

Sample Sermon

“Ain’t It Awful?” (1 Kings 19:1-20)

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Have you noticed that more and more people seem to be joining the “ain’t it awful” club? In fact, there are new chapters forming every day. Some gather in the neighborhood barber shop or beauty salon. Others meet at the community coffee house, the corner pub, or next to the water cooler at work. Sometimes they even meet at the church—in Sunday School classes, deacon assemblies, or gatherings of the women’s missionary circles. I imagine that if you listen carefully, you might even hear an occasional “ain’t it awful” session taking place in the Pastor’s Study.

What is an “ain’t it awful” session? It’s an occasion for people to whine and complain about life’s “terrible” state of affairs. In his book *Games People Play*, Eric Berne says that an “ain’t it awful” session provides people with an opportunity to engage in the sometimes cathartic act of hand-wringing and brow furrowing.¹

Of course, some subjects seem standard fair for an “ain’t it awful” gripe session.

“Can you believe those Washington Democrats? They’re spending away our children’s future. Ain’t it awful?”

“What about those Republicans. They are nothing but a bunch of obstructionists. The party of ‘no,’ that’s what they are! Ain’t it awful?”

“I’m worried about President Obama. I don’t even think he was born here. If he’s not the anti-Christ, I don’t know who is! Ain’t it awful?”

“It’s Sarah Palin who makes me nervous. She seems like evil on a broomstick, yet they say that she could be our next president! Ain’t it awful?”

Want to have some fun? Say any one of these statements at the next gathering of your friends or family, and watch what happens. The “ain’t it awful” game will be enjoyed, nothing will be accomplished, and a good time will be had by all.

It’s not just national politics. Few subjects are off limits.

“Did you hear what that fellow over in Iran was saying about Israel? It sure seems like he’s itching for a fight. It might mean World War III. Ain’t it awful?”

“Can you believe that off-season trade the Redskins made to bring in another quarterback? And he’s an over-the-hill quarterback at that? Ain’t it awful?”

a still small voice
1 Kings 19:11-13



“My parents never listen to a single word I say and every time they talk it just turns into another lecture. Ain’t it awful?”

“Why can’t those kids learn how to pull up their pants and wear a belt? Ain’t it awful?”

“You know, the pastor passed me in the hall the other day and he didn’t even say ‘Hello.’ And did you see the tie he was wearing? Can you believe his wife let him walk out of the house looking like that? Ain’t it awful?”

Clergy play along, too. I heard this from a pastor friend in another state: “Our church secretary doesn’t even know how to type. She spends the whole day sitting in the office taking personal phone calls while I am preparing the worship bulletin. I’d fire her, but her daddy is chairman of the personnel committee, a deacon, Sunday School Director, and our congregation’s biggest financial contributor.”

“Ain’t it awful?”

The laments go on and on, covering a broad range of topics. The aim is never to fix the problem. Rather the distress is expressed and satisfaction is gained by wringing a bit of sympathy out of the circumstance. Then you can come back a day later and do it all over again.

Sometimes, however, the “ain’t it awful” laments are much too intense to simply be spoken and put off to another day of complaining. Sometimes the challenges call into question our sense of identity, purpose, calling, and mission. That’s what happened with the prophet Elijah.

Elijah was a big-time prophet, so great that “Jewish tradition places him side-by-side, shoulder-to-shoulder, with Moses, the Lawgiver.”² Elijah had the courage to confront potentates about their sinful rebellion against Yahweh. He spoke with authority to his people, calling them back to the ways of Yahweh. He was so intimate with Yahweh that when he prayed, the Bible tells us that the dead were raised, fire was called down from the heavens, and nourishing rains came or departed at the command of his voice.

Elijah’s chief nemeses were King Ahab of Israel and his foreign-born wife, Jezebel. Jezebel’s primary ambition was to “shove her religion down the throats of the Jews.”³ Her religion was the worship of Baal, a Canaanite god of fertility, harvest, produce, and sensuality. When Jezebel and Ahab married she made it her life’s aspiration to establish Baal as Israel’s primary deity. To accomplish her goal, she had temples erected all over the nation in Baal’s honor while systematically killing all the prophets of Yahweh.

