

When the Alarms Go Off

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[1 Kings 19:1-15](#), Psalm 42, Galatians 3:23-29, Luke 8:26-39

How would you react in an emergency situation? Would you know what to do when the alarms went off? For some strange reason, one that I can't quite put my finger on, that was a question that was very much on my mind as I prepared for this morning's service. It is an important question. Emergencies are situations that naturally provoke confusion, panic and fear. When those sorts of emotions are in play, it can be very easy to react in the wrong way.

And that can be a big problem because emergencies, by definition, happen when you don't expect them. Why, one could even break out amid a Sunday morning worship service. And that is, of course, why we sometimes carry out drills so that people can work out how they will react before the emergency occurs. But the reality is that we may never know how we will react until we find ourselves in the actual situation.

Elijah's Emergency

The prophet Elijah had been feeling pretty good about his accomplishments lately. He had engineered a confrontation with the prophets of the god Baal, and he had beaten them at their own game. He had pressed his advantage and led the people as they attacked and slaughtered the priests of the foreign god.

But his good mood was suddenly destroyed when a messenger arrived from Queen Jezebel, who was a patron of the god. It was short and to the point. **"So may the gods do to me and more also, if I do not make your life like the life of one of them by this time tomorrow."**

As you can imagine, that set off immediate alarm bells in Elijah's head. Honestly, he shouldn't have been surprised. He had been the first to resort to violence. It shouldn't have been unexpected that violence might be turned back against him. But there is a great difference between thinking that there might be some consequence and having that consequence suddenly spelled out for you in such stark terms. This was not a drill!

Elijah Chooses Flight

And how did Elijah react? Not particularly well. He was filled with confusion, fear and panic. These emotions immediately triggered that part of his brain that makes us react to danger with either fight or flight. And which option did Elijah take? **"Then he was afraid; he got up and fled for his life and came to Beer-sheba, which belongs to Judah; he left his servant there."** And let's recognize that reaction for what it is. Not only did Elijah run away, he fled the country. Beer-sheba is about as far as you can go from the Kingdom of Israel without leaving civilization altogether. And, of course, he was not yet finished running.



Now, let's be clear here. Flight is absolutely an appropriate response to a dangerous situation. It is often the best thing to do. When the building is on fire, yes, you should get out. But how you do that is also important. Unhelpful reactions like panic and disorderliness can make the whole situation worse. The worst outcomes often take place because people do not flee the scene in an orderly and calm manner.

So, let us not judge Elijah for running away. But let's take a critical look at how he ran because we might well learn something that will help us to deal with the crises and emergencies that we encounter in our lives.

Isolation

Here is the first thing I notice about how he responded that is often problematic for us as well. **"But he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness and came and sat down under a solitary broom tree."** Here we see Elijah isolating himself, and how many times have you seen people respond like that when things go wrong?

For many people, their automatic response when anything happens that makes them feel vulnerable is to cut themselves off from anyone who might give them support or help. They are afraid, perhaps, that other people might see them struggling, that they might appear to be something other than self-sufficient. The very idea that they might need help from somebody else seems even more intolerable than anything else in the situation.

Depression

I understand where the temptation comes from, of course, but it only makes a bad situation worse. We human beings were made to live together in community. We were made to need each other. And you only make things worse when you isolate yourself because things have gone wrong.

Not surprisingly, therefore, when Elijah isolated himself, things immediately began to spiral for him. He fell into a deep depression. **"He asked that he might die, 'It is enough; now, O LORD, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors.'"**

And, yes, depression is always a danger when we go through difficult times. But I think that there is also a lesson for us in how he handles his situational depression. Sometimes we may be tempted to bottle up all of those negative feelings inside – to hide them from others, from God or even from ourselves. We think that not expressing it all is a way of being strong and faithful. But that is a big mistake.

Learning to Lament

Holding it in can make it rot and fester, and that is what makes those feelings toxic. That is what can turn situational depression into endless cycles of inescapable depression. And so, take note of how Elijah let his feelings out. He didn't hesitate to express them to God.

And I know some who struggle with that. They think that expressing their gripes to God means that they have lost all faith.

If you ever think that, remember the example of Elijah. Remember the example of the psalmist who wrote that incredible psalm of lament that we read together this morning. Do not be afraid to express your negative emotions to God. God will always appreciate your honesty. What's more,

God's feelings are far from fragile enough that you could hurt them with a genuine display of your emotions.

