

Getting Up (part 2)

1 Kings 19:9-16; John 6:51-58

August 15, 2021

Brian Russo

What are you doing here?

Sometimes there's this voice in my head that whispers, Brian, what are you doing here?

Sometimes I hear it when I'm at youth group. Sometimes I hear it when I begin writing a sermon. Sometimes I hear it when getting into petty arguments at home. Sometimes I hear it when I find myself at Acme instead of Wegmans. I heard it in my first serious relationship. I heard it when talking with Bible-belt peers at Seminary. And I heard it when studying for Accounting in the Business School at Seton Hall University. Brian, just what are you doing here?

God, I have no idea. Sometimes in moments, sometimes over months and years, I have felt like I was, or am, sort of wavering. Floating. Lost in my bearings. Lost in my purpose or meaning. And I don't think I'm alone. I think that no matter our age or our experience, we probably annually (?) go through a kind of fog. Light or dense. Where we can see paths in front of us, where we can feel the roads behind us, but we have no idea where we are supposed to be in relation to either, or where we are meant to be heading next in the future.

But you know, I think we're in good company. Because neither really did Elijah. *What are you doing here, Elijah*; the angel asks twice. And I'm not sure Elijah knew. At this point, and where we left him last week, he's sort of just stumbling about. Lying down under solitary broom trees, eating strange cakes, and apparently now hiding out in a cave somewhere. So the angel asks him twice, what are you doing here, and twice Elijah tells him the same story: *"I have been very zealous for the Lord, the God of hosts; I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away."*

The repetition echoes our story from last week with the double attempt to get Elijah to eat, after the double event of Elijah returning to sleep. And I think the point of all this repetition is that remedies often don't happen at once. They take time. And effort. And trials and errors. And second and third and fourth attempts. As much as we would wish it to be, we can't simply snap our fingers and make it all go away. Or say our prayers at night to awake anew and whole the next morning. Sometimes, often times, we need to work, and repeat, and work, and repeat, and even hide away in a cave for a while, before emerging strong enough to tell our story, our true and honest story, to ourselves and to someone else, again and again, before things finally begin to click. Before healing and progress can be made and visible.

And you know what, even though that's not ideal, or what any of us might want to hear, it's also strangely sort of okay. At least for me. Because it's normal. Short of I guess being instantly restored by the touch of Christ, which I have not (at least not instantly), it's just how it seems to work.

So I keep telling my story. Like Elijah. And perhaps like you too. Because the more times we tell it, the more it kind of makes what we're going through somehow easier. You got to talk it out, they say, and not keep it in. And you know what, I think they are right. We've got to talk it out. Especially if we are struggling right now, which I suspect many of us are.

Step one to getting up is confessing to our story, whatever it is, and first to ourselves. To **ourselves**. We must be honest with the truth we see, no matter how sad or embarrassing it may be.

Step two is seeking help. Maybe from an angel, I guess. But probably a friend, pastor, or therapist will do. And there is absolutely nothing at all wrong, or weak, in doing that. My friends, we all need help. And that's probably why we are here, in church. All of us, young or old, single or married, would be immeasurably benefited from receiving help. From telling our stories and talking it out. The stigma that you are somehow a failure by making that call and scheduling an appointment, desperately needs to be corrected and disappear. It really does.

Step three is then watching and listening. To trusted wisdom, for professional guidance, and the Spirit when meditating or praying in silence, so to hear the steps that we should think to take next.

Now of course, it's not always as easy as that. For watching and listening, child-like lessons, can be some of the hardest we ever figure out. Especially if today's standards are any metric. Because sometimes there's just too much baggage, or propaganda, that gets in our way. That stops us from hearing, and watching out for new perspectives or listening to words of advice.

Verse 13 of our text is particularly interesting in this respect. You see, after listening for God, Elijah emerges, but is yet unwilling to step past the entrance of his cave. He doesn't run out to God. He doesn't drop his veil. It says he literally wrapped his face in his shawl, and stood no further than the entrance of his tomb, as it were. Like any of us who were or are broken and then made to feel vulnerable, Elijah emerges from his shadow cautious and embarrassed and at first seems unwilling to let all the baggage go; to immediately trust in whatever he hears or sees now in front of him. It's almost as if he wants to hold onto the past. To remain close to his pain. His cave and his story. To stay where he knows, even if it's not where he wants to be.

Does that sound like you? Or someone you love?

So like any good therapist or friend, God notices this and surprises him. Startles him. Makes him question his preconceived notions and expectations so to awaken his inspiration. Instead of appearing as Elijah might suspect, God takes an alternative approach. Listen:

*Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces, **but the Lord was not in the wind**; and after the wind an earthquake, **but the Lord was not in the earthquake**; and after the earthquake a fire, **but the Lord was not in the fire**; and after the fire a sound of **sheer silence** (vs. 11-12).*

There Elijah heard it. There Elijah saw it. Not in the loud or the complex, the verbose or thunderous, but in the silence. In the silence! Or in the soft whisper, as the NET translates it. Have you ever gotten so upset or uncomfortable when the therapist or the friend or spouse peppers you with a series of *why?*, or worse, says absolutely nothing after you've divulged everything, and just sort of stares at you, or asks questions with their eyes, allowing you the space and time to come to your own answers and conclusions? Yeah? Well, God does just that, but in doing so, in the silence and the soft whisper, Elijah is able to begin putting things into focus. To listen openly to what he ought to do next.

What feels like a lifetime ago, I spent five months in Florence, Italy. Yes, it ended up being as amazing as it sounds, though the reason why I went was sort of complicated and more like an escape. A last-ditch effort to leave the past and present behind to find a new way forward.

