Book 7

Sunday March 19, 1978

"LIFE IS LIKE THAT!" I Kings 19:1-4, 9-14, Mark 11:1-10

One of the most puzzling aspects of our human nature is how we can vary in our moods from enthusiasm to indifference; from being high on some idea or intense in our commitment, to being low; from being strongly in favor of a proposition and then being against it; from intense love for another person and then have that love dwindle or even turn into hate.

There is a certain fickleness in our nature and it is often difficult to control. One day we are elated and supremely happy and confident, and a few days later we are depressed and defeated. Life is like that!

In our spiritual experience we can feel that God is very close to us and be confident of God's presence in our lives and then not long after have the feeling that God is absent or far away. We vary from the conviction that God is for us to the opposite conclusion that God is against us; from the belief that there is a God who is in ultimate control of the creation to doubts that God exists. The moods in our nature are variable. Life is like that!

But it's not something that happens only in this day and age. Prophets, spiritual leaders, people we think of as "saints," the heroes in the Bible, the events of Holy week from Palm Sunday to Good Friday to Easter, all tell us that life is like that!

Take Elijah, for example, that giant among the Old Testament prophets. What a moody man he was. One day he had the courage to challenge the King of his country in the name of the Lord, and then a few days later he was so depressed and discouraged that he hid in a cave.

Like some of us, of course, he had reason to be discouraged. The country of Northern Israel in which he lived was ruled by King Ahab. And there were problems. In addition to all kinds of political abuses, the King had married a foreign woman named Jezebel. Queen Jezebel was no sweet golden-haired princess who had been carried into her marriage with high romance. It was a marriage of convenience and Jezebel was going to make it as convienent as possible.

She brought with her to Israel her pagan religions in the form of Baal and Ashtoreth worship. These religions found extreme expression in sexual orgies and infant sacrifice. In order to make his bride feel at home in a strange country, Ahab not only permitted the invasion of these primitive expressions of religion, but actually built temples and maintained their priests at public expense. It proved to be a popular move with most of the people. Many Israelites became enthusiastic Baal worshippers, able to break all the ten commandments without compunction.

It was into this situation that Elijah was sent by God. He warned the king that if he did not change his ways, a severe drought would come to the whole country. Ahab had never seen or heard of Elijah before. Elijah was no Billy Graham leading a White House worship service or speaking at a Washington Prayer Breakfast.

After his confrontation with the King, Elijah waited in the capital city to see whether or not the drought would bring the king and the people to their senses. It had been a high moment for him to confront the king. He was God's spokesman. But now during the long wait, his exaltation faded bit by bit and he slipped from the peak of his original holy enthusiasm into discouragement and despair. As the prophecy of the severe drought came true and ordinary people began to suffer, Elijah grew more depressed.

Now the King remembered Elijah and blamed all the country's troubles on him. He sent his soldiers to arrest the prophet, but Elijah escaped with the help of friends.

God also remembered Elijah and told him when the drought was at its worst to again confront Ahab and Jezebel. Though discouraged, Elijah was not yet afraid. He challenged all the false prophets of the pagan religions to a public contest.

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Elijah won the contest and the prophets of Baal were destroyed, and the drought ended. But there were other problems. Ahab returned to his wife despondent and filled with a fierce anger from his public humilitation and Jezebel did not take the news with quiet resignation. Her first thought was vengeance. She sent a message to Elijah, "So let the gods do to me and a hundred times more if I

don't have your head within 24 hours." In other words, by this time tomorrow, you will be dead!

Now in fear and despair, Elijah ran for his life. And he complained to God, "O Lord, I've had enough of this. Take away my life. I'm no good." And he went and hid in a cave.

Many of us know the feeling of going from high to low and we have our own kinds of caves in which to hide.

The events of Holy Week speak of the same condition. On Palm Sunday, enthusiasm was high. Many spread their garments on the road and others spread Palm branches. People welcomed Jesus as the Messiah into Jerusalem with high hopes. "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord."

Not many days later Jesus said to his most devoted followers, "One of you will betray me," and he went on to say, "You will all fall away." Peter couldn't believe it. "Even though they all fall away, I will not." And Jesus said, "This very night before the cock crows twice you will deny me three times."

And look at what happened to those who were not among the twelve. On Palm Sunday they were committed followers of Jesus and proclaimed his kingship, yet just a few days later when Pilate asked the crowd, "What shall I do with the man whom you call King of the Jews?" They joined with the others in shouting, "Crucify him, crucify him." Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord had changed to cursed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. One day we are commited persons and a few days later we fall away. Life is like that!

