

Sermon for Sunday, November 19, 1972 by Andrew A. Jumper, D. D., Pastor  
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"PLAYING THE GAME OF POOR LITTLE ME"

I Kings 19:1-19a

Text: "He said, 'I have been very jealous for the Lord, the God of hosts; for the people of Istael have forsaken thy covenant; thrown down thy altars, and slain thy prophets with the sword; and I, even I only, am left; and they seek my life, to take it away.'" I Kings 19:10

After the death of Solomon, the kingdom of the Jews had split--Israel in the north and Judah in the south. In the north King Ahab was king. For political purposes he had married the daughter of Ethbaal, King of Tyre--a young lady named Jezebel. Being a very religious young lady, when she arrived in her new homeland the first thing she did was import her native religion and endow a seminary for aspiring young priests of Baal. Nobody liked it, but no one said anything either because they liked having their heads on their shoulders. However, there was one hard-nosed conservative who was not ecumenically inclined who spoke out and his name was Elijah. He was particularly incensed when his number one parishioner, King Ahab, went to his wife's church occasionally. II Kings 10:18 says that "Ahab served Baal a little." Elijah considered that the equivalent of being a little bit pregnant and told the king so in no uncertain terms. Ahab told Elijah to quit meddling in politics and stick to preaching the gospel. He told him if his sermons were not more comforting, he might even cut off his pledge.

Being the hard-headed Jewish Presbyterian that he was, Elijah challenged the priests of Baal to a sort of theological debate. A sacrifice was put over the wood and whichever preacher could get his god to set it on fire, why that God would be rated number one in all the polls. From morning until noon the priests of Baal danced and whirled around the offering and in a final frenzy cut themselves with lances and swords. When nothing happened, Elijah taunted them and said their god was either out to lunch or gone to sleep on the couch watching Peyton Place re-runs. Now it was Elijah's turn. He had water poured on the wood and then knelt by the offering and offered a simple prayer to God. Suddenly, fire from heaven fell upon the sacrifice and it was consumed.

When the people--who had gathered to watch the debate saw this, naturally they decided they were on Elijah's side. At his command they voted to remove the Baal priests from the church rolls--with a sword, of course! However, the president of the Women of the Church--Jezebel--did not appreciate this unilateral action by the pastor and told him in no uncertain terms, "So may the gods do to me, and more also, if I do not make your life as the life of one of them by this time tomorrow." At this point Elijah's courage broke. The Bible tells us, "Then he was afraid, and he arose and went for his life..." Next we find Elijah out in the desert sitting under a broom tree. This is a bush common in the desert wadies, growing sometimes to a height of ten feet. Actually, it provides relatively little shade against the desert sun, but it was the best there was. Elijah is at the end of his own courage and his own strength. In dejection he confesses that in spite of his success at Mt. Carmel, still he hasn't done any better than his fathers.

There are two things here that I want to talk about this morning. First, I want to talk about what was wrong with Elijah. Second, I want to talk about what God told Elijah to do. Let's look at what was wrong with Elijah. First, Elijah had not realized that there are no permanent spiritual victories. When he had won the victory on Mt. Carmel and when he had the 450 priests of Baal put to death, he thought he had won Israel back to God. The crowd acclaimed him and supported him totally. But when Jezebel let her feelings be known, the crowd deserted him. He was even disappointed in God who had let him get in such a pickle in the first

place. Out there in the desert, sitting under the broom tree, he was literally in tears. "Lord," he said, "it is enough. take away my life."

Elijah was learning the hard lesson that there are no permanent victories. Truth, justice and righteousness must be fought for again and again. We are learning this truth ourselves in little ways day by day. We taught in Church School last year--but there are other children this year; we gave to the poor last week--but other hands stretch out today; we prayed for the sick last night--but others are ill this morning. We built buildings in other years--but new ones must rise in years to come; we did a good deed yesterday, gave a cup of cold water, visited in the prisons, supported a missionary--and today it's to do all over again. No, there are no permanent victories. Even our surrender to Jesus is never complete for we keep discovering new areas of life that must be given over to his Lordship.

The second thing we discover wrong about Elijah is that he had not realized his religion would make him unpopular. Elijah was a fanatic. He thought God meant what he said. He thought a person was really expected to live as God commanded. Nobody else thought that. It wouldn't hurt to cheat a little, to lie a little, to be unfaithful a little, to worship Baal a little. After all, God gave us this life to enjoy. So Elijah was a fanatic--a religious nut who marched to a different drum--whom Ahab called "a troubler of Israel." If you take God seriously, it is not likely to make you popular. You ought not have any illusions about that. St. Paul wasn't popular. In one city he was stoned and left for dead, in another he was whipped, in another imprisoned, in another he barely escaped two jumps ahead of a biblical Klu Klux Klan. But Paul was a fanatic who marched to another drum--and even though it made him unpopular, in his later years he could face death and write, "I have finished my course, I have kept the faith..." Martin Luther was a fanatic--he thought the Bible meant what it said. The Roman Church felt he was just a trouble-maker and said they would have his head if he didn't recant. But Luther took God seriously and when asked to recant upon threat of death he replied, "I cannot and will not. Here I stand, I can do no other, God help me." We don't like fanatics--they make us feel uncomfortable. They make us aware of our own shortcomings. They make us aware of our own lack of surrender to God. They make us aware of our own sins.

