

[Note: Most of the reflections on the male characters listed below are based on the work of Kalman Kaplan in his Psychology of Hope. They were summarized by Talitha Arnold who is also the author of the reflections based on female characters.]

Hagar (Genesis 16:1-4; Genesis 21:8-21)

Twice the Egyptian slave of Sarah and Abraham finds herself at the point of despair and death in the wilderness. The first time is after Abraham, at Sarah's urging, has used her to conceive a son. The second time is when Sarah is jealous of Hagar's son, Ishmael, and tells Abraham to cast her out. In both stories, God hears her cries and an angel of the Lord responds to her. In the second story, God opens Hagar's eyes to see a spring of water that saves both her life and her child's. Both stories remind us of God's presence even in the deserts of our lives. God hears our cries and can open our eyes to the possibilities of life around us. The stories also remind us of the role of our faith communities to be such "streams in the desert" for persons in despair or grief.

Moses (Numbers 11:10-25)

By the third book about the Exodus, Moses is exhausted from leading the people. They are hungry for meat, tired of manna, and longing for the fleshpots of Egypt—and they blame Moses. In turn, he cries out to God. He tells God the burden of leadership is too much and that God might as well go ahead and kill him at once.

God doesn't grant Moses' request. Instead God tells him to gather 70 elders to share the burden of leadership. God gives them some of the spirit that had been poured out on Moses—and therefore some of the responsibility. God also makes good on the promise to give the people quail along with the manna. The story is a good one not only for our congregations, but also for faith leaders in particular. When the burdens of leadership and pastoral care become too great, as they often can, Moses' story reminds us to reconnect with the source of that leadership—namely God's spirit—and also to ask others to help carry the load. Suicide prevention, pastoral care, and other aspects of mental health ministries need to be shared by the whole congregation, not just the rabbi, pastor or priest.

Ruth, Orpah, and Naomi (Ruth 1)

Although neither Naomi nor her daughters-in-law ever express their desire to die, you cannot find three people more bereft nor more vulnerable in all of scripture. Each of them individually and all of them together have walked through the "valley of the shadows" with the multiple deaths of husbands, sons, and fathers-in-law. In addition, as widowed women without male relatives to protect them, they are among the most vulnerable people in their cultures. Naomi expresses her despair when she tells her relatives not to call her "Naomi," which means "Pleasant," but "Mara," for the bitter turn her life has taken.

Yet somehow each of the three women find their way back to life. For Orpah and Naomi, it meant each returning to her own people and community. For Ruth, it meant stepping out into an unknown life with a new people. Connecting to community and trusting in the future were key elements for all three. Such connection and faith in the future are ways to deal with despair and vulnerability in our time, too.

Elijah (I Kings 19:1-21)

Like Moses, the Prophet Elijah is at the end of his rope. He's defeated the prophets of Baal but now he's on the run from the evil King Ahab and the wicked Queen Jezebel, who is after his head. Just as Hagar did, Elijah flees to the wilderness. Falling exhausted under a broom tree, Elijah asks to die: "It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life." Just as God didn't grant Moses' request to die, so God offers a different answer to Elijah. God sends an angel who gives the prophet something to eat and drink (not unlike what our congregations do when someone is going through a difficult time). When the prophet makes his way to Mt. Horeb, God listens to his anguish and exhaustion. And as God told Moses to commission 70 elders to share the burden, so too God raises up young Elisha to help the older prophet continue in life and ministry.

Being cared for in body and soul, having someone who listens to our anguish and despair, having a friend, co-worker or partner to share the load—Elijah's story offers many ways we can help those who are feeling overwhelmed by life. ~*(Based on Efreem Epstein's Elijah's Journey and Dr. Kalman Kaplan's Psychology of Hope)*

Jonah (Jonah 4:1-11)

The Prophet Jonah has an odd reason to want to die: he's succeeded! God called Jonah to go to the wicked city of Nineveh and tell them to repent. Jonah doesn't want to do it, not because he's afraid but because he knows God is a God of mercy and will spare the evil Ninevites if they change their ways. So he boards a ship, gets caught in a storm, gets thrown overboard and is swallowed by a great fish. You know the rest of that story! God gives him a second chance to go to Nineveh and get them to repent. This time he does what God wants. Lo and behold, it works! The people of Nineveh turn from their evil ways, even the king! God keeps his part of the bargain and doesn't destroy the city. And that makes Jonah mad! Mad enough to want to die. He gets even angrier when the castor oil plant under which he's stewing shrivels up and dies. "I do well to be angry, angry enough to die," he explodes to the Lord. God listens to the prophet but then challenges his reasoning. If Jonah could have pity for a plant, shouldn't God have pity for a hundred and twenty thousand foolish Ninevites, "who do not know their right hand from their left, and also much cattle?" On first hearing, it may sound like an odd answer. (It may sound odd even on second hearing.) But God's response to Jonah's complaint puts the prophet's life in perspective and also reminds him of the breadth and depth of God's mercy and love, be it for the Ninevites and their cattle or Jonah himself.