

AGAINST THE CURRENT

Psalm 43 expresses a feeling many of us have had when things are not going as planned or when the world seems tilted against us.

The Psalmist is protesting the pressure, the judgment, and the oppression.

A dreadful condition will prompt most anyone to mix a little accusation against God with plea for help, as the Psalmist did.

It is frustrating, tormenting and irritating when things are NOT going as planned,..... or worse.

It's the feeling of getting seeds in the ground after a late Spring, only to have the monsoons arrive / of doing everything right and all goes wrong.

In the I Kings passage, Elijah is in that agony--that place where what should have been a good thing has turned terribly ugly.

Not long ago, he won a contest against the priest of Baal. He proved that there was only one God--Yahweh.

People should have changed / they should have turned away from their acceptance of multiple gods.

They should have finally joined his "correct" way of thinking.

But NO, instead the King, the Queen / the entire government was out to get him.

Queen Jezebel vowed to kill him,..... so, fearing for his life, Elijah fled. He ran away into the wilderness.

He was right. It should not have been that way.

The people should have embraced Yahweh, the one God, his God.

The cold reality is that most people simply do NOT like change, even if it is for the better.

In the Luke text, Jesus was crossing the Sea of Galilee, and as soon as he stepped on dry land, on the other side, a crazed man approached him.

It was said that he was possessed by many demons, so many that he called himself "Legion."

It can be a challenge to manage one or two demons. Demons are very demanding.

However, appeasing and placating numerous demons would drive anyone crazy, nevertheless crazy can be a comfort zone, after awhile.

It's hard to separate the person from the demons, so we'll consider both communicating with Jesus.

And, ...he/they were very uncomfortable in the presence of Jesus,..... Yet he/ they approached Jesus in the first place. .... Crazy, eh?

They/he came to Jesus, yet were tormented by being in the presence of Jesus..... because they knew.....

Jesus changes things.

Jesus expels demons.

They begged to be left alone,..... and then finally compromised and agreed to leave the man and join a group of flying pigs.....more craziness. Pigs don't fly.

The man became himself. He became whole. He cherished being in the presence of Jesus, and that should have been the conclusion to a happy, feel better, get better story,..... but it wasn't!

The transformation / the change was good, yet.... it affected others around who didn't appreciate the change.

The keepers of the pigs were not pleased.

They were likely good people, just as good people work in munitions factories,... and stopping a war means loss of income.

Moreover, the rest of the people were upset, too,....which seems a little crazy. However, anytime homeostasis / the norm / the way things are is altered.....people get perturbed, anxious and even offended.

Their comfort zone included a crazy man running around,.....AND their comfort zone likely included their out pet demons.

Who knows, with Jesus around, things / life could change. Who cares if it's for the better,..... because change could be for the worse.

Who knows,..... who wants to risk the unknown.

A comfort zone doesn't have to be good or beneficial; it is merely what is familiar,.... and that feels safe. Unsafe takes faith,.... and that's a risk.

And, besides,..... with Jesus around they all could end up singing praise songs off the wall,..... with a guy who is suppose to be crazy.

So,.....they did the only thing they felt they could do--they chased Jesus out of town.

Crazy people.....chasing Jesus away to avoid change,..... but at least they got to keep their demons,..... and no more pigs suffered either.

Elijah was chased away, too, except he was wanting to end his journey with God. He wanted to resign as a prophet.

In fact, he was ready to die,.....he was that miserable.

Events / his life had turned ugly when he thought it would be radically better.

In addition, being a prophet wasn't such a glorious and cushy job.

Elijah had chosen to follow God's way. He'd accepted the calling to proclaim good theology, including telling people that there is God's way and no other.

He had selected the noble and righteous path,.....yet it turned out to be a brutal and agonizing journey.

I know a lot of pastors who have had that same rude awakening, and it's not easy.

When you try to do everything right, then ....well.... things should turn out "right" / good.... happy and all that.

It is shocking when the opposite happens.

Elijah was wrestling with expectations turned upside down and inside out.

It was reality check time,.....and he didn't particularly like that.

He ran out into the wild place. He was trying to escape / to get away.

And even though he protested to God and was trying to flee "everything" including God,..... God provided for him by sending an angel with food.

Elijah ended up in a mountain cave. It was a hiding place, but it wasn't Tora Bora.

He was likely trying to hide from God, too, yet God knew where he was.

God asked Elijah, "What are you doing here? Don't you know your journey with me isn't finished?"

In response, Elijah vented and complained to God.

He said things like:

"People are messing up. They're lazy and selfish.

I'm the only one doing all the work.

Plus, they are not obeying the rules; they're Not keeping your laws.

They're ruining everything.

I've sacrificed. I've tried to be correct, loyal and righteous,.... and look what I get for it: pain, disappointment and frustration.

Nothing has changed. The powerful and the greedy are prospering"

Elijah was mostly accurate in his assessment.

