

**“Get up and eat some more,
for there is a long journey ahead of you.”**

Fr. John Fuellenbach, svd
Saint Augustin, August 2009

“I've had enough,” he told the Lord. “Take away my life

There are hundreds of biblical stories which describe the return of individual persons to a renewed commitment to the Lord whom they had served for many years but had grown tired, disappointed or even totally disillusioned with the vocation and mission they had so enthusiastically embraced at the beginning of their calling. The life story of the prophet Jeremiah might be the most dramatic one (20:7-10). Another beautiful one is the story of Elijah's encounter with the Lord in 1 King 19:9-15. The story images so many of us that it is worth a meditation at the beginning of a retreat. It is a “retreat story” in the proper sense of the word.

The prophet runs away (*he retreats*) from his enemies and goes to the mountain of the Lord to complain about all the hardships experienced in his ministry.

When Ahab told Queen Jezebel what Elijah had done, and that he had slaughtered the prophets of Baal, she sent this message to Elijah: “You killed my prophets, and now I swear by the gods that I am going to kill you by this time tomorrow night.”

So Elijah fled for his life; he went to Beer-sheba, a city of Judah, and left his servant there. Then he went on alone into the wilderness, travelling all day, and sat down under a broom tree and prayed that he might die. “I've had enough,” he told the Lord. “Take away my life. I've got to die sometime, and it might as well be now.” Then he lay down and slept beneath the broom tree. But as he was sleeping, an angel touched him and told him to get up and eat! He looked around and saw some bread baking on hot stones, and a jar of water! So he ate and drank and lay down again. Then the angel of the Lord came again and touched him and said, “Get up and eat some more, for there is a long journey ahead of you.”

So he got up and ate and drank, and the food gave him enough strength to travel forty days and forty nights to Mount Horeb, the mountain of God, where he lived in a cave. But the Lord said to him, “What are you doing here, Elijah?” He replied, “I have worked very hard for the Lord God of the heavens; but the people of Israel have broken their covenant with you and torn down your altars and killed your prophets, and only I am left; and now they are trying to kill me, too.” “Go out and stand before me on the mountain,” the Lord told him. And as Elijah stood there the Lord passed by, and a mighty windstorm hit the mountain; it was such a terrible blast that the rocks were torn loose, but the Lord was not in the wind. After the wind, there was an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake. And after the earthquake, there was a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire. And after the fire, there was the sound of a gentle whisper.

When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his scarf and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. And a voice said, “Why are you here, Elijah?” He replied again, “I have been working very hard for the Lord God of the armies of heaven, but the people have broken their covenant and have torn down your altars; they have killed every one of your prophets except me; and now they are trying to kill me, too.”

Then the Lord told him, “Go back by the desert road to Damascus, and when you arrive, anoint Hazael to be king of Syria. Then anoint Jehu to be king of Israel, and anoint Elisha to replace you as my prophet.

Elijah ("my God is Yahweh") is one of the great personalities in the Old Testament. Since he had gone to heaven in a fiery chariot he was expected to come back before the Messiah would appear on earth. John the Baptist was seen as the returned Elijah. Elijah was from the countryside and his way of dressing with a mantle and a rawhide belt around his waist later become the typical garb of a prophet.

The story tells us about Elijah's flight from Israel where he had killed the Baal prophets and Jezebel the queen and ardent devotee of Baal tries to kill him. So he has to run away from a woman. He is so disgusted and frustrated that he wants to die and be delivered from a burdensome and hopeless mission. He just had it. Even his greatest miracle had no effect on the people. He believes that Israel is just beyond any hope of converting it his God Yahweh

Elijah lies down and waits for his end to come. But God has other plans for him. He sends an angel to bring him food. He has to eat and walk to the mountain of Horeb in order to meet God. Horeb is the mountain where Moses had encountered God.

1. Here he received the stone tablets of the covenant (34:1-5).
2. Here he pleaded with God not to destroy his unfaithful people (Ex 32:9-14).

Yahweh then said to Moses, "I know these people; I know how obstinate they are! So leave me now, so that my anger can blaze at them and I can put an end to them! I shall make a great nation out of you instead."