On weekends, my roommates and I would travel by rail to another region or another country. On one such occasion we took a train from Florence to Interlaken, traversing the Italian Alps to stay in the Swiss Alps. Pretty incredible stuff. During our stay we decided to go sledding at midnight, in those Alps. We took the lift up in the dark, and after enjoying some genuine fondue by candlelight in a cabin at the top, we descended the slopes one by one by sled. The trail was marked by orange lanterns along the edges lest you miss your mark and suffer a terrible drop. And let me tell you, those sleds went fast and so the light from those lanterns became a passing blur. At one moment, I could hear my friends screaming “woo.” At another I could hear them screaming “ahhh.” And then at another I could hear nothing. Nothing at all. Either they veered off some path they shouldn’t have, or maybe it was me. But all I knew is that I was suddenly alone. In the dark. In the Alps.

At first I was pretty scared. At first the silence was deafening. The stars twinkling above and the reflection off the snow weren’t so much beautiful as they were bewildering. I felt so small in the great expanse. Totally insignificant. And without anything familiar nearby, I kind of felt paralyzed in a sense. And in that moment of quasi-paralysis, I had what felt like a million things rush through me. The face of my girlfriend who helped break my heart; the college degree I earned but felt impassioned to; the job I had but then lost; the friends I had but who had moved on to others; the family I loved but who was still fresh in disarray.

And so there in the silence, I felt alone. And I wept. For some time. Privately confessing to the stars my fears, my sins, and my shortcomings. And praying for strength to make changes.

And then not so immediately, but after some time, something washed over me. A sort of peace, maybe? A soft voice whispering *Brian, what are you doing here? ...look, I am with you.* In the expanse. In the silence. Even in Switzerland. No, it wasn’t an audible voice in my ears, and I’m not going to argue definitively saying that on that mountain top I in fact heard God. But maybe I did? In my soul. For it was there, when totally afraid and alone, on a journey across the Atlantic in the hope to emerge from my cave and find some sort of purpose and meaning, that I found it. Purpose. And meaning. And hope. As the stars were seemingly infinite above me, so too suddenly felt the options before me.

Shortly after my friends reappeared. I guess they had gotten behind me. And shortly after that I left Italy and enrolled in Seminary. And shortly after that I was hired as your intern. And some time after that became one of your ministers. And today I find myself in this pulpit once again telling my story.

It’s kind of amazing. How it all lines up and can be traced back through time. How it seems to make sense now, but at the moment was all sorts of chaos and uncertainty. But that’s kind of how it goes. Each of us will walk through our long and deep valleys often without knowing how we got there or how to get out. And Time, so often the great healer, nudges us slightly forward so that one day we look back and it kind of reads like fiction. But we know it was real.

And so my friends, all I know is that I wouldn’t have found where I was meant to be without first fessing up to my issues, and then searching for guidance and listening for answers. Even if it meant going all the way to Italy.

And thus, step four: doing. Following through. Taking a leap of faith and going where we wouldn't before.

The angel in our story tells Elijah, "Go." "*What are you doing here, Elijah?*" *'Go, return on your way to Damascus. When you arrive, you shall anoint a king over Aram and anoint a king over Israel; and you shall anoint Elisha as prophet in your place.'*" Faced with another command, Elijah could have done as he did last week. Gone back to sleep. But this time he listens and follows through, and acts on the advice he is given, and by doing so, sets a new path forward that has him eventually meet Elisha. The man who would ultimately take his mantle from him, removing his burdens.

Sometimes, my friends, it really is as simple as that, as listening and abiding by the advice of a single word. Like, go. Or, do. Two of Jesus' favorites. But just because it's simple doesn't mean that it's easy.

Two of my favorite shows, LOST and The Leftovers (the latter being superior), both understand and portray this really well. In LOST, Jack has to save the people on the island by simply pressing a button. In The Leftovers, Kevin has to sing a song in order to navigate his way out of Limbo. In both cases, pushing a button and singing a song, it can all seem rather ridiculous and stupid. Not elegant or intelligent enough. But in the end, the question is, does it really matter? Just press the button, Jack. Just sing the song, Kevin. Just do whatever it takes, whatever is required of us, no matter how simple or difficult, so that we can leave the cave, get off the pavement, and emerge healthier on the other side.

Anya and I usually disagree about this, as she is a perfectionist first, and I am a curator after. But since I am preaching, and I believe myself to be right, I'll tell you my reasons as to why. If I begin writing my sermons trying to first articulate my thoughts exactly, I always get stuck in neutral, and internally scream WHAT AM I DOING HERE? But if I just begin to write, blurting it all out, it sort of eventually comes together (though I guess you can be the judge). Whereas, my poor wife's blog for instance that she has conceived of authoring for the last ten years is still going through name changes and devoid of any content!

My friends: confess; seek and search; watch and listen; do and follow through. There are of course more intermediary steps than these, but they seem to encapsulate the path towards us getting up. From laying down. God doesn't promise, sadly, that life will be easy or painless. That even as prophets of the Divine, we aren't spared from long periods of doubt, self-criticism, and harm. And more that, getting up will probably only ensure that at some point we will be knocked back down again. Because that's life in a fallen world. Elijah suffered from it, as did Jesus, and so shall we. So it's not about preventing loss, sadness, and failure. But it's about how we cope and handle and move on when we do.

And God willing, with God by our side and ever in our midst, abiding with us always and still, even in the soft whispers and the silence, we will make it through. We will emerge. And be stronger and more capable to deal with wherever we find ourselves now or next, and whatever this world may summon thereafter.

Thanks be to God. Amen