

When You are at the End of Life

Sermon for the 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Lent

Sermon Text: 1 Kings 19:1-13



*Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done, and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword. <sup>2</sup> 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 as the life of one of them by this time tomorrow." <sup>3</sup> Then he was afraid, and he arose and ran for his life and came to Beersheba, which belongs to Judah, and left his servant there. <sup>4</sup> But he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness and came and sat down under a broom tree. And he asked that he might die, saying, "It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life, for I am no better than my fathers." <sup>5</sup> And he lay down and slept under a broom tree. And behold, an angel touched him and said, to him, "Arise and eat." <sup>6</sup> And he looked, and behold, there was at his head a cake baked on hot stones and a jar of water. And he ate and drank and lay down again. <sup>7</sup> And the angel of the Lord came again a second time and touched him and said, "Arise and eat, for the journey is too great for you." <sup>8</sup> And he arose and ate and drank and went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights to Horeb, the mount of God. <sup>9</sup> There he came to a cave and lodged in it. And behold, the word of the Lord came to him, and he said to him, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" <sup>10</sup> He said, "I have been very jealous for the Lord, the God of hosts. For the people of Israel have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword, and I, even I only, am left, and they seek my life, to take it away." <sup>11</sup> And he said, "Go out and stand on the mount before the Lord." And behold, the Lord passed by, and a great and strong wind tore the mountains and broke in pieces the rocks before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind. And after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake. <sup>12</sup> And after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire. And after the fire the sound of a low whisper. <sup>13</sup> And when Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his cloak and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. And behold, there came a voice to him and said, "What are you doing here, Elijah?"*

"Superman" was written on a little boy's swimsuit. He proudly told his little sister that he was a real Superman. He confirmed this by showing with his hands and feet what it means to be Superman and, above all, everything that Superman must do. The little Superman was on his way to the Cospudener Lake with his family. But not long after, He was anything but Superman. His mother insisted that he

should learn how to swim but after the first small attempt to just go a bit deeper into the water made the little Superman scream like a stuck pig and he was afraid of all the bad things that would pull him and his family into the deep.

In our Bible text today, we also get to know a Superman and he was not just in the movies. He was a real person. With absolute trust in God, he appears as the only one to go against his people, against the king, and against a bunch of Baal priests. That was no small thing because the king and priests of Baal could cut their opponents into pieces, burn them, or do even worse in a very short time. But Elijah risked it – all alone. Then he truly brought about supernatural things too: he called fire to rain down from heaven and in the end, it was the priests of Baal that he slaughtered with his own hands... what a man.

And then Elijah was brought low. All at once, he was like our Leipzig Superman – at the end of his strength. It was a woman who made Elijah's knees tremble. He had the strength to go against the king and Baal and others, but he tucked tail and ran as far as he could when he had to go against Jezebel. Nothing else but bitter fear pushed him for 160km until he was exhausted, drained inside and out, and lay on the ground to die.

When we hear this story, we have lots of questions. How can Elijah be so straightforward and brave in the face of the entire government's power and when all the people worship one God and confess their sins then, of all times, he backs down and runs away. It makes you want to somehow call out to Elijah in this story: Don't be afraid Elijah, the woman won't bite. She's lost all her teeth!

But we would like to ask further: Can it be right that the man of God, who has worked so hard for what is right, can't deal with his life and lose his composure? Sometimes I have the impression that we Christians have the opinion that a Christian must have perseverance. A Christian must simply always be strong, never be afraid, never lose hope, never make the wrong decision. Furthermore, a Christian's life must always go right in every aspect. And when things don't go smoothly, we think that something is wrong with our faith in God. It's no coincidence that God shows us through His Word that even strong Elijah actually has a very small heart, even Elijah can't push the right buttons and get what he wants, even Elijah doesn't have God in his hand. When he goes on into the desert without his servant and wants to die there, everything points to Elijah experiencing a deep depression and lack of faith. This hits us deep inside. The man of God lost his faith in God. The God, who rained fire down from heaven, must now intervene, do anything no matter what... But God does nothing. He lets Elijah run 160km and even then, when Elijah throws himself down on the ground to die, God lets him do that. To say it very clearly: God allows His servants to be weak and He allows them to have doubts. Over and over again, people come to the church to be baptized. We give them God's Word. They get to know the God who rains fire from heaven and answers the prayers of His servants. But they also get to know the same God who allows His servants to get to the end of their strength. Do we let that happen? So often we can't see when one of our brothers or sisters is at the end of their strength. We want to force them to be happy, so to speak. Our words are then like poison in a wound. But we also don't want to be completely silent because that would mean that we don't care at all.

In His silence, God gives us exactly the right amount of strength that His servants need. It's an angel that stands by Elijah's side with bread and water. "Arise and eat." Bread and water are basically the necessities of life. They are the gifts that strengthen us when everything else falls away. In Baptism, we receive that kind of water. Paul tells us what happens there. We give up our lives and receive new life from God because in Baptism, we are buried with Christ and will also rise again with Him. Just like Elijah already gave up his life in the desert and could get it back, so can we. And it's the same with the bread. Bread reminds us of the Body of Christ. The bread and wine are the death of Christ. But this death is, at

the same time, new life that we may have through Christ's resurrection. As Christians, we are not only such people who always experience the great deeds of God. We are not called to be Superman or Super Christians. No, we are people who constantly need strengthening in our lives because we are not God. We have limits and must always experience where our limits are and when we are at the end of our strength. But then we may lay down our heads and let God be God, just like Elijah did. Then God also shows us the other part of being a Christian. It's that we keep getting food from God. Our Christian life is, in essence, a path. This path wears out our strength. The strength that we get from God is neither self-evident nor does it always come bubbling out of us. "Arise and eat," God tells us. "Let me give you what you need" we need to let God constantly tell us this.

And then it goes on. Elijah continues on for 40 days and 40 nights. This is a symbolic number and signifies an encounter of life and death, light and darkness. And then, Elijah meets God after all. This time, not in fire from heaven, but in a quiet, gentle breeze. In the voice of silence, he sees God again. Right here, God shows us today that we can never control Him. Sometimes He comes like a devastating fire, sometimes in stillness. Sometimes He gives His servants strength of faith and courage, sometimes He demonstrates His power precisely in the fact that His servants are weak. God is completely free in His actions. He meets us today one way and tomorrow, completely differently. But God's freedom is not arbitrary freedom. In His freedom, the living God is not indifferent to what happens to us. In light and in darkness, in abundance and the same in poverty, God's strong arms are always around us to hold us and to protect us from the bad things. That gives us courage. Precisely in the dark times, it gives us courage because in such times, we see that God is not far away from us with His strength giving fountain. Elijah felt God's distance and His nearness. Jesus felt God's distance and God's nearness. Both God's distance and nearness are an expression of God's great love that strengthens us. Amen.