What made matters worse was that the people refused to make a stand against this idolatry. In fact, they tried to have it both ways. They wanted to hold onto Baal with one hand and Yahweh with the other. They wanted the God of the Exodus on one side, and the god of crop insurance on the other. For Elijah, this was totally unacceptable. Elijah spoke to his people: “How long will you waver between two opinions? If Yahweh is God, follow him; but if Baal is God, follow him.”⁴

This set the stage for a showdown—a contest—between 450 of Baal’s brightest and best prophets, and Elijah, a solitary man standing on behalf of Yahweh. The face-off took place on Mount Carmel. Two alters were erected, one for Baal and the other for Yahweh. Two bulls were brought for burnt offering sacrifices, but no fires were to be lit. That’s when the gauntlet was thrown down by Elijah. “You call on the name of your god, and I will call on the name of Yahweh. The god who answers by sending fire—he is God.”⁵

The prophets of Baal went into a full-frenzied cultic worship dance, complete with songs and shouts for Baal to come down and consume their offering. Nothing happened. They tried again. This time Elijah taunted them. “Shout louder,” he said. “Maybe Baal is deep in thought, or busy, or perhaps he’s on vacation. Maybe he’s fallen asleep and needs to be awakened.”⁶ This put the prophets of Baal into a more frantic state of panic. They shouted louder, cut themselves as a sign of their devotion, and continued singing and dancing throughout the day and into the early evening. Nothing happened.

Completely spent, they turned their attention toward to Elijah. “Come closer,” Elijah said. The people watched as he repaired the altar to Yahweh, which lay in ruins. He added 12 stones to the altar representing the 12 tribes of Israel. Next, he ordered a trench to be built around the wood and commanded that four huge drums of water be poured over the bull. Then he ordered it to be done again, and then again, three times in all. By the time he was finished, the altar was sitting in a large pool of water. No one could call this a stunt or a trick. It would be a full-blown, no questions asked, totally undeniable miracle.

Then Elijah prayed, “Answer me, Yahweh, answer me, so these people will know that you, Yahweh, are God, and that you are turning their hearts back again.”⁷

As Elijah finished praying, fire immediately fell from heaven. It consumed the sacrifice and even licked up the water in the trenches. Then the people knew that Yahweh was the one true God. They fell on their faces and cried out, “Yahweh—he is God! Yahweh—he is God!”⁸ That’s what Elijah’s name means in Hebrew: “Yahweh is God!”⁹

What happened next is not pretty. Emboldened by this great miracle, Elijah ordered the people to round up the prophets of Baal and seal this victory in their blood. Baal’s prophets were gathered and slaughtered at the wadi Kishon.

With this act, the scene soon changes back to the capital. Ahab the king tells Jezebel what happened. “Elijah arranged a contest between Yahweh and Baal; between himself and the prophets of Baal. Baal’s impotence was revealed, as was the great power of Yahweh, and all the prophets of Baal were put to death.”

The news infuriated Queen Jezebel, who vowed vengeance against Elijah for what he had done to her prophets. “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.”¹⁰ Put another way: “Within twenty-four hours you’ll be dead.”

When this death threat reaches Elijah, he panics in fear and is overcome by depression. After the victory at Mount Carmel, this is not at all what he expected. Instead of being put to rest, the powers of evil only seemed to intensify, and Elijah knew that the “people who need Mount Carmels in order to believe do not long stay faithful.”¹¹ Elijah reacts by running. He ran to Beersheba in Judah. Then he ran another day into the wilderness. Then he ran for another 40-day trek to Mount Horeb, the place where Moses had met Yahweh. While on the run, Elijah plays a few rounds of “ain’t it awful” with Yahweh. “I’ve had enough! I’m worn out, wiped out, and burned out. I want to be released from my call and retired from my mission. Life is just too hard! Ain’t it awful?”

Elijah had lost his sense of purpose.¹²

“Things are no better now than when my ancestors were fighting these same battles. What’s the point? You try and try and try, but nothing seems to improve. My zeal, my passion, my strength are gone. Ain’t it awful?”

Elijah was discouraged.¹³

“The people have rejected your covenant and torn down your altars. I’ve tried to point them in the right direction, but they won’t listen. When your other prophets were threatened with death, nobody stuck up for them and nobody will stick up for me. Ain’t it awful?”

Elijah felt underappreciated.¹⁴

“Let’s face it, Yahweh! They’ve killed everyone else. I am the last one who is still making any effort to be faithful to you. Ain’t it awful?”

Elijah felt all alone!¹⁵

“I want to quit. I want out of this whole ‘prophet’ gig. In fact, I’m tired of living. Let me lie down and go to sleep and never wake up again. I can’t hear your voice anymore anyways, so what’s the point? Ain’t it awful?”

Elijah felt disconnected from God and just wanted to die.¹⁶

There you have it. In one moment, Elijah is pictured as a faithful, bold, and courageous prophet—one so intimately connected with God that when he prayed, fire would fall from heaven at his request. Then, an instant later, this same Elijah runs for his life, in the opposite direction of God’s call, feeling anxious, uncertain, and depressed, coming across as a sanctimonious whiner with suicidal fantasies. Ain’t it awful?