Most of us when we enter the Christian faith, do so on a note of enthusiasm and joy. Some of us, like many in that crowd on Palm Sunday, call Christ our Lord and King, even though we may not be too sure of what that means or what the implications of that confession are. Still in an act of faith and devotion, we join with God's people.

When children are baptized, there is usually a large amount of joy in the family, relatives are invited in for a big dinner and everyone has a good time. But if we were asked, we might not be able to explain all the happiness we feel on such an occasion. We may even think that

baptism means something quite different from what it really is. But God doesn't frown on our joy and celebration (story)

Today, as in other years, when those in the Confirmation Class join the church, there is joy and excitement among the members of the class and among family and friends. Again, we may not be albe to adequately explain all that we feel. We simply know that something good, important and significant is happening.

Our lives need these high moments. I feel sorry for the life that never forgets itself in a great lift of devotion or celebration. We need the times when we are certain that God is with us, times of happiness and confidence.

And as always, as on that first Palm Sunday, there were the cynical who didn't care for the enthusiasm and celebration of the crowd. Some even asked Jesus to stop the demonstration; to restrain his followers.

But Jesus didn't stop the shouting. At the same time, I'm sure that he didn't have any illusions about the crowd that day. Even though the feeling was running high and the devotion intense, certainly he knew that the crowd's enthusiasm would be short-lived; he knew that many of them would later turn against him; he knew that some of the devotion and support was mis-guided; that some of the people expected him to be a different kind of Messiah that he was. Yet he accepted their worship in a loving, patient way. And he accepts our devotion, our commitment in the same way, even though it is often short-lived, thin and has varied motivations. God knows that life is like that!

Both the experience of Elijah and the events of Holy Week say to us--there is a place in our life, in our faith, for celebration, for enthusiasm, for a kind of over-flowing devotion.

Such devotion and enthusiasm can of course be mis-used and mis-guided, but this does not invalidate it. Quite the contrary. Jesus, as we have seen, admired honest enthusiasm in forthright sinners. It was the righteous grim repression of the Pharisees and those like them that he frowned upon.

There are many people who in their youth were capable of generous enthusiasm and dedicated devotion, who had a sparkle and a spirit, but who got caught up in the love of material prosperity and the drive for success and the spirit stiffened and the life narrowed and now they couldn't shout hosanna if their life depended upon it.

But it would not be telling the whole story if we did not also remember the other side of our nature. Our lives are filled with lows as well as highs. The events which followed Palm Sunday, just like the events in Elijah's life remind us that there will be times in our lives and in our faith which are more like Maundy Thursday, times of denial, betrayal; times of desertion when our moods are low and we stumble.

There are also times in our lives which correspond to Good Friday--times when we are certain that all is lost, that our faith is dying or is dead; times when we feel that all the good we have tried to do is being crucified and is for nothing; times when we feel that God has forsaken us; times of doubt, of questioning; times when we wonder if there is anything we can believe; times when we find it difficult to pray, when we wonder what's the use of it all. These periods come to us not only in our spiritual lives, but in our marriages, in our professions, in our friendships, in every part of life. We have our dry spells.

It is in those times when we simply need to be faithful to faith itself. C.S. Lewis defines faith this way: "Now faith is the art of holding on to things your reason has once accepted, in spite of your changing moods."

Our moods will change, as we have seen, no matter what view our reason takes. The rebellion of our moods against our real self is going to come anyway. That is why faith is such a necessary virtue. Unless we teach our moods where to get off, we will just be creatures dithering to and fro with our beliefs and practices dependent on the weather and the state of our digestion.

So as Christians our first step is to recognize that our moods do change. But the next step is to make sure that we cultivate our faith so that it can remain constant.

That is why religious discipline is so important--daily prayers, regular participation in worship are necessary parts of the Christian life. We have to be continually reminded of what we believe. Our faith must be fed or it starves and dies. Most people do not have their Christian faith reasoned out of them by honest argument, most people simply and gradually drift away.

If we do persist in our practice of the Christian faith, and if we persist even in our cavas and in our low points, there will always be Easter days, the days and times when our faith is resurrected and renewed; the days of joy when we know that God is with us and for us in a fresh and new way. It is often in our deepest despair that we can then find God most uniquely. That's what Elijah discovered, and it's what the disciples also found. We too can have the same experience. Amen.