

## **1 Kings 19:1-18**

Today's story can be seen as an existential journey. And the person asking the existential question isn't the main character, Elijah, but God. Today, we encounter the prophet Elijah on the run.

Two weeks ago we read about the anointing of David as King. Last week's narrative was about Solomon and the building of the Temple. We skipped last week's reading and sermon as we celebrated the 500<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Reformation with the Toronto Area congregations. We have now moved from Solomon to King Ahab. In between, the kingdom of Israel split into a Northern and a Southern Kingdom. Today's narrative takes place in the Northern Kingdom. King Ahab is considered one of the worst kings in both kingdoms. He marries Jezebel, a Phoenician princess. Ahab even had a temple built for Baal and other places were set up for people to worship this new god. Jezebel worked to make sure the prophets of Yahweh were persecuted.

In the preceding chapter, there is a showdown between the prophets of Baal, and Elijah. You may remember the story from last fall. Elijah decides to challenge King Ahab to prove whose God is more powerful. First up, the prophets of Baal pray for their god to send fire on their offering. Nothing happens. Then it was Elijah's turn. He prays to God and God answers, powerfully burning the offering, including the altar. Elijah is then able to persuade the people to capture the false prophets and have them killed. When Jezebel hears of this, she is angry. Embarrassed. Furious.

Elijah has just killed her prophets. She intends to make...him...pay.

She swears vengeance against Elijah. Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah with this message: "May the gods strike me and even kill me if by this time tomorrow I have not killed you just as you killed them."

Now, after such a dramatic event, one that Elijah won, you would think Elijah would have been even more confident in God. He would be able to stand up to Ahab and Jezebel, daring them to do their worst. As Elijah catches wind of all of this, he decides to do the only thing he can do, run! Like a dog, he's going off to die. He takes his servant and high tails it out of town. He runs into the wilderness to lay under a bush until he's no more. He asks God to take his life. It's just too much for him to handle.

Why does Elijah run? He won the argument, the test. Baal's prophets were dead, he was the winner. What made him able to face Ahab, but flee when Jezebel threatens him? It's important to note that Jezebel is a true believer in Baal. After all that has happened to shake her faith, she still swears by her gods. Elijah wasn't prepared for this. He is shocked and instead of thinking theologically, he responds emotionally.

In short, Elijah faces a crisis of faith. Elijah's flight is reminiscent of Jonah's attempt to flee from God. But there were some notable differences. Jonah hated the Ninevites, the people he was called by God to preach to. Elijah however, is scared by Jezebel's threat. In both cases, God has to bring God's prophets back on the path

of faithfulness.

Elijah walked in the desert until he found a tree to sit under - hoping to die. As Elijah falls asleep, an angel of God wakes him up to some bread and water by his head and says get up and eat because the journey is too much for you. Jezebel's words have pierced him and he wonders if it's all worth it. The angel comes to him a second time. Get up and eat. Strengthened by this food, he gains his composure and starts on a journey; he keeps walking and walking and walking, travelling forty days to Mount Sinai also known as Mount Horeb, a mountain of God.

This is the same mountain where Moses communed with God, saw God's backside and received the ten commandments. This is the same mountain where Israel entered into covenant with God. The specification of the cave is an echo of the cleft in the rock where Moses stood during his vision of God in Exodus. "The cave" where Elijah experiences God is the very same site on the very same mountain where Moses experienced God.

So Elijah spends a night in the cave where he'll encounter the presence of God in unexpected ways. The gift of food is a reminder of what God had done for the Israelites in the past. It was a reminder that just as God fed the Israelites in the desert with quail and manna, God would take care of Elijah. Elijah needed the food not just to fill his belly but to remember who God is and what God has done. Remembering the past was a way to remember who he was and what he needed to do. God asks him an odd question: Why are you *here*, Elijah? The question along

with Elijah's answer is repeated.

Despite his extreme zeal for the Lord, Israel has abandoned God's covenant, destroyed God's altars, and killed God's prophets. Elijah claims to be the only one left but is quick to add that he is now public enemy number one. His phrasing is striking and plaintive: *"I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me, too."* This exchange leads directly to the divine command that Elijah should go out and stand on the mountain before the Lord, because the Lord was about to pass by.

A powerful wind blows, shattering rocks on the mountain but God wasn't in it. And then there was an earthquake. And then a fire. But God wasn't in those either. God's presence was in the gentle whisper or "still small voice", as some translations have it. Why did God come in this way?

A number of scholars think that God deliberately rejected storms because of their association with the god Baal which happens to be a god of rain. In a time when the Israelites have divided loyalties between Baal and God, the gentle whisper is a way of stating who God is; not in the loud sounds but in the quiet. It is in the quiet that God asks again: why are you here? Elijah responds:

*"I have zealously served the Lord God Almighty. But the people of Israel have broken their covenant with you, torn down your altars, and killed every one of your prophets. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me, too."* Elijah thinks he is alone. All of the other prophets were killed by Jezebel. But God responds:

*“Go back the same way you came, and travel to the wilderness of Damascus. When you arrive there, anoint Hazael to be king of Aram. Then anoint Jehu grandson of Nimshi to be king of Israel, and anoint Elisha son of Shaphat from the town of Abel-meholah to replace you as my prophet. Anyone who escapes from Hazael will be killed by Jehu, and those who escape Jehu will be killed by Elisha! Yet I will preserve 7,000 others in Israel who have never bowed down to Baal or kissed him!”*

How many times does the enemy get the best of us because we're not willing to wait for the stillness that comes after our trials. The stillness that's after storms that batter our own lives. Or when things seem to be falling apart right under us like some life-earthquake that's shaking us to the core. Or when the fire comes rushing through, leaving nothing untouched. For Elijah, God wasn't in the wind, the earthquake, or the fire. God was in the stillness. He was in the quiet. That's the moment that God was choosing to renew Elijah's hope, showing him Israel still had a future.

