

Reading: <https://bible.usccb.org/bible/readings/080821.cfm>

Days went by after that first week of lent, after that failed fasting and praying attempt that just led him to admit that which he had been resisting: that God did not exist, that there was no bread, no mana, in the dessert for him, or anyone else for that matter... others just were too naïve to realize it... he wished he was that naïve...

For the first time in his life he experienced what it was like to be depressed. It was a strange feeling... it wasn't so much sadness as it was emptiness, numbness, a lack of a sense motivation, of any meaning and purpose. Things that once animated him, sparked his interest, filled his life with awe, wonder and curiosity fell victim to indifference and up crept a new curiosity, a new thought: what would it be like to not exist?

It was a frightening thought, one he had never considered, and it scared him to realize just how attractive that thought had become. He knew he would never do anything to make it happen, non the less the thought was there. What now...? What next...? He would need to find meaning and purpose somehow, somewhere, in that desert.

Many people go through a similar experience at some point in their lives... be it a teen or young adult trying to figure out their place in the world as they question everything, especially those things that were meant to be sources of meaning and purpose; the faith handed to them by their parents... It also happens when a tragic life-altering event occurs: the sudden loss of a loved one, an accident, sudden illness, pandemic, or mental illness when our bodies are experiencing an imbalance of hormones and chemicals in the brain... any of these experiences can make life seem uncertain, unsafe, undesirable.

A common metaphor for this universal experience that we find in scripture is that of being in a desert: where there seems to be a lack of life, a lack of water, a lack of food and shelter... a place where people are completely exposed to the elements and there is no where to run or hide... a place where, when all we see is very little of the same or nothing at all, the temptation that creeps up is to give up, to stop walking for there is nothing else.

This is where we have been taken to these last two weeks in our readings, to this desert experience, both through exodus in the first readings and the through the people coming to Jesus for something in the gospels. We focused on two common

difficulties with faith and prayer that can lead us to this desert experience in the first place:

1. When God does not seem to be enough to satisfy our lives, and
2. When our efforts to get close to God seem to fail.

Well since we have been brought to the desert, today we start making a shift as we face the question: *what now...? When there seems to be nothing... what now?*

To begin answering this question, we are being invited into the desert experience of Elijah.

Elijah enters the “dessert” due to the mental and spiritual difficulties he experienced. God had asked him to be his prophet, to speak against the false prophets of Baal this false god. At first Elijah was into it, his role models and heroes were those great prophets like Moses so he figured he was going to be like them, triumphantly leading people to victory... so he gets right to it, he confronts the false prophets and defeats them, in fact they actually end up being killed. But now, the followers of Baal were out to kill him, so he is feeling very overwhelmed, overworked, tired... feeling like this task God asked him to do was too much, impossible, he wasn't like Moses. In came a lack of confidence and self-esteem, he lost sight of meaning and purpose as he wanders into the desert thinking “what

now?”... seeing absolutely nothing, no options... and it is here when a new thought emerges: what would it be like to not exist?

Depression and thoughts of suicide do not discriminate, they affect everyone, believer or non-believer, young or old, rich and poor... it is the thought that comes when “what now?” seems to have no answer.

As Elijah begins to desire death, and not wanting to take his own life, begs God to end it for him; “this is enough, Lord! Take my life, for I am no better than my fathers...” Defeated, he falls asleep under a broom tree, an important detail...

What is a broom tree? Why was it important that the writer identified what type of tree it was?

Well, I googled it for you. Broom trees are delicate, they are not hardy nor are they strong and bushy enough to provide much shade from the scourging sun. They grow along dry riverbeds, and they only survive thanks to the rare flash floods which provide a sudden abundance of water which leave just enough traces of moisture deep bellow the ground for the tree to survive the desert drought, it is *just enough* before the next rains...

So here we have Elijah, a delicate human being honestly tired by God’s demands on him to the point of desiring non-existence because he can’t see

anything to look forward to anymore, and he is resting under a delicate tree that shouldn't even be alive in the desert... a tree that survives with just enough moisture hidden from plain sight deep below the ground... and it is under the image of this tree that God *takes Elijah out of the desert immediately and solves his problems! Yes?* No! Just like the tree, he gives Elijah just enough food to survive the rest of his journey in the desert...

I don't know about you, but I don't really like that... *God, you are going to give me "just enough" when I am struggling? Why not fix things, why not take the turmoil away, "Jesus take the wheel" as the song says...*

Yet that is the case... God does not promise to safeguard us from immediate turmoil, instead, God invites us to trust that he will provide with what is needed to get us through that difficult journey.

Now accepting that usually takes a great deal of faith... and most of us in times like that definitely don't feel like we have much faith if any at all. So, what then? We are in the desert, either like Elijah believers in God but with little faith, or like I was, with no faith at all... the the temptation is to just walk away from it all... because it all seems hopeless...

When faith and trust in God is missing in those most difficult times of our lives, then all God needs is our honesty. The first step to overcoming difficulties in prayer, in belief, the first step towards walking through and out of the desert, faith or no faith, it is *honesty*.

Elijah was honest about being overwhelmed by what God was asking him to do... in all honesty, he tells God directly that it was too much, that he was overwhelmed, could not do it... that instead he wished non-existence. God meets him in his honesty, insecurity, lack of self-confidence, tiredness... and takes his life! But not in the way he expected it, not by ending it, but by sustaining his life with just enough food until the next floods came, and he found his sense of purpose once again.

This is different than the how we heard the Jews react in the gospel... they were also honest about their lack of faith and confidence in Jesus, but instead of going directly to Jesus with their doubt, they murmured, they talked about it amongst themselves... and Jesus tells them, they will never be able to receive what God has for them if they are not willing to go directly to God with their doubt...

When we lack faith, God can only work with our honesty, and will do so, no matter how crude our honesty might be.

That was defiantly true for me. I was honest about my unbelief, I felt stuck, intellectually, emotionally, I could not make sense of it, and I tried, I honestly tried... and that is all that God needed... if you have someone in your life doubting in God or struggling with their faith due to a difficult situation... just encourage them to simply be honest, to approach this God with what little or no faith they have but in full honesty let God know the need... somehow, somewhere, God provides...

I continued walking in the desert of that lent getting used to the idea that there was nothing else... as I began to tell myself I would have to start making meaning out of my own life, in my accomplishment, in a good moral life...

I didn't realize it then, but God was using that honesty and providing through it just enough to get me walking through the desert, just enough to reject the idea of non-existence, as I was led towards that moment that changed it all, when God indeed took my life, and directed it somewhere else. That moment began with Holy Week of that lent... when the rain, the monsoon, finally came.

To be continued.

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