

“That Lonely Feeling”

I Kings 19:1-15

Proper 14-B, August 9, 2015

Have you ever had it; that lonely feeling? Sometimes you can be in a crowd of people and still feel very lonely! You can go to a crowded shopping mall, or attend a ballgame, or go to a school prom or be in *Times Square* on New Year’s Eve and still be very lonely!

In Genesis 2:18, the Bible tells us—that the first thing God saw in his perfect world that was *not* good is that Adam was lonely! Therefore God gave him a companion; a helpmeet suitable for him.

In 1966, the Beatles released a new song: “Eleanor Rigby” and in it there is that haunting refrain: “All the lonely people, all the lonely people, where do they all come from?”

In the Broadway play, “The Cocktail Party,” written by Thomas Eliot, people are portrayed as just chattering away. They’re all lonely, and in their loneliness they just chatter and chatter and chatter.

And so you can see drama has it, song has it, and the Bible is just chocked full of it; people suffering from loneliness. And in our Old Testament lesson today, the Prophet Elijah is suffering from a profound sense of loneliness too! *“And I, and even I only, am left, and they seek my life to take it from me!” (I Kings 19:10).*

Brothers and sisters to put it mildly—the Prophet Elijah was having a very bad day; a very bad day that followed, strangely enough, directly upon the heels of what must have been one of the greatest days of his whole life and ministry. In I Kings 18, we learn that Elijah had just won a great victory in a personal showdown that he had had with the false prophets of Baal.

Sadly enough the wife of King Ahab, Queen Jezebel, did her best to turn the people of Israel away from their worship of the true God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and to shift their loyalties instead to the false god of Baal. By this time many of the people living in northern Israel, in the region of Mount Carmel, were vacillating back and forth between their supposed loyalty to the LORD God Almighty and their infatuation with Baal. Therefore Elijah came near to all the people and said: *“How long will you go on limping between two different opinions? If the LORD is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him” (I Kings 18:20-21)!*

Then Elijah challenged the prophets of Baal to build an altar to Baal even as he would build an altar to the God of Israel. Each would offer up a bull as a sacrifice upon their respective altars to their professed gods. The only catch is that neither Elijah nor the prophets of Baal would be permitted to use any matches or Butane lighter, or any other fire-starting devices to kindle the firewood that would consume their sacrifices. Both the prophets of Baal, and Elijah would take turns calling upon their respective gods to send fire down directly from heaven to consume their sacrifices. Therefore, Elijah invited the prophets of Baal to go first (I Kings 18:26-27)

Well, the false prophets of Baal went first and they cried out to Baal saying, “O Baal, answer us!” But there was no responding voice and no one answered. And at noon, Elijah mocked them saying, *“Cry aloud for he is a god: either he is meditating or he has wandered away or he is on a journey, or perhaps he must be asleep and must be awakened!”* but there was no voice, no answer, and no response. They even cut themselves with their own swords and lances until their own blood gushed out of them in an attempt to catch Baal’s attention and to personally express the seriousness of their devotion to him. But there was no voice, no answer and no response.

Now it was Elijah's turn, who first of all took twelve stones, one for each of the twelve tribes of Israel as the foundation for his altar. Then he dug a trench around his altar and placed his recently slain sacrificial-bull upon that altar. He filled four gigantic jars with water and poured them over his sacrifice; not one time or two times but three times! And then Elijah prayed: *"O LORD, God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, let it be known this day that you are God in Israel, that I am your servant, and that I have done all these things at your bidding. Answer me, O LORD answer me, so that these people may know that you, O LORD, are God, and that you now will work to turn their hearts back towards you!"* (I Kings 18:36-37).

Then the fire of the LORD fell and consumed the burnt offering, the wood, the stones, and the dust, and even licked up the water that was in the trench. When all the people saw it, they fell on their faces and said, *"The LORD, he is God! The LORD, he is God!"* That's when Elijah said to the Israelites: *"Seize the prophets of Baal, do not let one of them escape!"* And they were killed!

It's probably difficult for us to imagine the great sense of euphoria that must have come over Elijah on that day, but Elijah's good feelings were short-lived at best! For the next day, when Queen Jezebel heard what had happened, she was absolutely incensed and sent a message to the Prophet Elijah stating: *"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!"* (I Kings 19:2)

Then Elijah, who was completely drained, physically, and emotionally exhausted, and spiritually weary too: *"Got up and fled for his life, and came to Beersheba, which belongs to Judah. He left his servant there, but he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a solitary broom tree. He asked that he might die: "It is enough; now, O LORD, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors: Then he laid down under the broom tree and fell asleep!"* (I Kings 19:3-5)

The wonderful thing, of course, is that God did not leave Elijah alone with his loneliness and depression. He sent an angel to him who touched him and said, *"Get up and eat something!"* 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 that food and water and then he lay down again! Then the angel came to him a second time, and Elijah got up and traveled 40 days in the strength of that food and drink until he came to Mt Horeb; the Mountain of God. And there it was—that the Word of God came to him.

(1) It was then that God said to Elijah, *"You go up there on top of the mountain and stand there because I am going to pass by!"* And Elijah went and suddenly the sky is blackened. The trees groaned and the hurricane force winds tossed boulders down the mountain and perhaps Elijah thought to himself: *"This is God!"* But the writer of I Kings assures us that God wasn't in the whirlwind.

(2) Then there came an earthquake that shook the land, and Elijah must have said to himself again, *"This has got to be God!"* But God wasn't in the earthquake.

(3) Then a bolt of lightning came and scorched the earth, and burnt up all the crops. And Elijah was stunned and said, *"This has got to be God at work!"* But God was not in the fire.

