

One step at a time

1 Kings 19:4-8

August 13, 2006

One step at a time. Just one step at a time ...

It's good advice when you're ninety-two years old, standing at the bottom of the long flight of stairs leading up to your apartment.

It's good advice when you're sixty-two years old, surveying the rooms and rooms full of stuff you will have to go through now that your last surviving parent has died.

It's good advice when you're nineteen years old, thinking about the enormous investment of time and energy and attention and money required to complete your degree.

It's good advice when you're fifty-three years old, and it's hot and dark and yucky, crawling over the gravel and through the spider webs underneath the house, stapling up the netting to hold the insulation in place, nailing up eight hundred feet of strapping to hold the netting in place. That's how I spent my vacation, at least two days of it! One nail at a time. One staple at a time. One step at a time ...

It's good advice, but not particularly profound advice. After all, what alternatives do you have? Have you ever tried to take two steps at a time? You can't! Taking one step at a time is the only option. What else can you do? What else can you do but take one step at a time?

You could take no steps at all ...

You could collapse in a heap at the bottom of the stairs. You could call in the Salvation Army to haul all the stuff away. You could drop out of school. You could leave the insulation job unfinished for another winter. You could let the size of the task, the length of the journey, the complexity of the problem overwhelm you, daunt you, paralyze you, defeat you.

One step at a time is good advice because it beats the alternative! It beats doing nothing! It means doing something, making a start, moving forward. It's good advice for someone paralyzed by grief, for someone enslaved by addiction, for someone overcome with despair. One step at a time ...

Elijah was overcome with despair: *He sat down in the shade of a tree and wished he would die.* Elijah was exhausted. He had bested the 450 prophets of Baal atop Mount Carmel, their home turf. He had raced Ahab's chariot back to Jezreel, and then he had run for his life from Jezreel after receiving word of Jezebel's threats against his life.

Elijah was frightened. He believed Jezebel all too capable of carrying out her vow to kill him.

Elijah was overwhelmed. He cried out, *It's too much, Lord!*

Elijah was filled with self-pity. Alone in the wilderness, he complained to God, *I am the only [prophet] left -- and they are trying to kill me!*

I have been exhausted and frightened and overwhelmed and depressed, and I have certainly indulged some self-pity ... but I have never prayed to die. The demons arrayed against Elijah must have been great indeed, because he was no weak man, no coward, but a man of courage and faith and action, a man of God! *It's too much*, he said. It is too much.

So how does the Lord answer Elijah's despairing cry? He feeds him. No reprimand and no words of reassurance. No counter argument, no argument at all. No counseling, no therapeutic conversation. Just breakfast! One step at a time ... There will be time for conversation later.

The Lord is kind to Elijah, but firm. The Lord provides bread and water to strengthen Elijah's body -- and his soul -- so that he can get up and go. There are still places to go and things to do. It is not time to die and there is no time for self-pity! It's time to go to Sinai, the holy mountain, to meet God there, to learn to see things from God's point of view, and to receive instructions from God for the work still to be done.

The work still to be done by Elijah ... and by Elisha ... and by Hazael ... and by Jehu ... and by the seven thousand faithful men and women who have not bowed to Baal.

You see, it's not about Elijah. It's about what the Lord wants to do, about the Lord's purpose for all those the Lord loves, all those on whom the Lord takes pity. The world spins forward and the Lord weaves his purpose into the fabric of history, using the men and women who answer his call. It's about much more than Elijah. It's about much more than you or me.

If I think it's all about me, I am sadly mistaken. Self-pity gets it all wrong when it supposes the twists and turns of circumstance are targeting me, intending me good or evil. It's not about me; it's not just about me! That's why a healthy dose of humility is a good antidote to depression. Depression overpersonalizes failure and loss, and overestimates the significance of one person in the larger scope of things. So wise up and perk up! It's not about you!

Elijah ate and he went to the holy mountain and he stood in God's presence and he listened to God's voice and he heard God's call to continue the work of a prophet ... and he obeyed. His life went on and the Lord's work went on. Elijah did not die. Elijah did not remain in the wilderness, consumed by his despair. But his journey out of the wilderness, his journey out of despair, began with a single step ... with breakfast under the shade tree.

For us, too, the journey out of despair or frustration or fear begins with a single step. We may feel sometimes like it's too much -- whatever "it" may be -- more than we can handle, more than we can bear. But the way out is to take that first step, to start to move out, to move forward, one step at a time ...

And often the first step is to take care of basic needs -- to eat, to sleep, to take time with God. And then to go and to do, to do the work God calls us to do, to do something. Because we may be paralyzed, daunted, overwhelmed ... by the ongoing threat of terrorism, by wars without end, by the increasing evidences of global warming, by the sheer magnitude of humanity and all of humanity's problems.

I felt that way several times during our trip home to Iowa. We stopped at a rest area on the New York State Thruway, and I was overwhelmed with the sheer number of people. People everywhere, going and coming, shoulder to shoulder. It was too much!

As we crossed from the United States into Canada at Niagara Falls, we watched a long line of vehicles, hundreds and thousands of vehicles, bumper to bumper, waiting to cross from Canada into the United States. It was a line that stretched on for thirty miles! So many people! And in just one place at just one moment in time!

It's too much! A world full of people, of all different kinds of people. People with their own struggles, their own needs, their own wants. People so different from me, thinking, feeling, acting so different from me. People bumping against people, people mistrusting people, people hating people, people killing people.

It's too much! It's too much!

What can one person do? What can one church do? What possible difference can the little things we do make?

But it's not about us. So lose the self-pity! Get up and eat something and get going! Go to a holy place and listen to what God is trying to tell you ... and do it!

Do it! Do something! There's work to be done, the Lord's work. So get to it, one step at a time ...