

It Is Enough
Caldwell Presbyterian Church
August 12, 2012
Rev. John Cleghorn

Text: 1 Kings 19:4-8

Last week, a casual comment caused a minor stir in the Twitter-sphere among Harry Potter fans.

According to my authoritative source, a certain 13 year old, a fan speculated that Harry Potter creator J.K. Rowling had said she considered giving her entire series of wildly popular books a different ending. That ending, this tweeter tweeted, was the old, tried and true surprise outcome, in which Harry would wake up from years of life and death struggle between good and evil ... and find that it was all one, long, very involved dream. As is so often the case in this instantaneous world, the rumor was immediately proved false and the Twitter-sphere moved on just that quickly.

But, truth be told, we Americans DO like our alternate endings. Many of us lost a lot of sleep over the last two weeks watching to see how the various storylines in the Olympics would play out. Who would shine? Who would choke? Who would get the front of the Wheaties box? Who would emerge as the great hope for the next games four years from now in Brazil?

Movie makers discovered a few years ago that alternate endings can generate extra sales. They package DVD's now with two or three alternate endings so viewers can choose the one they want to watch. Then video game producers took it to the next level, giving gamers options at every twist and turn of the game so they can write their own alternate reality differently every time they clutch the game controls.

Yes, we like to know how the story comes out, and, if it doesn't come out the way we'd like, we'll pay to have the story end the way we think it should. Just more signs, I suppose, of our culture's deepening drift into individualism and consumerism ... and perhaps its ever-more desperate grasp for control.

In a sense, though, none of this is new. The greatest story ever told is full of plot lines that turn out far differently than both the story characters and its readers expect. This morning's text about Elijah from First Kings reminds us of the fact that our God is full of alternate endings, far better than the ones we can write. Thank God for it.

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Elijah was a Hebrew prophet and reformer who lived in the 8th century before Christ. Come to think of it, *his* story would make a great movie.

He lived in Israel in the time of King Ahab. Ahab was married to Jezebel, the daughter of a neighboring country's king. I see Brat Pitt in the role of King Ahab and Angelina Jolie in the role of Jezebel. Jezebel was a devout worshipper of all manner of false gods and she imposed those gods upon the people of Israel. Under Jezebel's iron rule, any priest of Israel who stood up for the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob was dealt with in no uncertain terms.

Elijah then appears on the scene. The Bible doesn't really say where he came from, just as it tells us that, at the end of his life, Elijah doesn't really die. He rides off into the heavens in a chariot. But that comes later.

In this story, Elijah is the one prophet who stands up to Jezebel and Ahab. Their long contention builds to one big showdown in which Elijah challenges the prophets of the false gods to produce evidence of those gods. This would be the big scene in the movie, full of special effects and no small amount of violence.

They can't produce evidence of a god who doesn't exist, of course. However, the one true God answers Elijah's call for evidence and wins the day. The loss glorifies God and exposes the false religion of Jezebel and Ahab. But it means Ahab is a marked man and he runs into the wilderness to hide.

By now, after three years of battling Ahab, Jezebel and their false gods, Elijah is spent - physically, emotionally and spiritually. His long, hard battle against evil in the world has been too much for him. In the verses we read a moment ago, he sits down under a broom tree and gives up. He asks the Lord to take him out of this world of evil, false worship, conspiring kingdoms and power grabs by kings and queens.

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Elijah's plight isn't that far from where some of us have been, if we're honest. Those who know the valley of the shadow, those who have experienced the dark night of the soul can relate to Elijah. It may be the smothering blanket of emotions that come on the anniversary of the loss of a loved one. It may be the profound frustration of a long and unsuccessful job search or effort at a career change. It may be devil of addiction.

Or it may be the anchor of depression that drags us to the bottom. Recent news stories report that depression in America is as serious – if not more – than it has ever been. Soldiers returning from wars in the Middle East are taking their lives at alarming rates. Others suffer silently until they can't take it anymore, a clear reminder that sometimes even if we know intellectually that God loves us, we can't just flip a switch or take a pill and make ourselves feel better overnight.

There are plenty of other experiences in life that might put us under our own broom tree, like Elijah. What's that catch phrase that some people say when the world seems to have turned entirely against them: "Life's a . . . (blank) and then you die?" That's how Elijah felt. It's how a lot of people have felt.

I'd say the last month has been enough to send anyone to go find a broom tree in the wilderness. First the horrific movie theater shootings in Colorado, then the divisive fracas over Chik-fil-A. (I *will* miss their chicken sandwiches.) Then last Sunday's white supremacist shootings in the Sikh temple in Wisconsin. All set against the backdrop of the escalating vitriol and name-calling of our political arena.

Even though we know that God is sovereign over it all, even though we know God is in the heavens, it all can leave us simply exhausted, can't it?

It's enough to leave us flinching and cringing in fear of the next thing, the next catastrophe. It's enough to give a person cultural PTSD – societal post-traumatic stress disorder.

In the 8th century BC, Elijah had certainly seen enough. He knew the fatigue and feelings of isolation that come with speaking up for God in a culture that wanted to write its own story. Elijah knew the cost of discipleship.

In all these ways, the picture of Elijah, defeated, alone under that broom tree foreshadows Christ, alone in the garden of Gethsemane, praying so hard he sweats blood, asking God to let the hour pass with one breath and, with the other, surrendering himself in that most difficult of all prayers, "Thy will be done."

When Elijah looked to the heavens and said "It is enough," he spoke words of submission that foreshadowed Christ's own words on the cross, when he, too, looked to the heaven in his dying breath and said, "It is finished."

But God had an alternate ending in mind on both of those occasions. With Elijah, God sent an angel with food and gave Elijah rest and nourishment to strengthen him for a long and safe journey to Horeb, the mount of God, away from Ahab and Jezebel.

Then, with Christ, God gave us the ultimate in alternate endings, raising Jesus from the dead and redefining life for the rest of us, a life in which we trade the pursuit of power for the extension of love and justice, the quest for control for comfort with vulnerability and our insistence on writing the ending for acceptance of the ending that God would write.

With that alternate ending in Christ, friends, we can speak Elijah's words with an outcome in mind that is far different than the one the lonely, exhausted, old prophet had in mind that day under the broom tree. When we say the words, "it is enough," they can proclaim to the world, as people of God, we have a different idea about what "enough" truly is.

When we say "it is enough," we can use those words to announce that, as people of God in Christ Jesus, we have enough for whatever faces us, however dark the world may seem, however isolated and discouraged we may feel.

When we say "it is enough," we indicate our willingness to be servants of God in the Jesus way. When we say "it is enough," we demonstrate what it is to live the Christian life and to demonstrate Christian leadership, a style of leadership that always "abandons power in favor of love."¹

God's love. It is enough.

God's grace. It is enough.

God's promise to abide with us in every circumstance, whether we are low in the valley or on the triumphant mountaintop, that promise is enough.

When we cry out like Elijah that we have had enough of the world, our Creator responds that we still matter enough that our worth is still needed in the world.

When it seems to us, as it did for Christ on the cross, that "it is finished," our Lord reveals an alternate ending that is far more than we could ever ask or imagine.

¹ Henri Nouwen, In the Name of Jesus: Reflections on Christian leadership, p. 82

Thanks be to God. Amen.