Elijah thought he was alone and he feared he would be next. But God does two things. First, God gives him a task to do: to go and anoint the next king of Israel (Northern Kingdom). He is also to anoint Elisha to be his successor as prophet (which was an unusual thing; prophets anointed kings not prophets). Finally, God tells Elijah that there are 7,000 believers who haven't bowed to Baal.

Why are you here? This is a question that is asked again and again in

everyone's life. You can hear it when you are laid off from your job. Or when your baby boy dies after being born premature. It's heard when you get the cancer diagnosis or when your loved one decides to leave you. Individuals, families, communities, nations, and even congregations at some time or other all go through difficult times, through challenges they don't always understand. The first response is fear, followed by uncertainty, and a crisis of faith.

John tells us about Jesus having his own Elijah moment when facing his soon-to-be death. Jesus knows his death is coming and his soul is troubled. Rightly, he's grieved. He wants his life to be spared but he knows the mission he's on is greater than even his own life. I think Elijah knew that too. Jesus, knew he had to die, and like a seed planted in the ground, it's his death, his own planting into the ground that will bring new life.

But there were three days of stillness. Three days of weeping. Three days of sadness. Three days where the disciples must have felt like someone was ripping their hearts out again and again. Three days of utter hopelessness. But out of this stillness the world would be forever changed. God was speaking new life into the world these three days. Storms will come. Earth shattering moments will happen. You'll get burned by the fires of this life. That's an unfortunate given. But when it finally gets quiet, just stop and listen ... Renewed hope and renewed life are waiting there in the quiet. There will be a gentle whisper breathing new life into you, your family, your community, your nation, your congregation. So don't give up.

God sustains God's saints. In a time of despair where Elijah just wants to die, God comes to offer food, drink and a new mission. We have to acknowledge and trust that our power comes from God and not from our own work. To follow God means that we will suffer in some way because life on this side of heaven is always a challenge. But it is in God that we can keep moving forward, that we can find new purpose, new ministries, new directions that we may have never anticipated.

So what about Elisha's anointing by Elijah? Elisha was not a King, but a prophet like Elijah. Perhaps this was all about "passing the mantle" - focussing on how we are connected to the work of the saints of God who have gone before us and those who will come after us. Their legacy and work lives on through us.

Death is the ultimate silence. Nothing more to hear. And the saints, like Elijah, HEAR something in that silence. The sound of the saviour who suffered the silence of God on the cross and - in return - FILLED it with himself. We usually idolize the saints and give them a "different from the rest of us" status.

The story of Elijah is a story of the greatest of the prophets struggling with his faith. Still, God used him in great ways just as the Holy Spirit can use us as individuals, as a community, as a congregation. Saints can become depressed, tired, frustrated. God doesn't give up on us but feeds and speaks and calls us again and again to do God's work in new unexpected ways.

Elijah's call to anoint Elisha as prophet is a reminder that we are but a small part of a big story, that there have been many before us, and God will call others

after us. We may feel isolated, even abandoned. We think no one can know the depth of our pain. But God reminds us we are not alone.

There are many, many people who are listening for God after the great wind of hurricanes, destruction of earthquakes, and devastation of fire(s). They, like Elijah, may be afraid, tired, and feeling very much alone. In the sheer silence after such events, when the world seems to have stopped, can we, as the church, be, or bring, the presence of God for these folks? Can we bear to them the courage and energy, and the wherewithal to help them keep going? The approaching holiday season may be seen by some as a dark, lonely time for various reasons. As the church, we are called to bring God's presence to the discouraged, the hurting, the depressed and the isolated.

Saints are people who are empowered by God to do God's work. God is always present for God's disciples in their time of need. We may be so busy looking for that metaphorical thunder, lightning, earthquake, or fire, that we miss the quiet whisper of God's voice. God sends unexpected help to Elijah during his time of great vulnerability. Elijah is able to overcome his great sadness, his depression, his fear, through the care of the angels, the nourishment of their food, and God's need for Elijah to fulfill God's plan.

This story invites us to see how God has been present to us in difficult moments. It also invites us to view our problems through a lens able to see God's divine presence in the world.

Just as God is clearly present to Elijah in order to help him overcome his travail, we too need to have the same confidence that God **is** present and **will be** present in our lives. We know the whole of the Elijah story and can see this as just a blip in Elijah's life. We also need to have the awareness that our travails and troubles are far from the whole of our story. Just as God has been present in our past, we need to persevere in the hope that God will be present in our future, as individuals and as a congregation. And we need to listen for God's quiet whisper - listen for the silence. Hear God's voice. Hear God's plan for your life.

Amen.