Where is God?

Now, we finally come to the biggest question of all that people face when things go wrong in this world. Where is God in the middle of the disaster? I constantly talk with people who ask why God allowed this disaster to happen or that disaster to take place. They seem to think that, if they can only find some divine meaning or purpose in it, everything will be all right.

But, as Elijah's story of emergency preparedness continues, I think we might get a different perspective on that obsession. He continued his journey of escape and finally came to a mountain called Horeb. This is a very significant location, of course, because it is the very place where Moses met with God and received the Law. It is also known, in some of the accounts, as Mount Sinai.

So, the prophet had come to the ideal place to answer the question of where God is in the midst of all the terrible events and disasters of life. But let us see how God answered his question. God told Elijah that he was about to pass by him, that he was to stand out on this mountain of God, and he would finally understand.

Three Disasters

And what happened next is crazy. While Elijah stood there, three of the worst disasters that you can imagine passed by. First, he was assailed by a gale-force wind – the kind of wind that destroys whole cities in tornadoes and hurricanes. Next, there was an earthquake, which can be even more destructive. Finally, there was a fire, an emergency so devastating that we actually run drills to prepare for one, all while we fervently hope that we never have to actually deal with one.

So we have the three most stereotypical disasters that you could imagine. Surely we will now get the answer to the question, where is God when disaster strikes? Except that's not quite the answer that we get, is it? Was God in the wind? No. Was God in the earthquake? No. Was God in the Fire? No! In each case, we are told that God was not.

Now, there are some things that we shouldn't read into that. That does not mean that God is absent when we are going through trials. For one thing, we believe in an omnipresent God – that there is no place in this world where God is not. It also doesn't mean that God is not there with us when we go through difficult times. On the contrary, people of faith often find that it is at such times that God actually joins us in our suffering, comforting and sustaining us when things are at their worst.

No Answers

No, what I think this story is saying is that we may not always find an answer to that perplexing question of why from God in the midst of the wind, the earthquake or the fire. In fact, we may never get that answer that we often crave. That doesn't mean there is no answer or that God doesn't have a plan; it just means that such an answer may not be given to us.

And I think that God is telling Elijah and us that that is okay. Not knowing the answer is okay. The wind, the earthquake and the fire may not give you any sort of answer when you are in the midst of them. After all, disasters often overwhelm us so completely that all we can do is react.

There may not even be time to think, much less come to a deeper understanding of why bad things happen.

You may not find God amidst the disaster. That doesn't mean God isn't there, and the story of Elijah shows us how we can become aware of that presence.

In the Silence

Where, then, did Elijah encounter God if not in the wind, earthquake or fire? **“And after the fire [there came] a sound of sheer silence. When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave.”** And it quickly becomes clear that it is in that silence that God met with Elijah.

And there is certainly a message for you in that – a lesson on how to navigate the disasters of life: you will find God in the silence. And that doesn't just mean that, after the storm has passed, you will be able to look back on it and discover what lessons you were meant to learn from it or what new strength you have gained by surviving it, though that certainly does happen sometimes.

But silence, you see, isn't just something that sometimes happens to you. It is a practice that you can cultivate in yourself and that you can bring with you into any circumstance – even into the wind, earthquake and fire. By cultivating silence, through practices like prayer, meditation and contemplation, you can make it possible for the voice of God – which is always present, which is always seeking to lift you up and walk with you through the wind, earthquake and fire – to break through to you and you will know he is there.

Learning From All of This

As a result of our little drill here today, I do hope you will leave with a better understanding of what you ought to do should an emergency ever arise in a setting such as this. That is some pretty good, useful information to take away with you.

But perhaps the story of Elijah and how he came to terms with his “not-a-drill” situation can do even more to set your heart at ease. This story teaches us how our ongoing relationship with God equips us with resilience to face the ups and downs and challenges that do unexpectedly come into our lives from time to time.

And may you also resolve – each one of you – to build silence into your lives. It is something that everyone can do. Learn about mediation techniques, which are indeed ancient Christian practices. Make a point finding times for turning off the noise in your life and your brain that never stops. You might be surprised to discover just how near God has been all along.