

There’s a t-shirt out there that reads, “Stop the world, I want to get off!” Have you seen it (or maybe you own it). Regardless, you probably know the feeling: *Stop the world, I want to get off!* The prophet Elijah sure did. Let me tell you why.

Elijah has always been a thorn in the side of Ahab, the king of Israel. But he really gets under the skin of Ahab’s wicked wife, Jezebel. He watches Jezebel and her prophets worshipping false gods like Baal and Elijah just gets mad. Finally he challenges those prophets to an epic showdown on Mt. Carmel. There, Elijah humiliates Baal and convinces the bystanders that they should worship God alone. As you can imagine, Jezebel is furious. She swears that by the next sunset, Elijah will be dead. He’s not about to wait around to see if she’s serious. Elijah takes off running, leaving everything he has to seek safety in the desert. It’s all adrenaline at that point. But once he’s far enough away, reality hits. He has done away with Jezebel’s advisers. There is a contract out on his life. He’s miles from safety, security and shelter. *Stop the world, I want to get off!*

Elijah’s overwhelmed. Utterly exhausted. He has nothing else to give, physically or emotionally. You know what it’s like when you’re just spent? Your mind races. You can’t get motivated to do even the simplest of tasks. You feel terribly sorry for yourself. That’s Elijah: curled up in a ball, sleeping under a bush, sulking, *Nobody cares. I’m all alone. I’d be better off dead.* (All I can think is, *drama!* ... but that might be because I’m coming off a week with our middle schoolers).

There’s a part of Elijah that must have been looking for God, because his wandering takes him to one of God’s holy places, Mt. Sinai, some 300 miles away. But when he gets there, not even a direct word from God can shake his mood. “Elijah, what are you doing here?” God asks. Elijah’s response is to invite God to his pity party: “Lord,” he cries, “I

have served you with all my heart and might. And what good did that do me? Everyone else has turned away from you. I'm the only faithful person left, and now they're trying to kill me too." Elijah is crippled by despair. His mood reflects the world outside. The wind howls. The earth shakes. Fire burns up everything in its path. But eventually, there's a stillness so intense that Elijah finally is able to drag himself to his feet and feel God's presence. Yet when it's all over, did you notice what happened to Elijah? *Nothing*. The Lord actually comes to Elijah in the midst of the silence and Elijah walks away completely unchanged. Oh, he realizes God is there. He even covers his face with his cloak in fear and respect. But when God asks him again, "what are you doing here?" he gives the exact same response. The pity party's going strong. Elijah is still stuck. *Stop the world, Lord, I want to get off!*

You can't blame Elijah for feeling this way. It's hard when your plans get changed, when you feel like life has dealt you a bad hand. It's tempting to feel like a victim, or to blame others for the mess you find yourself in. You might even to shake your fist at God for letting you down, or begin to doubt if God is there at all. Those voices in your head that it's you versus the world can be powerful indeed. Sometimes it takes something bigger than you to get the chaos to stop: an intervention, a dose of perspective, a renewed sense of purpose.

All of those things God does for Elijah. He doesn't leave Elijah alone. First, God gives him a pep talk: *I have not forsaken you or forgotten my people*. And then God gives him a job: *go, and anoint new kings for Israel and Aram, and then anoint Elisha in your place*. Even when Elijah can't see it, God has other plans for him. He's creating a new future for Elijah – one that will renew his strength and give him hope. The thing is, does Elijah hear it? Or does God's pronouncement seem like more bad news?

One of my go-to books on church leadership is Andy Stanley's *Seven Practices of Effective Ministry*. One of the practices is "Replace Yourself." At first glance, that can seem a little intimidating. Who wants to feel like they're not needed anymore? But it's based on the concept that none of us are here forever. It's up to us to nurture the next generation of leaders, to train and walk with them, and then to hand off our responsibilities to them so that they can carry the ministry forward into the future. Being intentional about replacing yourself means you can set the standards and direction for things you care about. But then you need to trust that those who follow your path to bring their own sets of gifts and ideas and passions so that ministry can continue to grow and change and flourish. Mentoring someone to take your place creates a sense of shared ownership. It ensures that what is important to you has a chance to continue. After all, Stanley says, "one day we will all be replaced." That's not always easy to hear, but it does add a little perspective.

I'm not sure how Elijah took God's pronouncement that God had other plans for him. Maybe he was so burned out that he welcomed a way out. Maybe he felt threatened that someone younger, newer or with different ideas was in the wings. He could have been hurt that God's plans for him were changing; this was a new path he wasn't necessarily expecting. Or maybe he was energized that he wasn't going to have to continue his journey alone. When we want to cry *stop the world, I want to get off*, we can be all over the map emotionally. But if there's anything we know about God, it's that God has this way of doing God's best work when we're little uncomfortable.

Think about it: so often we spend our energy trying to keep everything running according to plan. Go to college, find a good job, buy a house, fall in love, raise a family, retire comfortably. Our goal is to take care of ourselves so we can get what we want. Now, there's nothing inherently wrong with this concept. But it perpetuates the idea that we can,

indeed, control what happens in our lives. And if we believe that long enough, it leaves no room for God to work. That's why sometimes it takes a change in routine, or a midlife crisis, or an unexpected disaster to get our attention turned away from ourselves. God is able to break in and, like Elijah, we are changed.

I mentioned that I was in Kansas City last week with our middle school mission trip. One afternoon I was talking with one of the adults who had been feeding people at a soup kitchen. She looked deeply troubled. "I spend my whole life not thinking about this," she said. "Not worrying about what I'm going to eat or where I'm going to sleep. None of my friends do either. We have everything we need. We are so blessed. And today I saw all these people, men and women and children who had nothing. It was so hard." And as tears rolled down her cheeks she said, "I needed to see this. And I need to do something to help – not just on this trip, but always." God was breaking in that day. Amidst her discomfort and pain, God was stretching her perspective. Her world stopped a little that afternoon – but instead of getting off, she was ready to invite someone else in to join her.

Friends, sometimes it does feel like the world is spinning out of control. You might be tempted to go out and buy one of those t-shirts for yourself. But do not despair. Because in the midst of life's chaos, God just might be breaking in. God wants to give you a new sense of purpose and company for the journey. And God will do whatever it takes to get your attention and help you believe it. Because God plans to give you a future filled with hope ... and then God plans use you to do the same for someone else. Amen.