Moses tried to pacify Yahweh his God. "Yahweh," he said, "why should your anger blaze at your people, whom you have brought out of Egypt by your great power and mighty hand? Why should the Egyptians say, 'He brought them out with evil intention, to slaughter them in the mountains and wipe them off the face of the earth?' Give up your burning wrath; relent over this disaster intended for your people. Remember your servants Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, to whom you swore by your very self and made this promise: 'I shall make your offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven, and this whole country of which I have spoken, I shall give to your descendants, and it will be their heritage for ever.' " Yahweh then relented over the disaster which he had intended to inflict on his people.

3. Here Yahweh appeared to him and revealed his true nature (34:6-7)

And Yahweh descended in a cloud and stood with him there and pronounced the name Yahweh. Then Yahweh passed before him and called out, "Yahweh, Yahweh, God of tenderness and compassion, slow to anger, rich in faithful love and constancy, maintaining his faithful love to thousands, forgiving fault, crime and sin. (Ex 34:6-7).

But Elijah has a different request. He is hiding and sore at his people and about his whole mission. He wants God to punish his unfaithful people. He does not plead like Moses for mercy and forgiveness but he wants to see God's wrath taking it full effect on his enemies. When God calls him and asks: What are you doing here, his answer is short: "They are after my life." Only when God asks him for the second time what he really wanted on this holy mountain, does Elijah admit his real intentions. They are exactly the opposite of the ones Moses had. Moses pleaded with God to spare the people. But Elijah wants the opposite: "Punish these faithless ungrateful renegades, root them out, they are just hopeless and

beyond any reform." He wants revenge for what they had done to him.

How does Yahweh react? Before giving him an answer he first lets his prophet experience his presence. But God does not appear to him in a storm, an earthquake or a fire - elements which Elijah had associated with God as ways through which he would show himself to his people. The typical image: a God of power and might before whom people would be terrified and who would show his anger and wrath if necessary. Elijah wanted a God like that for his intentions. A God who will terrify the queen, his opponent, and destroy her with an iron fist. But God was not coming to his prophet in this way: He appeared in the gentle breeze. Elijah was to learn that Yahweh is rather a God of kindness, compassion and gentleness - not the wrathful, angry God who comes with might and power. Elijah had to become aware of a God who was not seeking revenge nor would he pursue his archenemy, Jezebel the queen with terror and wrath.

After the encounter with this kind of God, the God of compassion and kindness, who is discovered neither in storm, fire or earthquake but most adequately in the gentle breeze, Elijah is sent back. His mission is not yet over. He has to go back to the place from where he came, right into the midst of the people who wanted to kill him. Precisely there he has to continue and complete his mission.

How can he ever accomplish such a seemingly impossible task? He will be able to do it in the strength of the God-encounter he just had been granted. It is the experience of a God who is compassionate, slow to anger and willing to forgive, a God who does not want to destroy but to give life. This God shows himself in a gentle breeze that soothes and does not destroy.

A retreat could turn into a similar experience: God is asking me: *Please, come out of your cave. I want to talk with you. The two of us have to talk.* It will most probably be an encounter not in storm, earthquake and fire but it could be one in the *gentle breeze*. That means, an encounter not of a dramatic nature, but nevertheless reassuring and comforting. It could be an affirmation like the one St Paul expressed in the words: "I know in whom I have put my trust." I am once again assured of God's presence in my life. God will ask you to go back from where you have come, to do the same work, to face the same people, to meet the same problems. But what could make the great difference is that you, during these days of the retreat, once again encounter a God who assures you that he is there with you and will always be with you to see you through. More we could not ask for. What a difference it could mean for the rest of your life if you go home with the words of St. Augustine: "Lord, you touched me and now I burn."

Question: *Am I willing to come out of my cave and then stand at the entrance ready to hear what God wants to tell me in these days of the retreat?*

A lesson to be learnt from the Prophet Elijah

The prophet had sought out Yahweh wanting him to take revenge on his archenemy the queen and on the people who had failed to follow the way of Yahweh. Moses had done the exact opposite, he pleaded with God for mercy and forgiveness for his people. But soon Elijah had to realize that he could not get God for his intention because this is not God's nature: God desires from his prophets and followers not to be asked to give way to his anger but he wants to be reminded of his kindness and his fidelity so that he will change his mind

and forgive. He wants to be reminded of his compassion and his promises.

