

The mighty Elijah is fresh from his spectacular victory at Mount Carmel where he triumphed over the priests of Baal, then promptly slaughtered them all. Queen Jezebel has heard and vowed to have his head within 24 hours. Elijah flees to the wilderness where he falls into despair and prays (from "Soul Food" by Stephen Shoemaker Christian Century, July 9, 2000).



1 Kings 19:3-8

Elijah was afraid and ran for his life. When he came to Beersheba in Judah, he left his servant there, while he himself went a day's journey into the desert. He came to a broom tree, sat down under it and prayed that he might die. "I have had enough, Lord," he said. "Take my life; I am no better than my ancestors." Then he lay down under the tree and fell asleep. All at once an angel touched him and said, "Get up and eat." He looked around, and there by his head was a cake of bread baked over hot coals, and a jar of water. He ate and drank and then lay down again. The angel of the Lord came back a second time and touched him and said, "Get up and eat, for the journey is too much for you. So he got up and ate and drank. Strengthened by that food, he traveled forty days and forty nights until he reached Horeb, the mountain of God. There he went into a cave and spent the night.

"When Things Fall Apart"

Out of the depths, I cry to you, O Lord. Lord hear my voice!
Let your ears be attentive to the voice of my supplications.
If you, O Lord, should mark iniquities, Lord, who could stand?
But there is forgiveness with you, so that you may be revered.
I wait for the Lord, my soul waits, and in his word I hope;
My soul waits for the Lord
More than those who watch for the morning,
More than those who watch for the morning.
Children of God, hope in the Lord!
For with the Lord there is steadfast love
And with him is great power to redeem
It is he who will redeem Israel from all its sin.

Psalm 130

In his reflection, 'Soul Food', Stephen Shoemaker noted: 'Paul Tillich wrote of the 'courage to be' in face of three great onslaughts to our psyche: the anxiety of death, the anxiety of guilt, the anxiety of meaninglessness. Any of the three can destroy our will to go on. No doubt Elijah is facing the psychic threat of his imminent death. Vengeful Jezebel usually gets what she wants (she wants to kill him). He may or may not be filled with guilt over his slaughter of the priests, but why would we assume not? Our nation's soldiers come back from every war deeply wounded with the guilt of killing, even when they believe in the justness of the cause and believe they have done the best they knew to do under hellish circumstances. Elijah is certainly confronted with the retribution of Jezebel, the judgment Jesus spoke of when he said, "Those who live by the sword die by it." And Elijah is clearly overwhelmed by meaninglessness, "What good is following Yahweh if Ahab and Jezebel will win?"

(Christian Century, July 19-12, 2000, p. 753)

Elijah's anxiety over failure of self and uncertainty of soul caused him to stop dead in his tracks and pray: "I have had enough, Lord. Take my life; I am no better than my ancestors." *Prayer*, wrote Joan Chittister, *is not a magic act; it is a relationship that calls the spiritual dimension in us to life, that attunes us to the universe, that hears the sound of the great I AM everywhere.* (Songs of the Heart, p. 112) Years later when things fell apart for Jews and anxiety over death, meaninglessness, and guilt was high, the psalmists composed seven penitential

prayers (6, 32, 38, 51, 130 and 95) for public worship of God in the temple. In our worship of God today the penitential prayer that companions the Elijah story in which ' his get up and go got up and went' is Psalm 130.

Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord.

Lord, hear my voice!

'Out of the depths" If we are only as sick as the secrets we keep and if confession is good for the soul, then admitting one's powerlessness over for forces of anxiety that have created a chaotic, scattered, and failed sense of self is the inner place of experience from which our prayer needs to begin. And, if we are stuck in paralyzing helplessness. where we cannot see what keeps us from doing God's will and the harm we that we do, then a willingness to face our inner world of denial is the spiritual dynamic in which we must pray. In his book, "From Whom No Secrets Are Hid: Introducing the Psalms," Walter Brueggemann described the inner world of denial that people of faith, in our day and age, bring to worship of God. 'Our closely held world of endless competitiveness is a system that cannot keep its promises of safety, prosperity, and happiness: it does not fully work. And so we are seduced into denial about the dysfunction of our dominant defining system of public life. We are forced into denial because we must pretend that the system works for us, that we have mastered the system, and that we benefit from it. We must keep up appearances, even if only to match the Joneses who are also keeping up appearances. We are on our best behavior, constantly expressing confidence in the system, rendering service to the system, and imagining that if we do a little bit better, it will be in our favor. But of course beneath the surface of such pretence, we know better. We know that a new car will not make us super. We know that a different beer will not surround us with friends we can trust or in whom we can confide, and so no one ever talks to anyone in a beer ad-not in any depth, at any rate. We know that a better shave will not get us a lover. We know that more weapons will not bring us safety. We know that wars do not produce as many "haves" as they produce displaced persons. We know that the violence in the NFL is a mighty narcotic for us, but never about anything more than the 'bread and circuses" of virility, money, and power. We know that the so-called political dialogue is ultimately

about controlling the wealth for the ones who manage the process. We know all of that, but we must collude. Because if we are not team players, we will not be "friended," and we will drop out; consequently, we bury the hurt-filled truth that will surface only at night when we are alone and our defenses are down . . . or that will surface in random acts of violence that are to be predicted but are always unexpected. We collude, after a restless night of candor, for the sake of the next day, whenever (which is to say, always) we reengage the performance of the system yet again one more time, despite our gnawing awareness (p. 12).

Out of the depths, I cry to you, O Lord.

Lord, hear my voice!

"Lord, hear my voice!" People can't, but God can. So from the psalmist's counter-world of faith, the speaker asks for help from the Lord of steadfast Love to redeem Israel from her repressed anxieties of death, guilt, and meaninglessness. The congregation prays for assurance in God's forgiveness of this sin. Here. I am reminded of one of Jesus' last words from the cross: 'Forgive them Father, for they know not what they do.'

We can't, but God can. That's why the confessional prayer of invitation to our time of reconciliation is about God's willingness and power to help us with our sin. In that hymn we sing words from penitential psalm 51: 'Create in me a clean heart O God, and renew a right spirit within me. Cast me not away from thy presence O Lord, and take not Thy Holy Spirit from me. Restore unto me the joy of Thy salvation and renew a right spirit within me.' And, that's why as disciples of Jesus who taught us to pray: 'Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us,' after the prayer of confession we sing the hymn, 'Turn your eyes upon Jesus, look full in his wonderful face, and the things of this world will grow strangely dim, in the light of his fullness and grace.' This hymn reminds us of God's resolve to bring repressed anxieties into consciousness through faith in the person of Jesus and Christ's way of love. And, as an assurance of pardon, it reminds us that renewal of one's spirit was, is, and always will be dependent upon the forgiving heart of Israel's merciful God.