

How Elijah copes (I Kings 19:4-8)

It's been quite a week for the prophet of God.

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Years ago, when I was teaching high school, there was an over-the-counter pain reliever called Cope©. The president of that high school called me in one day to ask me to take on yet another project. When I moaned, she told me she thought of me as the poster child for that medication, because no matter what she asked of me, I'd find another hour of the day to fit something extra into my schedule. I coped. Not, however, without a little carping and some spectacular slip-ups along the way.

Sometimes I think that we think that our ancestors in the faith had an easy go of it with God. Abraham and Sarah had the deity to dinner; the disciples had the best role model anybody ever had. Moses got on-the-job training from God, who propped him up and assured him he could do the ministry to which he had been called. Mary of Nazareth had a visit from a heavenly visitor followed by a revealing conversation, and this while presumably minding her own business on an ordinary day in a backwater town. There are hundreds of examples of palpable divine presence in the lives of our biblical heroes and heroines.

Even poor Elijah has just come from a wow of a day, besting the 850 prophetic lackeys of King Ahab and Queen Jezebel in a fireworks-worthy contest. Final score: prophets of Baal and Asherah, zip; God of Israel, a heaven of a rout.

One might think then that Elijah would be beaming, resting on his prophetic laurels. But no; we find a despondent and frightened prophet, running from his life and farther into the wilderness.

The wilderness, both in the Bible and in some contemporary remote spots, is a formidable place. With so little water available, food and hydration are sketchy; weather is unforgiving, and the possibility of losing oneself is ever present. Even one's identity is different in the wilderness. The old familiar patterns are no more; recognizable borders are nonexistent. And no one else is there to help define who one is or of what one is capable.

Israel has been to the wilderness before. It emerged as a new people with a new identity, a new sense of themselves and of their God. Jesus will go there later, either on his own steam or driven by another, depending on what Gospel you're reading. During his own 40-day ordeal, we will learn just what kind of Son of God he will be. Elijah's story lies intriguingly between these other wilderness sojourns.

In his weal to woe of a week, from illimitable success to unfathomable distress, Elijah has to re-assess his life and his ministry. At first he opts for fear and despair. But even in his depths, he remembers the God who's been with him in his success. Though his prayer grows out of depression and hopelessness, it is prayer—vital, honest, relational.

And God responds extravagantly, as is God's wont. Hot dinner, twice served, food for the journey. But the God who nurtures is also the God who calls, and that call is to service. Even when a prophet, or any of us, thinks we've done our bit—shot the wad, aced the ministry final—God is back, nudging us awake, reminding us that we've got what it takes to go out again into the world at the service of our God and for the good of the world that God so loves.