

The Strength in Weakness

1 Kings 19: 1-9

Mark 6: 7-13

Stronger is better. This is particularly true as we all know in the matter of paper towels. No one is going to argue with me on that one, right? Who hasn't demanded a paper towel that can – when it's wet – hold up a cup and saucer? Anything less, we'd be peeved.

Stronger means more resilient, more capable, more better. We want a strong economy, a strong stock market, a strong military, a strong character, a strong body, a strong mind, a strong labor market, a strong earnings report, a strong whatever.

Superman is super because of his strength. Nobody wants a weakling nerd of a Superman, because what's super about that?

Our society has no use for weaklings, or what's perceived as weak. Weak is inferior. It's submissive instead in charge, dominated instead of domineering, whiny and wimpy instead of bold and decisive, winning the arm wrestling contest, not losing.

No! We want our Superman to be super!

Yet along comes Jesus who redefines what it means to be super and strong. For Jesus, like in the Sermon on the Mount, characteristics like humility, meekness, compassion, mercy, peacemaking, and suffering are called super, are named as the strengths, really, of the person of genuine faith. This is what happens in the gospel as Jesus reveals the dynamic of the Kingdom of God; everything gets flipped upside down from what the world has as values. Strength becomes weakness, and weakness becomes strength. It introduces the wackiest ideas *ever*. That was two thousand years ago, and we still think they're wacky, and we say we follow Jesus. Go figure.

The ideas that Jesus presents are nothing all that new. They'd been lurking in the pages of scripture for centuries before Jesus.

You recall the story of Elijah and the prophets of Ba'al, how the prophets of Ba'al, loyal to Queen Jezebel, were unable to call down fire on their offering on the altar. Then Elijah steps up, douses the whole altar and offering and water and calls down fire from God. Contest over; God wins. Elijah does what any religious person would do after winning a contest. He hops over the net and shakes their hands, congratulating them on their effort. No, no, he doesn't. He and his followers kill every last one of them that they can find. Everyone like a strong guy, right? He's bold, decisive, and pretty brutal. Of course, they would have done the same and killed him in the blink of an eye.

In fact, the story isn't over. Queen Jezebel doesn't like any of this. She doesn't like the show-off prophet. She *really* doesn't like the show-off prophet killing all of her prophets. She sends Mr. Show-off the prophet a message. *May the gods deal with me, be it ever so severely, if by this time tomorrow I do not make your life like that of one*

of them. This is the Queen speaking. She does have some resources at her disposal to make this happen. This is strong. This is a threat, a lethal threat from someone who has a ruthless and lethal reputation.

The next verse says: *Elijah was afraid and ran for his life.* Elijah was no dummy. He ran for his life. He high-tailed it into the desert. He outran Jezebel's posse that was chasing him. But there was price in all of this. It says: *He went a day's journey into the desert. He came to a broom tree, sat down under it and prayed that he might die. "I have had enough, Lord," he said. "Take my life; I am no better than my ancestors." Then he lay down under the tree and fell asleep.*

You have to sympathize with poor Elijah. One minute, he's the strong and mighty victor, standing tall and slaying his enemies, the hero who triumphs over the evil, idolatrous Queen for his wondrous God. The next minute, he's gotten a death sentence and is running like a weakling loser for the hills with a gang of revenge-seeking soldiers in hot pursuit. How did that happen? He went from the highest mountaintop to the pit of doom and despair in a matter of hours.

What went wrong? It certainly wasn't God that got it wrong. Elijah can't imagine anything else but to believe that he got it wrong. He was as pitifully useless as all of his ancestors in advancing God's Kingdom in the world, in standing up to the evil and beating it back.

Then he gets visited by an angel who does desert catering, *a cake of bread baked over hot coals, and a jar of water.* It says that *He ate and drank and then lay down again.* The food and water so graciously provided, like the manna from heaven and the water from the rock for God's people during the Exodus, had not changed anything. Elijah was in a bad way, not simply physically, but spiritually.

The angel returns for a second try, telling him not only to eat and drink (more), but also adding, *for the journey is too much for you.* The angel doesn't say that he's useless, or that he's a failure. The angel doesn't say that everything will be alright either. The angel says that there's a journey ahead of you, and you better eat because you've got some traveling to do.

The angel also doesn't say what direction he should travel. He chooses to head for the mountain of God, hoping that God will meet with his failed servant there and maybe explain what on earth went wrong, and then end his life and put him out of his misery. But that's another sermon.