(4) Finally, then there came a great silence and the prophet heard the cadence of a far-off voice speaking very softly, *"What are you doing here Elijah?"*

Elijah replied, *"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"* (I Kings 19:14)

Not only does God minister to Elijah in his loneliness but he also gives him a renewed sense of direction

for his life! In the verses that follow God also tells Elijah to anoint another man named “Elisha,” to become his companion in ministry and who will eventually become his successor. Furthermore, God tells Elijah that far from his being the only true believer left in the whole nation of Israel, that actually there are some 7000 people of faith in the nation, who had not yet bowed the knee to Baal and who have never kissed his mouth (I Kings 19:17-19)!

Brothers and sisters, one of the great avenues we must march down again and again as the followers of Jesus Christ in this world is that one which ministers to other people in their loneliness. To those husbands and wives whose faithful spouses have now died after having been happily married for 40 or 50 or 60 years, how lonely!

To those who have tried their best to sustain a marriage relationship, though it comes apart at the seams anyway, resulting in a divorce that comes about anyway, how lonely!

To those who have been unemployed for a long time and are about to give up all hope of ever having a meaningful job or career ever again, how lonely!

We need to respond to them in the name of Jesus Christ who has experienced the greatest sense of loneliness of anyone, anywhere at any time, when he willingly went to cross, carrying inside of himself the tremendous guilt of our sins, crying out in that moment of great separation: “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?” so that we might never be forsaken by God—all to reconcile us to our Heavenly Father and bring us the forgiveness of our sins, life and salvation.

Some people are like Elijah. They say, “I’m lonely, but they do nothing but bottle themselves up with their loneliness and do nothing but complain!”

For some it’s like that bride who many years ago wrote a letter to her father back east from the state of California, “I just can’t go on! I am so lonely out here!” And writing back to her he reminded her of that well-known verse: “Two men looked out from behind the prison bars, the one to the mud and the other to the stars!” One looked at that which depressed him and was sullen! The other looked at that which inspired him and was grateful!

That’s how it was with Elijah. He saw only the mud until God came to him and helped him see the stars. In his loneliness he thought that he was the only true believer in the God of Israel alive anymore, when God came to him in the stillness of that small voice to assure him that there were still 7000 in Israel who had not bended their knee to Baal.

Loneliness is something that must be dealt with and if you have a great many close family members and friends living all around you, you may forget completely that there are many lonely people living out there in our world!

There were times no doubt when our Savior in his humanity must have certainly encountered the problem of loneliness too! How lonely Jesus may have felt on that day when he said, ***“Foxes have holes, and the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head!”***

Or how lonely Jesus must have felt when he called some of those people who looked awfully promising to become one of his disciples, when they having called them they turned to him and said, ***“We are going to follow you, but first let us go and attend to all the other important matters in our lives first!”***

Do you remember how our Lord said in the hours before his Passion, ***“How earnestly I have desired to eat this Passover Supper with you!”***? Jesus knew what was ahead of him, and in his humanity he wanted the companionship of people in that hour, and that is why he broke bread with them and instituted the Sacrament of Holy Communion.

It was for that same reason that he took his closest friends, Peter, James and John with him into the Garden of Gethsemane, to the place where he knelt down to pray, so that they might comfort him with their presence. But they kept falling asleep on Jesus. In his disappointment and loneliness he asked them, ***“Could you not watch with me for even one hour!”***?

In his own life, one way that Jesus dealt successfully with the problem of loneliness was to carefully distinguish between loneliness and solitude. Loneliness is not a good thing, but we all need a certain amount of solitude. After preaching to the crowds all day and healing their sick, our Master would at evening send these people back to their homes and villages. He would sometimes even send the disciples to a place by themselves as well. And then he would go up into the mountains and pray to be alone with God his Heavenly Father in solitude and to draw a new supply of energy from that divine source of power! At one point he said, ***“I am not alone! My Father is always with me and I have a constant sense of his presence and power!”***

Certainly there are a number of things that we can each do to help other people cope with the problem of their loneliness. May I make one small suggestion?

Why not, each one of you in the next ten days, write down the names of three people that you know are very lonely? And maybe you should actually go and visit them. One woman who was the member of a Christian congregation in Florida decided to accept this challenge from her pastor and listen to what happened!

She went to visit an older couple whom no one had visited for a long time. They were so happy that when she left they gave her a great big bag full of oranges, from a tree in their backyard. So she took some of those oranges with her on her next visit to a solitary older woman who no one ever, went to see. When she told her how she had come by those oranges, that woman smiled and said to her, I have the most marvelous recipe for orange marmalade.

The visitor went home and used the rest of the oranges to make orange marmalade. On her third call, she visited an elderly gentleman that most people thought of as being rather crotchety! And when he opened the door, she said, “I’ve brought you some marmalade, made from some oranges that were given to me on my first visit, and with a recipe that was given to me on my second visit. And he said to her, “Why don’t you sit down and try some of my homemade bread?” **And they sat down and had toast and marmalade and coffee.**

This woman discovered that each one of those three homes she went to visit, were home in which each resident had something wonderful to give to another, but no one to give it to!

Through his perfect life, death and resurrection, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ made it possible for us to be brought into God’s own family; a family where there should always be room enough for everyone; a family where people seek to build one another up and encourage one another, rather than to belittle and demean others. When we are reunited to the God who created us, that’s when our loneliness, to a large degree, will begin to disappear. All barriers are broken down. There’s no longer any fence to separate us from our God or one another!

Do you remember he says to all of us on the night before he died? ¹² “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. ¹³ No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s

friends. ¹⁴You are my friends if you do what I command you. ¹⁵I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. ¹⁶You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. ¹⁷I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another. Amen