, and you're not sure what to do with your life...

It's tempting to ask, in the midst of whatever difficulty you're facing: Why me?

I've asked that question.

At different times in my life, that has been my question.

But I will always be indebted to the church member who reminded me that that's not the question.

The question...is why not me?

What if God has sent you into whatever storm you might be facing, not because God is mad at you or wants to punish you, but because God has a job for you...because God wants you to be the very one to share God's love and God's grace in the midst of whatever difficulty has come across your path?

Back in the 19th century, the Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard wrote that he'd been out and about in Copenhagen, and he had noticed a girl with a beggar's basket, leading three musicians down the street, begging.

The musicians were blind.

They were trained, classically trained musicians.

They were playing Mozart and Beethoven; it was just marvelous music.

And around them gathered a little crowd of people, people who had run into hard times, people who had no means, who didn't have any money. And down the street, clattering in their chariots, went those who had money, going to the evening's entertainment, paying no mind to those who were begging.

Kierkegaard wrote in his Journal:

“There are two kinds of people in the world; those who are willing but cannot and those who are able, but will not.”

But as the late preacher Fred Craddock once put it, Kierkegaard was wrong.

There are really three kinds of people in the world.

Those who are willing, but because of the storms that they've had to face in life, they cannot help the way they'd like to help.

Then there are those who are able, but because of their own insecurities, their own focus on the self, they do not do what is needed to help.

Which leaves us with the third kind of person.

The third kind of person is one who knows that they won't always get rewarded or recognized for doing the right thing. They might even face more difficulties in life because of their generosity and gentleness.

Their faithfulness doesn't send them away from life's storms...it sends them straight into the storms.

In other words, three kinds of people:
There are those who are willing, but cannot.
And there are those who are able, but will not.
And then there's you.³

Amen.

³ The sermon referenced here is "Does God Have Too Many Children?", by the Rev. Dr. Fred B. Craddock, in *The Collected Sermons of Fred B. Craddock*, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011.