Another mistake Elijah made was to have the wrong standards of success. The fact is, success cannot always be judged in terms of numbers. We Americans are great nose counters. If we have a large number in our meetings or a large number joins our church, we think we have been a smashing success. But quite aside from numbers, there is another facet to success. Success must be judged in terms of God's purpose and plan for human lives. For example, we wouldn't call the life of Jesus Christ a success by American standards. He was born in an obscure village and raised in another village equally obscure. He never set foot in a major city nor traveled more than 200 miles from home. He never held a major public office, never went through the chairs of the local civic club and was never invited to speak at Jerusalem's downtown Rotary Club. The fact was, he concluded his wretched career in poverty (he had no place to lay his head) was executed between two common thieves as a public nuisance (made himself to be king), was buried in a borrowed grave, was deserted at the last by his own followers (they all forsook him and fled) and was betrayed by one of his closest companions. Yet all of the kings and princes and emperors of the world combined--with all of their armies and navies--have not done as much to influence the course of human history as did that one solitary life.

Elijah had the wrong standards of success. Out there in the desert he had to learn that God did not require him to be successful. No, God only required that he be faithful. A church school teacher never knows what words she says may be indelibly

printed on the mind or heart of a little boy or girl that will bear fruit in years to come. A parent never knows what influence some prayer or word of love will have on a son or daughter. A Christian can never estimate what influence an act of thoughtfulness, of kindness, of love, done in the name of Christ will have upon the life of some lonely soul. No, God never demands success of his servants--he only requires faithfulness.

So, because he had not realized there are no permanent victories, because he had not realized his devotion would make him unpopular, because he had the wrong standards of success, Elijah sat under the broom tree in the sweltering desert and asked God to let him die. This brings us to the second thing I want to talk about this morning and that is what God told Elijah to do. Elijah cried himself to sleep under the broom tree, wallowing in self pity playing the game of poor little me. While he slept the sleep of the despairing and dejected and discouraged, God prepared a meal for him. When it was ready, an angel touched him on the shoulder and said, "Arise and eat." The first thing God says, then, is "get up". God isn't going to spoon feed him in bed on his back. Elijah has to make the exertion of will and of body. Elijah--like all of us--had deep, inner resources he had not yet used, he had hidden strength he had not yet called upon, and God called upon Elijah to draw upon his own powers by getting up.

Sometimes we face challenges that overwhelm us; we are faced by duties and responsibilities that seem too big for us; we are called to tasks that are too hard for us; we are asked to do things that are too heavy for us to bear. And at times like that it is easy to quit. It is easy to say "Lord, you will have to do this if you want it done. It is too big for me. Lord, I quit." But in facing difficulties, in facing responsibility and duty, in facing burdens and tasks, God first of all demands that we use what resources we have. He will not spoon feed us on our backs. He won't help us when we won't help ourselves. He says to us "get up."

The second thing God said to Elijah was, "Go forth, and stand upon the mount before the Lord." That is, God not only said, "get up", he also said, "Look up." Elijah was suffering from spiritual anemia and he needed his blood count built up. It isn't enough to force your body to the limits of your endurance and flog your will into obedience. We can't go it alone when the going gets rough. No, we need also a new source of inner spiritual strength and vitality. The fact is we can't go it alone when the going gets rough. We need a fresh vision of God. We need the empowering of the Holy Spirit. Many of us are going it alone this morning. And because we are, so often we find ourselves down on our hands and knees in the mud and mire of human tragedy. Like the prodigal son we come to ourselves to discover we are living in some sort of spiritual pig sty. But God says to us this morning, "Look up!" Whoever you are this morning I want to tell you that God wants into your life. God wants into your heart. God wants to give you a new source of inner strength and power. God wants to give you a fresh vision in your heart this morning. To you--whatever your need, whatever your discouragement, whatever your heart-ache or burden, "Look up--look up!"

The third thing God says to Elijah is this: "Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus." Why did he say that--what was out there? Why there was new work for him to do; why there were new friends waiting for him there--do you see? God had other people of his own; God had other servants who loved him and obeyed him and God wanted Elijah to join hands with them. So the third thing God says to Elijah is not only get up, not only look up, but he also says, "link up." Out there under the broom tree Elijah said, "and I, even I only, am left...." In his loneliness and isolation Elijah's courage had leaked out. We need one another, you and I. We need to forget ourselves in comforting one another; we need to forget our own loneliness in encouraging one another, praying for one another, serving one another. Yes,

link up. ~~I need you and you need me.~~ Standing shoulder to shoulder we need to draw courage from one another, strength from one another.

I want to say to you this morning that if you do not belong to a prayer group, a church school class, a worshipping community you are poor indeed. If we are spiritually isolated, cut off from spiritual fellowship, inevitably we begin to feel that "and I, even I only, am left...." We need one another, you and I. If you do not feel close to God this morning, perhaps it is because you are not close to those who love him.

To us today God comes as he came to Elijah and he says, "use what resources you have--get up." He says, "but you will need a new source of strength and power greater than yourself--look up." He says, "And you will need the fellowship of others to encourage you--link up." At this point the Bible says of Elijah, "So he departed from there...." He got up, he looked up, he linked up and God used him in a powerful way. So I say to you as God said to Elijah--whatever your need--get up, look up, link up.

*[The following text is extremely faint and largely illegible, appearing to be bleed-through from the reverse side of the page. It contains several paragraphs of text, including phrases like "I want to say to you this morning", "use what resources you have", "look up", "link up", and "whatever your need".]*