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In the process of Bible study and preaching over the past 30 years, I often come across a scripture that I've encountered before. Depending on the situation in my life the first time I read a text, my understanding of the text may change in a later encounter. I suppose you may have experience this change in understanding of the Bible in your life as well. That's because the Bible is a living text containing words that continue to shape our lives thousands of years after being written, and, of course, we change over time as well.

I think it's absolutely amazing that we can read these ancient words and get a glimpse into the experience that people had of God so long ago. Just imagine if your experiences of faith were recorded so people living three to four thousand years from now could know how you experienced God. I wonder what we might write down. How might our stories and experiences of God shape their lives and understandings of God?

I realized this week how the story from 1 Kings has impacted me over the years. In this story we encounter the prophet Elijah who confronted the

prophets of Ba'al, whose followers believed was an ancient storm god who could control the weather.

We might think this notion a rather odd idea, for we know how storms form from science classes: when moist warm air and cooler air in the upper atmosphere mix, water vapor begins to form and creates condensation and falls as rain. A difference in electrical charges between the atmosphere and earth create lightning, which rapidly expands the air with the resulting sound of thunder. Not a storm god.

People who lived thousands of years ago didn't have this understanding of storms, for they believed that different gods controlled various parts of life, such as Ba'al, who was the storm god of a people called the Canaanites. Since a terrible draught had covered the land and everyone was praying for rain, Elijah wanted to prove that the God of Abraham and Sarah was the only God and that specialized storm gods did not exist. The prophet asked the people who believed in the storm god Ba'al, "How long will you go *limping* with two different *opinions*? If the

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LORD is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him.” (1 Kings 18:21)

One commentary has suggested the Hebrew word for *opinion*

is related to a word meaning “tree bough” that might have been fashioned into a crutch creating “unequal legs” and causing an unsteady gait. Elijah is calling the people to pick the god behind whom they can steadily walk.¹

The prophet challenged the followers of Ba’al to stop limping along, and so he proposed a contest. “Let’s build two stacks of wood and call on our God, and the God who lights the wood on fire wins. You go first,” Elijah suggested to the followers of Ba’al.

For a second time, the story uses the Hebrew word פָּסַח (paw·sakh), meaning “to limp” as the narrator tells us that the followers of Ba’al limped around the stack of wood.

When Ba’al could not light the fire, Elijah teased the followers by asking, “So what’s wrong? Maybe you need to yell louder. Maybe Ba’al is traveling on vacation. Or maybe Ba’al is sleeping and you need to wake him.” The story is filled with irony—a storm

god who supposedly sends lightning could not light a fire or even send a little rain!

When it was Elijah’s turn, he flooded the wood with water and then waited for the action to begin. Soon fire erupted and burned up all the wood, with the narrator explaining that the fire even burned up the surrounding stones and dust and water.

As I read this story several times this week, I never noticed how the narrator tied the story together with the word *limp*: limping with two opinions at the beginning and then limping around the stack of wood. Twice I’ve encountered this story when struggling with difficult decisions in my own life, as though I had been limping along trying to decide what to do.

The first time I spoke about this text from 1 Kings I was in my mid-20s at First Christian Church in Martinsville, IN. Doris Mason, an elderly woman in the congregation, invited me to fill in several weeks for the chaplain at the Kennedy Home, a retirement center in town. I became a bit nostalgic this week as I wondered what I spoke about 33 years ago, so I searched my computer. But writing

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sermons three decades ago was back in the days of 5-1/4 floppy discs and WordStar software, technology no longer compatible with my current laptop. I searched my paper files, and I found a folder labeled “Kennedy Home Services, May 1986,” with a faded dot matrix manuscript titled “Blessed in the Midst of Struggles.”

The story of Elijah spoke to me 33 years ago during a difficult period of my young adult years, a time when I was trying to discern a direction in my life, a time I felt as though I was limping along.

My mind flashed forward 30 years later when in southern Missouri I encountered the story again. I had reached another critical point in life where I faced another crisis, feeling as though I was once again limping along.

To be honest, I was a bit reluctant to talk about this story again today, for fear that another crisis could enter my life, and once again, I could find myself limping along trying to discern what to do.

Have you ever had that happened in your life? You find yourself facing a crisis, and you feel as

though you’re limping along as you try to discern which direction to go in life.

Maybe an illness has forced you make a choice about your lifestyle, for your current choices have led to a deterioration in health. You can either choose health or limp along with declining abilities.

Maybe your company decides to downsize, and you face a career change in order to survive.

Maybe you’ve overspent your resources and you limp along trying to pay your debts.

Maybe you’ve run into a dry period in your spiritual life where prayer just doesn’t seem as effective, and you feel as though you’re limping along in your relationship with God.

Maybe you’re in a relationship with someone that seems dull and lifeless, and you feel like the relationship is just limping along.

Or maybe you miss someone who has died and you’re limping along without that loved one. Celebrating All Saint’s Day helps us remember those loved ones and how they have shaped our lives and that they remain in God’s eternal care, but we may continue to feel the pain of loss.

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Sometimes when we find ourselves limping along, we may feel as though there's nothing we can do. And yet, God has promised to always be with us, even when we're limping along and facing a life crisis. We may face a difficult choice, but God continues to provide us with new possibilities, with options we never before imagined.

Even when we find ourselves limping along, we can still bring hope to the world, or we might even find ourselves blessed by another person limping through life, as one couple discovered while walking in the park.

While my wife, Penny, and I were walking in the park the other day, a ten-year-old boy came racing around a tree, almost running into us, and said, "Dad, where's Amy?" Instantly he realized his mistake and said, "Sir, I'm sorry, I thought you were my dad. I made a mistake." I replied, "That's okay; everyone makes mistakes!" As he began to walk away, I noticed he had a limp as well as the features of a child

with Down's syndrome. After having walked about ten yards, as an afterthought, he turned around and started retracing his steps toward us.

"My name is Billy," he said. "You both were very nice to me. Can I give you a hug?" After giving each of us a tight hug, he said, "I just wanted you to know that you're my friends and I'm going to be praying for you. I have to go now and find my sister, Amy. Good-bye and God bless you!"

Penny and I both had tears in our eyes as we watched Billy limp to the playground to play with his little sister. After Billy went down the slide, his mother came over to him and gave him a big hug. It was obvious that he was special to her. Sometimes God uses the Billys of the world to break down our walls of sophistication to show us what genuine kindness is all about. [Even when limping along] we must never underestimate the impact that a hug, smile, or encouraging word may have on a person's life.²

¹ Summarized in Alan J. Hauser and Russell Gregory, *From Carmel to Horeb: Elijah in Crisis*, JSOTSS 85 (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1990), 87, fn 27; see also Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *A Hebrew And English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson

Publishers, 1996),704, as quoted at www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=4215.

² Hodgkin, Michael. *1002 Humorous Illustrations for Public Speaking: Fresh, Timely, Compelling Illustrations for Preachers, Teachers, and Speakers* (Kindle Locations 1128-1140). Zondervan. Kindle Edition, #52.