What we see is how life can deal you a stunning loss right after a stunning win. One moment you're on top, and the next, you're at the absolute bottom. In Elijah's story we hear how God coaxes Elijah to keep on going. The journey is **not** over when he camps himself under that broom tree. God is not done with Elijah. The angel, who I believe was a persistent female angel, was going to get his fanny moving for the Lord God once again.

In his time of weakness, God provided him strength. Perhaps at that moment when he was feeling his oats the most, he forgot how he got there, lost sight of his mission, lost connection with his God, like when he learned that the Queen wanted him dead, badly. Fear overcame him in that moment and his sense of the presence of God that had brought him victory suddenly left him. Feeling alone, weak, and vulnerable, he ran for his life.

In the reading from Mark's gospel, Jesus sends out his disciples on a mission trip, like a graduate apprentice, or a field internship. They're sent in pairs, not alone. This is a reminder that we work together, or it doesn't work. Jesus gives them specific authority over "evil" spirits, as the translation says, or over "unclean" spirits as the footnote alternative suggests. A compromise word in translation could have been "sinful spirits," or those forces which set a person opposite the will of God in some defined way. The mission of these discipleship trainees, these future leaders of Jesus' ministry, is to bring people to a right knowledge and positive relationship to God and God's will.

The instruction to bring no bread, no bag, no money, and no extra tunic for this journey communicates to those whom the disciples will visit that they seek the hospitality of the home. Disciples outfitted in this spare manner will be recognized as pious travelers, akin to miracle workers, healers, or exorcists. Homes that open their doors to provide travelers with hospitality are regarded as homes worthy of their ministry. Homes refusing hospitality send a clear message, too: they have no interest in God and no interest in aligning with God's will. There is too much to be done for the disciples to cajole, convince, and persuade reluctant villagers to repent and seek the Lord's way.

For those who do provide them hospitality, there was a ministry from the disciples that brought people to a new path in their lives, drawing them into a more faithful relationship to God and being more attentive to God's will.

But clearly they aren't equipped to look or to be strong, capable, or independent. If they brought their own food, a bag with a toothbrush, a change of clothes and a sleeping bag, a Visa card, and an extra jacket for the chilly nights, they would be going on a camping vacation, not a mission trip. Their success would depend on others, even beyond their partner. They would need faith to believe that God would provide "angels" for them who would advance their Kingdom work.

For some, that meant driving out demons. Demons are like a code name for powers outside of a person which have a defining control over that person. The demon-possessed typically live in fear, anxiety, or depression. The disciples minister by replacing fear with faith, anxiety with assurance, and depression with hope and promise. The demons are driven out not by muscle or skill or craft. They're displaced and exorcised by a committed witness of faith in the God who gives life and cares for life. This is spiritual strength, and the result of spiritual strength is healing and new strength for those who had been broken and weakened by the demons that had overcome and come to control and define their lives.

Related to the driving out of demons, the disciples would also anoint and heal the sick. The healing extended not simply to the illness but more specifically to the condition which typically made a person unclean and unable to be in a right relationship with God.

Again, it was not by any special talent or skill or strength brought to the healing ministry by the disciples. It was their faithful witness to God who brings new life to God's people. They didn't have medical degrees, prescriptions, MRIs, or even a stethoscope to demonstrate their personal capability. They didn't even bring a toothbrush. Weak in themselves, they were open to the blessings of their God and God's people to whom they ministered, and who in turn ministered to them in their needs.

In short, the disciples' ministry was to connect God's people to their God, to the blessings of their God, and to the promise of new life in Jesus Christ. It was not from some storehouse of personal strength and capability. In fact, they were equipped for the opposite, not for strength, but for weakness, for humility and meekness in themselves so that they would remain open to God working through them and their faithfulness.

In the way of the Kingdom of God, where down can be up, high can be low, the least can be the greatest, so the weak are made strong. The apostle Paul wrote in Second Corinthians (12:9-10) about a vision he had: *[The Lord] said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for [my] power is made perfect in weakness.' So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, **then** I am strong.*

The Kingdom life which believers are called to embrace and practice does turn things upside down. However, we find within that perspective that advantages exist for our blessing and for the blessing of others. May we remember such gracious gifts when whatever-it-may-be hits the fan blowing in our direction, and we're left feeling weak, fearful, and failed. It is the perfect time for God to come into the barrenness and fill us with renewal and blessing and peace. All it will take is our faithful spirit to reach out to God's faithful Spirit ready to minister to us. May our faith lead us forward always.