

THIS WEEK'S KEYWORD

OBEDIENCE

I was pitching the game of my life. It was the summer after my senior year of high school, and my Babe Ruth League team had advanced to the championship of a tournament in Excelsior Springs, Missouri, and I got the ball for the big game against the host team.

Everything was working that day. My fastball was moving late on its arrival to home plate, which was all too rare for me that season. My sinker was darting down and inward to the predominantly right-handed lineup I was facing, which was the one thing I could usually do. And on that day, the rarest combination of all took place: My change-up pitch seemed ultra-smooth, and I could throw it wherever my catcher located his glove.

I had not recorded a victory that entire senior high school season, despite a few better-than-decent outings. But on this sunny afternoon, I was in firm control, and I had a 1-0 lead going into the final inning.

Until.

Yeah, you knew there had to be an “until” in this story, didn’t you? With just one strike to go, I threw a pitch on the inner half of the plate. This umpire, one who clearly knew all of the home team’s players, suddenly decided that pitch he had called a strike the entire game was now a ball. I know that because the batter slumped his shoulders and started walking back to the dugout. At least two people in my line of sight started to pick up their seat cushions to leave.

But the umpire yelled “Ball!” I couldn’t believe it.

The next pitch was a sinker that started outside and dove inward. The batter tried to check his swing, which means he started to swing and tried to stop. This time his coach yelled out a word that led me to believe even he thought his player had swung at strike three. Again, the umpire insisted it was a ball, and he wouldn’t allow an appeal to the other umpire in the field to see if he had a different opinion on if the batter swung or was able to hold up.

You might guess what happened next. The batter hit the next pitch for a single to left field. The next batter reached on an error. And then my coach pulled me.

The very next batter hit a homerun off our relief pitcher, and we lost the game. Officially, I received what in baseball is known as a no-decision. But I had felt the highs and lows of the game in just a few moments.

Elijah is one of my favorite Old Testament people because he knows what it’s like to live the highs and lows. He defeats the 450 prophets of the false god Baal through the power of God, mocking the adversaries as they fail to draw fire from the heavens to consume a sacrificed bull. Elijah then orders the deaths of those people who had misdirected the Israelite people after God consumes his bull with fire despite it being doused in water three times.

Then, the bravado ends. The queen, Jezebel, vows to kill Elijah, and the prophet of the one, true God goes on the run.

He scampers away, far south from where this epic showdown took place, Mount Carmel. Eventually, he ends up in modern-day Egypt at Mount Sinai, also known as Mount Horeb. It is there that God finally gets through to Elijah. Despite all the power God had displayed, Elijah had forgotten his role. He had forgotten that God would protect him. And so instead of serving as a prophet of the most-high God, Elijah disobeys by fleeing when he thought his life was in danger.

God calls Elijah out of the cave in which he was hiding. A wind so fierce that it split rocks rushes by, but Elijah didn't feel God in the wind. An earthquake violently shakes the ground, but Elijah doesn't feel or hear God in the earthquake. Finally, fire rages nearby, but Elijah fails again to hear God.

Then, in the peace afterward, Elijah hears God ask "Why are you here?" In other words, "Why are you not where you're supposed to be, doing what I've called you to do? Why are you not obeying what I've told you to do?"

Obedience is our key word this week. Not all of us are prophets, but we are all called into ministry in some way, shape or form by God. This week, consider what God is seeking you to do. Consider what it means to obey that calling.

THIRD SUNDAY OF LENT

Elijah enjoying the view from up top

Scripture — 1 Kings 18

We'll take this story of Elijah in two parts.

Questions for Reflection

1. When is a time you felt full of pride? Is there anything you wish now that you could change about the way you acted at that time?

2. Why do you suppose Elijah had so much water dumped on the bull? As you visualize this scene, what stands out to you?

3. The people eventually see the power of God and are convinced to recommit themselves to worshipping only the God of Israel. Have you ever had a time when you recommitted yourself to God? Write down, briefly, the circumstances that led to you seeking a way back to your Creator.

MONDAY

Elijah at his lowest

Scripture — 1 Kings 19:1-18

Questions for Reflection

1. God provided for Elijah twice along his journey even though the prophet was disobeying by fleeing the region. In what ways has God provided for you in times when your faith has waned or when you have doubted?
2. Elijah went from the highest of highs to the lowest of lows. How do you rebound when you have a failure? Or maybe just when you are feeling down?
3. God had to remind Elijah that he had been called to an important job. God had given him the tools to serve as a prophet for the people of Israel. Consider your gifts and talents. List two or three ways you think God may be calling you to serve.

TUESDAY

Exile from the Garden

Scripture — Genesis 3

Questions for Reflection

1. The snake tells Eve that she won't die if she eats the fruit from the forbidden tree. In what ways was the snake correct? In what ways was the snake wrong?
2. Think of a time when either yourself or a child disobeyed. How was your or their reaction the same or different from Adam's and Eve's when they were caught?
3. God kicked the people out of the Garden of Eden, in effect separating humanity from its Creator. Do you think God over-reacted? What are the ramifications for us today of the punishment way back then?

WEDNESDAY

Building the Ark in the sunshine

Scripture — Genesis 6:5-22

Questions for Reflection

1. Why did God choose Noah? Though not to save humanity from a flood, how do you think God chooses people for important tasks today?
2. Remember, the construction likely took many months, so it was built long before the rain started. What do you think Noah encountered when he started building the ark?
3. We don't know if Noah found it difficult to follow God's directions. How well do you follow God's lead? What strategies do you use to listen for God's direction?

THURSDAY

Just Like Everyone Else

Scripture — Genesis 12

Questions for Reflection

1. How might Abram (soon to be Abraham) answering the call benefit all people? What might the tie-in be to Jesus? (Take a look at verse 3).
2. Abram apparently leaves his family and all whom he knew to follow God's direction. Have you ever moved far from family and friends? What were the circumstances? What were your feelings?
3. What was Abram promised? How is that promise tied in to the political issues of the 21st century?

FRIDAY

Baptism of Jesus

Scripture — Matthew 3

Questions for Reflection

1. Jesus never sinned. He never needed to repent. Why do you think he insisted on being baptized?
2. John felt unworthy to baptize Jesus. When was a time you felt inadequate for a task — personal, for the church or for your community? How did you address your concerns? What was the outcome?
3. Think of your baptism. Is that a significant moment for you in your faith journey? If so, why? If not, what do you wish would have been different about the experience?

SATURDAY

Just a Touch

Scripture — Matthew 9:9-13

Questions for Reflection

1. As a tax collector, Matthew would have been reviled by the Jewish people living in that area. So why would Jesus choose him as a disciple? What would the message be to the community?
2. Matthew would have been living a pretty good life because of his job in the Roman taxation system. What do you think he would have given up by obeying Jesus' command to follow him?
3. Pharisees criticized Jesus for keeping company with tax collectors and sinners. Who might you invite into relationship that would cause others to criticize you for showing such love and compassion?