

After the Fireworks

Jim Benedict – Union Bridge Church of the Brethren

Sermon for Sunday, June 20, 2010, 1 Kings 19:4-18

In the sweltering heat of June, few are thinking of the recently completed Winter Olympics in Vancouver. They seem so long ago. What happened? Who won? Frankly, it is hard to remember.

There were no great stories, the likes of which we will be telling our children's children -- no unbelievable American upsets, like the hockey team at Lake Placid in 1980. Sure, the U.S. won the most medals (37), though not the most golds (we tied for third). And we won a couple of gold medals in categories we had never won or hadn't one for a long time – Nordic combined and the 4-man bobsled. But my guess is that by the time the next Winter Olympics roll around in 2014, only die-hard fans of those sports will remember those tremendous breakthroughs.

So there were no great stories of champions. That's o.k. Not all great stories, in sports or in life, are about champions. In fact, one of my favorite Olympic stories is about Mark Lenzi, a diver. Lenzi actually won gold at the 1992 Olympics in Barcelona. He saw his dream come true, and got to stand on the podium and listen to the Star Spangled Banner. And for a while, he was a media darling, the subject of articles in *Sports Illustrated*, made an appearance on the "Tonight Show," and was recognized on the streets.

But then it all faded. The Olympics became old news, and Mark Lenzi was just another face in the crowd. And a terrible, paralyzing depression took hold of him. He stopped training, gained thirty pounds, and found himself sitting around his apartment night after night, feeling thoroughly discouraged.

Strange, isn't it, how quickly the thrill of victory can give way to the agony of anonymity? How success and the elation that accompanies it can sour into a deep, bone weary despair? But this is not only Mark Lenzi's story. It is also the story of Elijah the prophet. We read in the scriptures about Elijah's battle with burn-out. But what we didn't read is the story that immediately precedes it, the story of Elijah's greatest and most dramatic success as a prophet. In a contest with the prophets of the false god Baal, Elijah the prophet of the Lord had prevailed, even though he was outnumbered 450 to 1!

In case you don't remember or perhaps never heard that part of the story, let me go over the high points. Queen Jezebel was a great supporter of idol worship, especially the worship of Baal. With her support, the worship of idols took a mighty hold on Israel and the worship of the Lord declined. Elijah warned the leaders and people of Israel that they were sinning against the One who had brought their ancestors out of bondage in Egypt, and preached to them that they must repent and return to the one true God. But the people didn't listen, and Jezebel – along with her husband, King Ahab – began to persecute Elijah and all the priests of the Lord.

Eventually, tired of running and hiding, Elijah stepped forward and issued a challenge. He arranged for two altars to be set up, and a bull to be sacrificed on each. Then he invited the 450 prophets of Baal to call upon their god to send down fire from the heavens to burn up the sacrifice on their altar. They could pray, they could dance, they could shout – they could do whatever they wanted – in order to get their god to send down fire. So they did. They danced

all day. They prayed. They shouted. They even cut themselves with swords and lances, supposing that if their god saw them actually bleeding, he would have to take them seriously and respond. But nothing happened.

Then Elijah offered a simple, brief prayer, and --- zap! – fire came down and consumed Elijah’s sacrifice, the altar it was on, and everything around it. The people of Israel were amazed. Elijah was the clear, undisputable champion. The Lord had prevailed. It is hard to think of a moment of more definitive triumph.

But as with Mark Lenzi’s Olympic victory, the glory quickly faded. People got all excited for a little while, but soon they went back to their old ways. And Queen Jezebel was not impressed. She was angry – violently angry. She placed a bounty on Elijah. So Elijah found himself a solitary broom tree out in the middle of nowhere and he sat down under it, and wished he was dead. All his ambition was gone. All his energy and enthusiasm for doing God’s work was gone. He had nothing left.

An angel visited, but that didn’t make much difference. Elijah ate the food the angel brought, but it didn’t change how he was feeling, so he just rolled over and went back to sleep. He slept a lot. Today we know that can be a symptom of depression. The angel came back a second time, with more food, and Elijah ate again. But this time, the angel brought more than dinner. The angel brought marching orders. God wanted Elijah to go on a journey, and however discouraged and depressed Elijah might be, an order was an order. So Elijah went, on a trip of forty days and forty nights, to the mountain of the Lord.

Maybe God thought a vacation would help. You know, you’re feeling down – maybe a change of scenery will make the difference. Go to the lake or to the mountains, take a cruise, or hike the Appalachian Trail. Sometimes it does help. But it didn’t help Elijah.