We may not like this side of Elijah’s personality, but I imagine most of us at least understand it. I don’t think many of us have seen fire fall from heaven at the sound of our voice, or the dead brought back to life. We really don’t know what it’s like to be surrounded by the miraculous in the same way as Elijah. What we do understand is the often frustrating nature of being on mission with God. We know what it is like to be in a ministry that seems on the verge of a breakthrough, only to have it beset by some silly conflict, or hindered by the lack of commitment. We know how it feels to climb into our cave, discouraged and depressed, asking God to let us off the hook and to allow us to walk away from it all. We know what it’s like to play “ain’t it awful” with God.

It would be a mistake to simply say that Elijah is running from Jezebel. It’s much bigger than that. This is a story about Elijah attempting to run away from his call. It’s a story about Elijah “running from his vocation, from where God wants him to be, and from what God wants him to do.”¹⁷ That’s something most of us probably understand all too well.

What is important to note is that the “ain’t it awful” frustrations and discouragements of life were not enough to allow Elijah to be excused from his calling—and neither do those things in our life excuse us from God’s call.

Elijah is hiding in a cave, playing a few rounds of “ain’t it awful” with Yahweh. Finally, Yahweh has had enough. He’s been patient with the prophet, but it’s time to shake things up and get Elijah back on track. “Climb out of your cave,” Yahweh commands. “Climb out of your cave and go to the mountain for I am about to pass by.”

As Elijah arrives atop Mount Horeb, the fireworks display begins.

First, a terrific windstorm rumbles through the area, so powerful that it shattered huge rocks into little pebbles. Yet despite this great display of power, Yahweh was not in the storm.

Next, the entire mountainside begins to rattle and quake. What an incredible scene that must have been as powerful tremors shook the ground. And yet Yahweh was not in the earthquake.

After the earthquake there was a raging firestorm, an awesome display of magnificent fury. Yet once again Yahweh was not in the fire.

Finally, after all these pyrotechnics, the Bible speaks of “a still small voice.” Other translations render this “a gentle whisper,” “a soft whisper,” or “sheer silence.”¹⁸ Scholars spend a lot of time focusing on what this phrase means and in so doing often miss the larger point: Elijah is really no better off after hearing “the sheer silence” than he was before. Following all these displays of divine power, the prophet sulks back into the cave, covers his head with his cloak, and continues his “ain’t it awful” laments.

The point here is not so much about how Yahweh speaks. Yahweh can communicate however Yahweh wants to communicate. Yahweh had spoken to Moses on this same mountain in the middle of a storm, earthquake, and fire. In the previous chapter, the people witnessed the awesome power of Yahweh as fire fell from heaven consuming the bull offering Elijah had pooled in water. Now Yahweh was speaking through “sheer silence.”

The point of the story is not the mode of communication, but the message being communicated.

“Elijah, I know you’re discouraged, depressed, frustrated, and fatigued. But that’s no excuse. You can’t quit, give up, give in, or surrender. You need to keep trusting me. You need to keep following me. You heard my call before, now hear it again. I commissioned you to be my prophet. Today I am re-commissioning you to that same call.”

That’s an important message for each of us to hear. The mandate of the church is to help people hear and respond to God’s call to mission and ministry. The reality, however, is that while all of us have divine callings, many of us find ourselves occasionally hiding, feeling frustration, discouragement, and opposition. Frankly, there are times when we’d like to quit, retire, pack it in, and fade into the woodwork. That’s true whether we be laity or clergy. There are many times when I have prayed, “Lord, let me win the next Publisher’s Clearinghouse Sweepstakes so I can retire early and walk away from it all.”

God will have none of that, neither from Elijah, nor from any of us.

“Go back the way you came,” Yahweh says. “Go back to your calling. Go back to your mission. I know life is difficult and dangerous, Elijah, but that’s no excuse for you to be on the run. Go back the way you came.”

This is a call story. Elijah had been called to serve God. Now he is being called again. That’s how it is for us, sometimes, isn’t it? God calls us. We respond. Things get tough. We want to quit on God. But God is not willing to quit on us. God calls us and then calls us again. Sometimes God calls us again and again and again.

“Go back the way you came,” Yahweh says. “When you get there, here’s what you will find. Elisha will accept the invitation to become your student and eventual successor. Not only that, when you get back, you’ll find 7,000 others who have never bowed down to Baal.”

