



ST. BARTHOLOMEW the APOSTLE ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH

19th Sunday 2021

The human instinct is to block suffering and pain. This is especially true in the West where we have been influenced by the “rationalism” of the Enlightenment. We really don’t know how to hurt! We simply do not know what to do with our suffering and pain, our depression, discouragements and disillusion.

The great wisdom traditions are trying to teach us that these feelings aren’t something from which to run. It’s a liminal space, a time of transformation. In fact, we can’t risk getting rid of the pain until we’ve learned what it has to teach us and it—grief, suffering, loss, pain—always has something to teach us!

Our Old Testament lesson today gives us a snapshot of a man in the depths of depression and despair. He is none other than Elijah, the greatest prophet in the Old Testament. And this moment in the prophet’s life happened at a most surprising time, right on the heels of his greatest triumph, the mountaintop moment when he single-handedly faced down all 450 of the false



ST. BARTHOLOMEW the APOSTLE ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH

prophets of Baal and scored a mighty and decisive victory over this false religion within Israel.

You would think Elijah would be riding on the energy of that victory for a long time. And perhaps he thought that too. But instead, the wicked Queen Jezebel sent a threatening message to the prophet, since he had dared to stand against her sanctioned religion of Baal. You might think that Elijah would simply laugh at this latest threat, given how mightily God had sided with him against the false prophets. But instead, Elijah crumbled, and he ran for his life into the wilderness.

When he couldn't run any more, he slumped down under a broom tree. (A broom tree is a desert shrub. In the Bible, desert shrubs appear in moments of despair as well as moments of divine encounters. Job describes the broom tree as a place of desolation, ruin and abandonment.) Under that broom, Elijah prayed to die. Soon he fell asleep from his physical, spiritual and emotional exhaustion. God sent an angel to wake him and feed



ST. BARTHOLOMEW the APOSTLE ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH

him, not once but *twice*. Then God sent him on *another journey*, even deeper into the wilderness, to a cave at the base of Mount Horeb, where Elijah again fell fast to sleep.

And it was in that cave that God finally approached the prophet with a still small voice that called him back to his purpose, and to the community of believers who still clung to God back in Israel.

What can we learn from this passage about how to care for someone, or ourselves, in a times of depression or defeat, discouragements and disillusions?

***First*, we must realize that absolutely no one is immune to suffering and pain, depression, discouragements and disillusions.** His mood is not unknown to us. It is found everywhere today, **communally and individually.**

- The press regularly reports the ugly and the horrible. Wars abound. Daily revelations of corruption in the corporate, sports, political, religious and professional worlds are numbingly



ST. BARTHOLOMEW the APOSTLE ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH

commonplace. Thus subconsciously burdened, we all feel an unspoken unease as we go about our lives.

- Then there are our **personal lives** which force us brooding beneath the broom tree. There are those who have suffered loss, the loss of a child or spouse or parent through death; the loss from divorce; the loss of physical or mental health; the loss of a job opportunity; the loss of virtue, loneliness, betrayals and disappointments, addictions and simply spiritual flatness plagues many of us.

Some of us are sick and tired of being sick and tired. Saint Ephrem the Syrian (303–373), a Doctor of the Church, considered tears to be sacramental signs of divine mercy. He instructs: *“Give God weeping, and increase the tears in your eyes; through your tears and [God’s] goodness the soul which has been dead will be restored.”* What a different kind of human being than most of us! **So, the first thing we must realize is that we all have Elijah moments.**



ST. BARTHOLOMEW the APOSTLE
ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH

The *second* thing we learn is the value of Elijah's solitude—the time when one is forced by circumstances "*to be still.*"

Elijah sat exhausted beneath the broom tree, ***but*** in that stillness he had a chance to regroup and recover, to listen to the Lord.

One of Grace Noel Crowell's poems speaks of his condition—indeed of life itself—as a reservoir that needs filling up just like a slow rain fills an empty cup. She proposes:

Hold up your cup, dear child, for God to fill.

He only asks today that you be still.

That's a lovely metaphor. It's starting to rain after a long dry period, one or two drops and then more, and you turn your cup up and gradually, drop by drop, the cup begins to fill again.

Those of us who are hurting, grieving, in sorrow, or just struggling with something, the poem says that maybe you need just to sit awhile and rest, and turn your cup up to God; and little by little, let your dry reservoir fill up again.



ST. BARTHOLOMEW the APOSTLE ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH

An interesting point is that it was not until things **calmed down** that Elijah was able to recognize the presence of God in his midst. My friends, it's human nature to focus on the **storms**, *rather than* on the loving presence of God. It is hard to recognize God's presence in the difficulties of life. Because of that, it is very important to take time to **be still**.

The **third** thing we notice is that as the exhausted prophet wakes up from his stupor of despair he unexpectedly spots a little hearth cake and water. Where did that come from?

Maybe it was there all along but he never noticed. Being so "down," that was the last thing he expected, but there it was and it picked him up a little. **In discouragement, the *Elijah story* says, be alert to the little signs. Be alert to the little signs.**

For example: this woman, newly separated from her husband, was having one of the worst days of her life. She was tired, sick, lonely, hot and discouraged. It was all she could do to lift her



ST. BARTHOLOMEW the APOSTLE ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH

little boy into his highchair for dinner. She put his food on the tray and began to read the mail. Another bill she could not pay; it was the last straw. She leaned her head against the tray and began to cry. The little boy looked at his sobbing mother, **then** took the pacifier out of his mouth and offered it to his distraught mother. She began to laugh through her tears and hugged the source of such total unconditional love. **Again, the lesson to learn in times of being at the end of one's rope is to be alert to small signs.**

So Elijah reminds us that:

- **no one is immune** to suffering and pain, depression, discouragements and disillusion;
- It is in those times that we ought to **be still**. These times are a sign that you're running on empty and simply need time to hold your empty heart up to God to be refilled.
- **Also, notice the little signs:** summer, spring, a flower, a kindness.



ST. BARTHOLOMEW the APOSTLE ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH

Friends, on the authority of today's scripture, let's commit to being a community for each other, especially when one of us is hurting. And not just physical hurting. Let's be a community of hope and healing for each other when we are suffering mental illness and psychological pain as well. Suffering and pain, depression, discouragements and disillusionments and other mental illnesses, whether chronic or episodic, are simply part of our human fabric and experience. And like all times of suffering, these are the times when it is especially important for us to draw close, to offer compassionate and persistent care, and to provide simple gifts of nourishment and encouragement and community until the illness is past, and the suffering one is restored to their full health and usefulness to the world.

We do this for the sake of the suffering one, **and** in the name of Jesus, the One who suffered all things for us, **and** because eventually we will wish we had a community of care and healing



ST. BARTHOLOMEW the APOSTLE ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH

around us when our time comes in this barrel, when we find ourselves sitting exhausted under some tree in the wilderness, wishing only that we could die.

May I suggest when shortly I lift up the paten and chalice, you might think of someone under the broom tree and say in your heart: *"I am placing Mary or John on this paten and in this chalice. May they too be lifted up to God."* **Or** when you approach for Communion, bring someone in your heart with you. Let them share the *"hearth bread"* of life, this sign that they are not alone.

It is only after being nourished by food provided by an angel of God that Elijah can continue his journey to the mountain of the Lord.

For the Gospel truth is that there is life, and a second season of calling and purpose for us all, after the time under the broom tree.