This way of behavior is deeply rooted in the history of Israel. The devout in the Old Testament had no fear do argue, to bargain with God and to shout at him. It looks often as if God was looking among the people for some who would bargain with him and remind him of his compassion and love so that he would not execute what he had threatened to do.

The people in the Old Testament banked on God's "regret" when he would find someone among the people who would remind him of his covenant and what he had promised. The psalms are the best proof for that. Behind all this is the firm conviction that in God's plan the human beings are not marionette or puppets but the covenant it build on fidelity and trust on both sides. Human beings play a part of how God's plan will be accomplished.

Story: "Your children have sinned against me!"

There is a story told in Jewish tradition which tells about God's desire to see his compassionate love and readiness to forgive mirrored in his creature. If he finds it there, it serves as a reminder of his own compassion which then in turn leads him to forgiveness and to cancel all punishment.

God told Abraham: "Your children have grievously sinned against me." Abraham answered: "Lord of the universe, let them perish to the honor of your name!" Then God said. " I will tell it Jacob, he bore the sufferings of becoming a grown up he perhaps will plead for compassion on their behalf." And God said To Jacob: "Your children have grievously sin against me." But Jacob replied: "Lord of the universe, let them perish to the honor of your name!" And God said: " No insight among the old and no council among the young." After that he went to Isaac and said: "Your children have grievously sinned against me"! Isaac responded: "Lord of the universe, my children and not also yours? As they eagerly listen to you before they put it into practice what they has heard, you called them my *firstborn son*, but now, when they disobeyed you words, you suddenly talk only about my children not anymore of your children too.

And how much have they really sinned? 70 years is the life span of a human. If you subtract the first 20 years for which you do not measure out punishment there will remain 50 years from which one has to subtract 25 for the nights. There remain 25 from which one has to subtract again 12 and a half for prayer, eating and toilet. Therefore, only 12 and a half will remain. If you will take the whole punishment upon our children, mine and yours that is fine if not then I will take half and you the other half. If you however want me to take all the punishment alone, that is fine, so have I myself been the sacrifice for them in your eyes." Isaac's children will then say: "You are really our father, Isaac !" But Isaac will point them towards the Holy one, blessed be he. An then all will raise their eyes to heaven and say: " You, O Lord, are our Father, our Redeemer is your name throughout the ages."

Comment:

God does not want people to endorse his desire to punish and to let his anger have its way. On the contrary, God looks for people who will plea for their brothers and sisters and who are willing to take the punishment upon them selves what *they* rightly may deserve. If he finds such people he sees in them his own compassionate nature and this in turn moves him to act according to his very nature: to forgive and have compassion. One of the most moving text in Scripture is Hosea 11:7-9:

My people are bent on disregarding me; if they are summoned to come up, not one of them makes a move. How could I part with you? Israel, how could I give you up? My heart within me is overwhelmed, fever grips my inmost being. I will not give rein to my fierce anger, I will not destroy you, for I am God, not man, the Holy One in your midst, and I shall not come to you in anger.

Our Mission:

Seen from this Old Testament context we, the disciples of Jesus, will have to commit ourselves all the more to this way of praying and presenting our brothers and sisters to God: Not asking God to let his anger have its way but to beg for mercy and forgiveness. This is precisely the Jesus way. Jesus is the one who stood for us all and having identified himself with us and bearing all our sins and transgressions, he represents us to God, his Father. And the Father looking at him who is willing to take God's judgment on sinful humanity upon himself, recognizes in his Son his very own nature of infinite compassion and forgiveness. That in turn moves him to reconcile himself with his own justice and give way to his infinite forgiving love and to cancel all judgement on sinful humanity.

If we are called to carry on Jesus mission we are asked to do what he did: To identify ourselves with all our brothers and sisters and stand before God on their behalf in constant prayer and willingness to take upon ourselves what ever God may ask from them but they are not able or willing to do. Our constant plea before God on heir behalf can never be a petition for punishment or revenge but must ever be like that of Christ that God my spare them, save them. And if he asks us to stand on their behalf and to take upon ourselves what would have been their lot in order to be saved, we will have to sacrifice ourselves since this is what Christ asked of those whom he calls to carry on his own mission. This is the service we are asked to render on behalf of all human beings according to our master's instruction: I did not come to be served but to serve and to lay down my life for all so that through my standing before the Father for them, all may be saved.

A greater love has no one except the one who lays down his life for his brothers and sisters.