

Scripture:

Psalms 130

Out of the depths I cry to you, Yhwh!
God, hear my voice! Let your ears be attentive to my voice, my cries for mercy!
If you kept track of our sins, Yhwh, who could stand before you?
But with you is forgiveness, and for this we revere you.
So I wait for you, Yhwh — my soul waits,
and in your word I place my trust.

My soul longs for you, Yhwh,
more than those who watch for the dawn,
more than those who watch for the dawn.
Israel, put your hope in Yhwh,
for with Yhwh is abundant love and the fullness of deliverance;
God will deliver Israel from all its failings.

1 Kings 19: 1-9

Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done, and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword. Then Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah, saying, 'So may the gods do to me, and more also, if I do not make your life like the life of one of them by this time tomorrow.' Then he was afraid; he got up and fled for his life, and came to Beer-sheba, which belongs to Judah; he left his servant there.

But he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a solitary broom tree. He asked that he might die: 'It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors.' Then he lay down under the broom tree and fell asleep. Suddenly an angel touched him and said to him, 'Get up and eat.' He looked, and there at his head was a cake baked on hot stones, and a jar of water. He ate and drank, and lay down again. The angel of the Lord came a second time, touched him, and said, 'Get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you.' He got up, and ate and drank; then he went in the strength of that food for forty days and forty nights to Horeb the mount of God. At that place he came to a cave, and spent the night there.

Then the word of the Lord came to him, saying, 'What are you doing here, Elijah?'

SERMON:

While the stories in the book of Kings read like history, commentators¹ suggest that this book isn't focused so much on the history of the time, but centered in how God's will is worked out with the people.

These stories are about the working out of God's will over the arc of time.

Keep that perspective in mind...

Our scripture today is from 1 Kings 19, but the prophet Elijah, the central figure, comes crashing onto the scene 2 chapters earlier in this book. Israel was in desperate shape. Ahab was king of Israel - who, scripture tells us, 'did more to provoke the anger of the Lord than all the kings before him.' Not only that, but Ahab married the Phoenecian princess Jezebel, building altars and serving the gods Baal and Asherah.

It's here that Elijah the Tishbite enters, appearing before Ahab and telling him that 'as the Lord of Israel lives, it won't rain - there won't even be dew on the ground - until I say the word.

And he fled, hiding in the bush, fed by ravens, drinking from the streams, until they, too, dried up.

We hear stories of God commanding Elijah to go to a widow, who miraculously has supplies to feed them, of his raising her dead son, and then returning to Ahab, inviting the 450 prophets of Baal and the 400 prophets of Asherah to an epic battle on the holy Mount Carmel. Elijah is powerful, fearless, calling out the infidelity of the people, telling them to choose, once and for all - follow baal or follow Yahweh. Who will the Israelites follow - the God of life, or these other gods?

A test is proposed between Baal and Yahweh - which God will answer, be present to their cries?

The prophets of Baal prepare their sacrifice, and call out to their gods to set fire to the sacrifice, with no response. All day they call - and nothing.

Then Elijah repairs the broken altar of Yahweh, prepares the sacrifice, dousing it with water, and prays. He prays to the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, asking God to respond "so that all will know you, O Lord, are God, and that you have turned their hearts back."

Boom! Fire falls, consuming everything - wood, stones, bull, even the dust - licking up all the water in the trench. When all the people saw it, they fell on their faces and said "The Lord indeed is God". Elijah orders the seizing of the prophets and has them all put to death.

Then Elijah turns to Ahab, telling him the drought is finally going to end and he better hurry up and get back to his palace in Jezreel before his chariot gets stuck in the mud. Ahab rides off, but the hand of the Lord was on Elijah, and he runs that 17 mile trek back to Jezreel, arriving before Ahab.

What an epic story! It's here, at the height of Elijah's power, that our scripture today starts....

READ SCRIPTURE

¹ *New Interpreter's Bible Commentary*, Vol II. 2015. Abingdon Press. P. 634.

Our reading today has the great prophet running for his life. We find him afraid, weary to the bone, doubting everything he has known. He's gone from having supernatural powers, doing God's work in miraculous ways, to stumbling through the wilderness, lying down under the broom tree, ready for death to meet him.

What happened? How has Elijah's understanding of himself, his role, his relationship with God, changed?

Somehow, Elijah's relationship with God has shifted.

He's lost perspective, disconnected. Where he once was confident, filled with the power of the Spirit, guided by God's voice, now he is, well, lost.

He has fled to Beer-sheba, a town well beyond the reach of Jezebel. Safe. Yet he doesn't stay there, he continues his journey, alone.

He ends up under the solitary desert bush - a broom tree, in many places the only bush that offers any shade.

Our translation has Elijah saying: 'It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors.'

It is enough.... I'm not sure that translation necessarily brings us into Elijah's despair. Rab, in Hebrew more literally translates as great abundance, or 'too much'.