It was the typical protest against the darkness / the cry against corruption and evil.

That Rant echoes from many caring and well meaning souls....who yearn to make the world a better place.

God heard his protest, and told Elijah to leave his cave because God was about to pass by.

Elijah was to experience a theophany--God present in the physical / the observable.

This was quite an honor / this was extraordinary.

It seems, Elijah was to receive a supercharged blessing / confirmation from God.

However, Elijah stayed in his cave. It was familiar; God's passing was not.

From the safety of the cave, he observed a violent wind storm; tree, even rocks were crumbling all around, but God was not present.

Then there was an earthquake, but God was not a part of the earthquake.

After that, there was a great fire, and again God was absent.

One would assume that such shows of force would be the ideal form for God to make a statement.

When a person is weak and distraught, and doubting one's faith, then it's seems only natural that God would bring reassurance with a "flash" of brilliance.

Conventional wisdom dictates that brute force reveals confidence and domination / that might makes right.

That's the way people think,..... but apparently not the way God works.

Then, after the blowing, shaking and burning,.....there was complete and total silence--"sheer silence."

Nobody can hide from silence.

Elijah discovered God in the silence. He covered his face with his long bread, and left the cave. He stopped hiding.

Out in the open, in a gentle, small voice, God again asked Elijah the ontological question, "What are you doing here?"

In other words, "Why have you stopped the journey with me?"

Elijah went through his rant again, and when he was done, God probably said, "Do you feel better now? Okay, good,..... because we have work to do."

And, God sent Elijah back to his people.....to continue serving God.

Life didn't get any "better" for Elijah. What changed was that Elijah better understood what was going on.

His expectations / his assumptions had been off.

He had his own agenda, and he assumed that taking the "high" road would bring some perks, maybe some accolades, and perhaps some satisfaction in seeing the fruits of his labour.

But,.....he wasn't in control,..... and life is difficult,..... especially for those who are travelling with God.

Travelling with God means going against the current.

Most people, particularly those lusting after power and wealth, are going one way, and it's not God's way.

Followers of Christ / those who listen to the still small voice of God are going the opposite direction.

It is one thing to stand up against the current. It is quite another to fight the current in order to travel upstream.

I'm sure most of you have seen the images of the raging flood waters from Calgary, Canmore and that area.

There were tons of debris, cars, logs, parts of houses, floating down the racing river.

They were going With the current. Out of control, they were going along.

Moreover, it was impressive to see bridges and other obstacles straining to remain still and in place against the current.

Standing firm isn't easy,..... but God does NOT call us to be stagnant / to stand our ground or.... to defend "the faith."

We are not asked to be a pillar or a model, unmovable Christian who endures all the waves and abuses.

Quite often, the ideal Christian is presented as one who is unwavering, who obeys the accepted, traditional righteous rules and norms. That icon stands up for what is right, is not part of culture, and to be sure, does Not dance, either.

Standing firm.....is going nowhere,.....and as Jesus demonstrated,.. we have places to go, people to see and injustices to confront.

God calls us forward "against" the current,..... and if you could picture someone swimming upstream in the flooded Bow River, then.....you'd understand,..... it wouldn't be a pretty picture, and it isn't.

If you've ever paddled a canoe upstream, against a strong current, then you know how stressful, painful and chaotic it is.

When people are conditioned to support militarism, and that patriotism means brute strength, even going to war to do killing and destruction,.....it is not easy to resist that brainwashing,..... and it is extremely challenging to confront that cultural current by promoting grace, peace and justice. Yet,..... we are called to transform the world, and not simply to avoid and hide in a cave.

Likewise, it is not easy to inform society that the wealth from fossil fuel isn't worth it. We are actually killing ourselves and destroying God's creation.

All kinds of threats and mockery are thrown at those who strive to change the system, including the ridiculous accusation, "Well you drive a car don't you?"

Our rules and tax money are propping up the oil industry, instead of investing in alternative means. It's a set up/a trap, until the system is changed / UNTIL those demons of lust, greed and power are expelled.

And, no doubt, if transformation happens, then a few in the pig industry will be upset,..... yet..... there will be lots of poor, lowly people feasting on bacon.

Those who are traveling against the current, are weary, jaded and .... not likely candidates to be on posters in the local Christian book store.

Nevertheless, they surely do not need more ridicule, but they could use some help paddling,..... against the current.

So,..... what's the point?

Why chose to follow Christ? Why chose to be on a journey with God going "upstream"?  
It certainly isn't not the easy way,..... and it means uncertainty and change, too.

So,..... why?

Consider the image of broken up, beat up debris floating down the river, with the current.....ending  
up.....in a mess..... somewhere.

And, consider the pointless, abuse of standing still against the current, going nowhere at all.

If those two reasons are not enough motivation to choose God's way, then.....there is silence.

Silence: that one on one experience with God.

From silence, the gentle voice calls, "Follow me. Follow me; we're going upstream."