

I Can't Go On

(Sermon by Rev. John Dieterly, June 13, 2010)

I Kings 19:9b-18 Then the word of the LORD came to him, saying, “What are you doing here, Elijah?”¹⁰He answered, “I have been very zealous for the LORD, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away.”

¹¹He said, “Go out and stand on the mountain before the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by.” Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces 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;¹²and after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence.¹³When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. Then there came a voice to him that said, “What are you doing here, Elijah?”¹⁴He answered, “I have been very zealous for the LORD, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away.”¹⁵Then the LORD said to him, “Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus; when you arrive, you shall anoint Hazael as king over Aram.¹⁶Also you shall anoint Jehu son of Nimshi as king over Israel; and you shall anoint Elisha son of Shaphat of Abel-meholah as prophet in your place.¹⁷Whoever escapes from the sword of Hazael, Jehu shall kill; and whoever escapes from the sword of Jehu, Elisha shall kill.¹⁸Yet I will leave seven thousand in Israel, all the knees that have not bowed to Baal, and every mouth that has not kissed him.”

Luke 8:26-39 (TEV) ²⁶Jesus and his disciples sailed on over to the territory of Gerasa, which is across the lake from Galilee.²⁷As Jesus stepped ashore, he was met by a man from the town who had demons in him. For a long time this man had gone without clothes and would not stay at home, but spent his time in the burial caves.²⁸When he saw Jesus, he gave a loud cry, threw himself down at his feet, and shouted, “Jesus, Son of the Most High God! What do you want with me? I beg you, don't punish me!”²⁹He said this because Jesus had ordered the evil spirit to go out of him. Many times it had seized him, and even though he was kept a prisoner, his hands and feet tied with chains, he would break the chains and be driven by the demon out into the desert.

³⁰Jesus asked him, “What is your name?”

“My name is ‘Mob,’” he answered—because many demons had gone into him.³¹The demons begged Jesus not to send them into the abyss.

³²There was a large herd of pigs near by, feeding on a hillside. So the demons begged Jesus to let them go into the pigs, and he let them.³³They went out of the man and into the pigs. The whole herd rushed down the side of the cliff into the lake and was drowned.

³⁴The men who had been taking care of the pigs saw what happened, so they ran off and spread the news in the town and among the farms.³⁵People went out to see what had happened, and when they came to Jesus, they found the man from whom the demons had gone out sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed and in his right mind; and they were all afraid.³⁶Those who had seen it told the people how the man had been cured.³⁷Then all the people from that territory asked Jesus to go away, because they were terribly afraid. So Jesus got into the boat and left.³⁸The man from whom the demons had gone out begged Jesus, “Let me go with you.”

But Jesus sent him away, saying,³⁹“Go back home and tell what God has done for you.”

The man went through the town, telling what Jesus had done for him.

Did you ever use the expression, “I'm at the end of my rope?” A mother of three small children became frustrated with the little ones one day and said, “I'm at the end of my rope; I think I've lost my mind.” At which the 4-year old suggested, “Did you look under the couch?”

It has been said, “If you ever get to the end of your rope, you will find God is there.” This is true. Some people only turn to God when they get to the end of their rope, but we can rest assured that God will be there to catch us. The bad news is that God may tell us to climb back up that rope. This is more or less what the two people in our Scripture lessons were told.

Elijah didn't know which way to turn. He really was at the end of his rope. He decided to just lie down and die. Now Elijah wasn't a coward. He had his moment up there on the top of Mt. Carmel. He had single-handedly, with God's help of course, defeated the 70 prophets of Baal. He could have stood on the top of that mountain for days, proclaiming his greatness. Except for one thing – the Queen had threatened, no promised, that she would behead him within 24 hours. So it is no wonder he ran into the wilderness and asked God that he might die.

God's response to Elijah is incredible. There was no big pep talk, no brass band, God didn't come in wind, earthquake or fire, but in a still, small voice. And what did that voice say? "What are you doing here, Elijah?" There is no condemnation; God is asking Elijah to speak for himself. But notice, God knows Elijah's name, God calls him by name, and God clearly understood his situation. And then God tells Elijah to climb back up that rope, get back to work, and God gives him his tasks: Go anoint the next king. This Jezebel who is giving you all this trouble, she will pass, along with her husband King Ahab. Oh, and anoint your successor – now there's a frightening task. My work, our work, for each of us, ends – but God's work will continue – go and anoint your successor. That should certainly have taken away any idea that Elijah had that he was irreplaceable!

The Gerasene demoniac had come to the end of his rope in an entirely different way. We don't have folks we call demoniacs in the 21st century – but if we have anyone who acts like he must have behaved, we institutionalize them, identify it as an illness that comes in various forms and try to treat it. Such institutions and treatments were not available in Gerasa, so they tried to chain down this man. He must have been a strong man – he kept breaking his chains. Since he was not accepted by the people in town, he had to live in the caves that were used as tombs, an interesting analogy, being treated as if dead by the people of town. And that was how this man got along with the people of the town. They treated him as if he was dead, gave him a wide berth, and he stayed out of their way, in the tombs.

Then Jesus came along and upset the status quo. The self-destructive stampede of pigs is so symbolic of what Jesus did. Today we might say that Jesus upset the apple cart, and apples flew everywhere. Back then it was a stampede of pigs – perhaps an even more vivid analogy. Because when the man was healed, when he dressed himself and sat down to have a civil conversation with Jesus, the good people of Gerasa were frightened. They had spent years trying to contain the man, to tie him up, to banish him to the cemetery, and Jesus comes and heals him. What kind of power does this man have to so completely transform this powerful demoniac? It is the power of Jesus that frightens them most of all, even more than the demoniac, and they ask him to leave.

Here is where the healed demoniac really comes to the end of his rope. He knows he has changed. He is completely transformed, recovered, a new man. It is a wonderful transformation, but can he go back to the same town and rebuild relationships, in that town where they treated him as a dead man, living in the tombs? Can you imagine how difficult that would have been for him? And so he wants to get out of town and start a new life. He says he wants to follow Jesus – you can't blame him for that, can you? But just as God told Elijah to go back to God's people and prepare them for the future, so Jesus sent the man back to Gerasa and told him to tell the people what God has done for him.

Sometimes, when things are going well, we just want to keep things going as they are, doing what we believe is right and good. But even when things go wrong, even when troubles come, even when we feel like we are at the end of the rope, God wants us to keep going. God doesn't accept the self judgment that "we can't go on." For God, we never really come to the end of our rope, because God will always have one more task. Maybe like Elijah, we will need to prepare for the future, even our own future, a future that will see us replaced by another. Or like the Gerasene man, maybe we are just to tell others what God has done for us.

No, our work is not done. None of us can claim to have completed all God would have us do. Even when we feel we can't go on, God may well have another task for us, and God will supply the strength we need to accomplish his task. Whenever you might feel like you are at the end of the rope, and you just think you can't go on, remember to call on God. Because if you are doing God's will, God will supply the strength you need, and you will find that you CAN go on.