Too much! Take away my life. - says Elijah

Let me die! Even though he's had amazing success on Mt. Carmel, he's not better than the prophets before him. No better, even, than Moses, who also asked the Lord to let him die, feeling he couldn't carry the work alone.(Num 11: 14-15).

Here, Elijah is feeling that the burden of continuing life as he knows it is too much to bear on his own. He lays down, defeated, and falls asleep, ready for death.

Then, suddenly...

Suddenly an angel touched him and said, 'Get up and eat.'

For the reader, the Hebrew word for angel here is mal-ak, the same word used for Jezebel's 'messenger'. when Jezebel sent that messenger, that mal-ak, to Elijah, the message was Watch out! You'll be dead tomorrow!

What kind of messenger is this, here under the broom tree? - one who brings death, as Jezebel promised, or one from the LORD, who will somehow deliver E from his persecutor and from himself?

Then the angel, this time the angel of the Lord, comes a second time, touches him, and says, 'Get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you.'

This angel provides unexpected gifts, again using Hebraic words that insinuate the Lord's provision, in miraculous ways.

While Elijah may feel alone, abandoned, afraid, there are many hints of God's being here, in this place.

Here, the Lord provides. Eat, take this nourishment, the angel of the Lord says:

because 'the way is too much for you'.

And so Elijah obeys, listens, allowing his perspective to be changed.

We're told: 'He got up, and ate and drank; then he went in the strength of that food for forty days and forty nights to Horeb the mount of God.'

E went 'in the strength' of that food for 40 days - A LONG TIME. It was a long, long journey. It was not his own strength. The angel knows that without the strength of the Lord, the journey will be too much for Elijah. He cannot, will not, make it on his own. E needs the strength that comes from God, not himself. He accepts this nourishment, and continues on - alone yet sustained.

So I return to that wondering - what happened to E, he who was filled with the Spirit, accompanied throughout these years of crushing dryness by God's presence - and yet he finds himself afraid, alone, needing to be reminded, by an angel, that he is not doing this of his own will. It is God who sustains, who provides the necessary nourishment for the journey.

Somehow, it seems, E forgot. He lost perspective, seeing himself as the center of the story, not God, and so he, like the landscape around him, dried up. Alone, he has no energy, no will.

As we continue a long journey through dry and uncertain times, I found myself connecting with this story this week. How about you? Do you resonate with the weariness of E?

These ongoing changes of our times require that we hold our hopes and expectations for what is to come lightly. Where is God in our midst?

Have you ever walked a labyrinth?

(Start video of labyrinth). Lately I've felt a little like I do when I'm walking a labyrinth. It's a solitary experience. You start out and before long you're near the center. There's this feeling like - I've made it! I've arrived. You see the center before you. And you turn. But then... again, you circle back, you seem so close... but not quite there. And the journey continues. It gets long, boring even, it takes you far away from the center. There's a lot of ground to cover before you arrive. Will you ever arrive?

This labyrinth of COVID that we're walking - it's long, and we're coming to learn, again, that there's likely no central spot to which we will arrive. We get close, and the journey continues, on.

Elijah's journey, after he ate the food provided by the angel, was long. 40 days - that mythical number that means a LONG, long time.

The angel knows that without the strength of the Lord, the journey will be too much for him.

It's a long, long journey that brings him to a cave, where he hears God's voice asking him 'What are you doing here?'. Again, not the end, but a new twist on the journey.

Where do you find yourself on this journey?

Some days you might feel the strength of the Lord with you, strong, capable, other days you might be afraid, unsure, looking for that one little piece of shade under the broom tree in which to lay down.

Perhaps the weariness of this time has you saying 'too much'!

The good news is that no matter where we find ourselves, we are not alone. **(end video - here, or wait and leave on screen for a few seconds fully finished)**

Elijah's perspective became deadening, when he perceived that he was alone. What happened to cause that?

It was there, in that despair, that God's unlikely messenger finds E under that broom tree. E has a choice - just like he gave the people of Israel the choice - which God do you serve - the God of life or the small, everyday gods of death - you choose.

Here, who will E choose to trust, his despair, or can he trust the messenger that shook him awake, telling him to get up, eat?

Elijah chose to engage, to listen, to take the chance, to remain in relationship with God, the God of life, taking the nourishment provided, getting the rest he needed, and continuing on.

Elijah ate, went back to sleep, got up, ate again. He was well rested and fully nourished before continuing on - for the journey ahead was long.

I wonder where you're finding rest,

where you're finding nourishment for this journey - this journey that can be bone dry and wearying.

God is here, among us, in this place where we are meeting - in person, and on zoom. God is here, my friends.

We must not lose perspective.

God is here, offering simple nourishment, provided, perhaps, in unlikely spaces. God is here, allowing us the rest we need.

God is here, all along the way.