Elijah took the trip, but when he arrived, he still felt lousy. He found the deepest, darkest cave he could find and crawled in. He was done with the world. He was done with being a prophet. He didn’t want any part of it, not now, not ever.

It was time for a little more direct confrontation. So God spoke to Elijah and asked him, “Elijah, what are you doing here?” Elijah told him in no uncertain terms. “Look, God,” he said, “I’ve done it all. I’ve done everything you’ve asked me. I did it when it was hard. I did it when it wasn’t popular. I did it when it was dangerous. I told these people of yours everything you asked me to tell them, and look where it got me. They hate me and they hate you. They don’t care about your covenant. They’ve torn down all the places where you used to be worshiped and they’re killing all the people you send to speak for you. I’m the only one left, and they’ll kill me too if they can get their hands on me.”

God couldn’t deny much of what Elijah said. But God asked him to watch a little demonstration to remind Elijah to whom he was speaking. Then God put on the greatest fireworks display ever. A mighty wind blew, the earth shook, and fire filled the sky. Then a great silence fell over the earth.

Then Elijah stood before the Lord, and God asked him a second time, “What are you doing here, Elijah?”

Now let me tell you I admire Elijah, because he wasn’t dazzled by the fireworks. He saw and heard it all, but he couldn’t be frightened into being a prophet. He couldn’t be dazzled into being a prophet. Some big emotional event wasn’t going to do it. He’d been through that before, when he’d triumphed over the prophets of Baal. He knew how quickly those experiences can fade. Elijah gave God the same answer after the fireworks that he’d given

before. He was still empty. He was still discouraged.

Then God did the only thing that there was left to do. God didn't try to dazzle Elijah anymore. God just put Elijah's next assignment on the table. "Here it is," God said, and left it at that.

It was up to Elijah now. He had to decide. He had been asking himself, "Why am I a prophet? So I can win? So people will look up to me? So people will learn to love God and give up idolatry? So I can have a safe, rewarding, fulfilling career?" God didn't give Elijah any promises about those things. Instead, God asked a far more fundamental question – or, more precisely, forced Elijah to ask himself, "Are you a prophet or not? Here is a message. Are you going to deliver it or walk away?"

When we read the story, it almost seems like something is missing at this point. We want some explanation, some description of how Elijah decided to get back to work. We want a charming tale of another angel visit, or about how Elijah's heart was strangely warmed, or about how he fell on his knees and cried out to God for forgiveness. But we don't get any of that.

Elijah's story isn't good theater, but I think it may be more realistic. The Olympic diver Mark Lenzi tells a similar tale. Basically, he says, he just decided one night that he was going to dive again, because as he said, you've got to be what you are. He's a diver, so he has to dive. Elijah was a prophet, so he had to carry the message. The scripture is so matter-of-fact: "So Elijah set out." And the story goes on.

What about you? Maybe this is your dark hour. Maybe you've done your best on the job, at home, even at church, only to be disappointed. Maybe you're discouraged. Maybe you want to find that solitary broom tree and say, "Move over, Elijah. I can't go on. I'm tired." Maybe you want to find that dark, deep cave somewhere to crawl in and never come out.

For some reason, this happens to God's people a lot. It may happen to everybody, but it almost seems like an occupational hazard for those God calls to faith and service. Moses got fed up with the Israelites as he led them in the wilderness, and he cried out, "God, if this is the way you are going to treat me, put me to death at once!" Job prayed, "Let the day perish that I was born." Jeremiah lamented, "Why did I come forth from the womb to see toil and sorrow and to spend my days in shame?" Amos complained, "The people hate the one who reproves in the gate, and they abhor the one who speaks truth." And in our own time, the writings of the late Mother Theresa, released after her death, show that she suffered for decades from a kind of dark night of the soul.

So if this is a dark hour for you, know that you are in good company. And know, too, that there may never be a dramatic resolution. God may never in this life give you the reasons why it has to be so hard sometimes. But above all, know this: after the fireworks, in the utter silence, you have to decide who you are. If God is calling you, you have to decide what you are going to answer.

Will you do God's work? Will you use the gifts God has given you – not just when it is easy, not just when it is safe, not just when it doesn't cost much, not just when there is glory in it, not just as long as it is fun – but even when it is hard, even when it is dangerous, even when it costs you, even when it is unpopular, even when it is nothing but just plain, hard work? Will you rise to the occasion? Will you do God's will, as best you understand it? Will you answer God's call? Will you take the next assignment? Will you continue to be what you pledged to be at your baptism – a follower of Christ wherever he leads and a servant of God in every

circumstance?

No one else can answer the question, only you. But it is one of the most important questions you will ever face. You have to be who you are. Who are you?

Amen.