How foolish we can be, thinking that we are in this enterprise all by ourselves. I’ve been there, with Elijah. Have you? “God, I am the only one who cares. I am the only one who gets it. I preach and teach, invite and challenge. I make all the right moves and say all the right things, but I’m all alone. Ain’t it awful?”

No, I’m not all alone! When I pay attention, I see many of you. I see deacons who honor their call by laboring consistently, often in obscurity, visiting the homebound and residents in nearby nursing homes. I see Sunday school teachers preparing lessons, caring for their students, while equipping them for a lifestyle of discipleship. I see ladies in WMU circles who always remind us of mission opportunities, both in this community and around the world. I see staff members and ministry team leaders who serve God in far too many ways to count. I see so many of you living out your call daily on the job, in your school, and in our community.

Alone? Elijah wasn’t alone. I am not alone, either. How arrogant of me to fantasize otherwise. There are many around me who get it. Oh, and by the way, if you’ve ever engaged in that “ain’t it awful” lament that you are all alone in your devotion to God, quit it. It’s not true. We are all surrounded by many people who serve God daily, with great passion and devotion.

“Go back the way you came,” Yahweh says to Elijah. “And when you return, anoint Hazael as king over Aram. Then anoint Jehu as king over Israel. Then anoint Elisha as your student and successor.”

I find this very informative. Yahweh says, “Go back the way you came, and when you arrive, anoint.” That sounds rather ordinary, doesn’t it? In fact, it was ordinary. The daily deeds of the prophetic office did not involve great miraculous deeds. Raising the dead, holding back the rains, and calling fire from heaven, were not the normal fare of the prophetic life. These acts were the exception, not the rule. The daily job of the prophet was the everyday act of anointing people, places, and things.

One of the things that tends to keep us grounded is the personal touch of ministry. On some rare occasions we get to participate in something miraculous, just like Elijah did. Most of the time, however, we are called to the ordinary tasks of everyday ministry. We are called to go where people are hurting so we can anoint them with God’s grace. We are called to care for the homebound, hold the hands of those in nursing homes, visit those in prison, pray with those in hospital beds, feed those who are hungry, and care for those who are homeless. We are called to share another testimony, teach another

Bible study, prepare another sermon, and spend another afternoon in prayer. We are called to do these ordinary, everyday tasks of ministry, because that's where God's best work is done.

"Go back the way you came," Yahweh says to Elijah. "Go back and do the everyday deed of anointing others."

Several years back I took part in a deacon ordination. After the service, one of those who was ordained said something that's been stuck in my mind ever since. She said, "The way I see it, my call to be a deacon is not my gift to God, but God's gift to me."

That's true no matter what our calling might be. Being called to join God in service is more a gift from God than a gift for God. It's this call that gives our lives purpose, direction, and passion.

The great prophet Elijah got discouraged. He became depressed and felt dejected. He faced frustration and fatigue and felt defeated. It should come as no surprise that we might feel that way from time to time. Sometimes the "ain't it awful" scenarios of life can wear us down and drive us into hiding.

That's what makes the grace of a second calling (and perhaps even a third, fourth, or fifth calling) so very meaningful. It's a reminder that God is still able to use us. It's a confirmation that God never gives up on us. It is an affirmation that by God's grace we can be recovered and re-commissioned. When dealing with the "ain't it awful" scenarios of life, this is truly good news. Amen.

Footnotes:

- ¹ Eric Berne, *Games People Play: The Basic Handbook of Transactional Analysis*, by Ballantine Books, 1969.
- ² H. Stephen Shoemaker, *Retelling the Biblical Story: The Theology and Practice of Narrative Preaching*, by Broadman Press, 1985, page 59.
- ³ *Ibid.* page 60.
- ⁴ 1 Kings 18:21, NIV
- ⁵ 1 Kings 18:24, NIV
- ⁶ 1 Kings 18:27-28, NIV
- ⁷ 1 King 18:37, NIV
- ⁸ 1 Kings 18:39, NIV
- ⁹ Shoemaker, page 65.
- ¹⁰ 1 Kings 19:1, NIV
- ¹¹ Shoemaker. page 70.
- ¹² David Beelen, "The Whisper of God," cep.calvinseminary.edu, mp3 audio.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁷ Richard Nelson, *First and Second Kings*, ed. James Luther Mays, Interpretation, by John Knox Press, 1987, page 126.
- ¹⁸ 1 Kings 19:12. The KJV translates this phrase as "still small voice," while the NIV renders "a gentle whisper"; the HCSB reads "a soft whisper"; and the NRSV offers a more literal rendering of "sheer silence."