

June 23, 2019 – Prophets: Elijah
Pastor Erin Bouman, Irving Park Lutheran Church
1 Kings 19:1-15a

Out of the Cave

Elijah was a great prophet. Elijah predicted the terrible drought and famine that occurred during the reign of King Ahab & Queen Jezebel, during the time of Israel's divided kingdom, that difficult era when Israel was split in two, antagonistic against itself, and its rulers were awful. A divided nation, rotten leadership, that was a hard time for the country, that time in which the great prophet Elijah lived. When the famine came, Elijah stayed with a widow of Zaraphath and her son, and, miraculously, their meager food supplies did not run out. Then, when the widow's son fell deathly ill, Elijah brought him back to life. Elijah was also the one who challenged the prophets of Baal to see whose God was worthy of worship. Elijah showed them who was God, in spectacular form. The altars of the idolaters remained inert and unlit while the water drenched altar to God ignited. Elijah was a great prophet. In many ways Elijah epitomizes the prophets. In the gospel story of Transfiguration, when the disciples go up a mountain with Jesus and see him talking with two great figures from ancient Israel, people who represent the law and the prophets, it is Moses and Elijah with whom Christ converses. Elijah was a great prophet—but things didn't always go so great for him.

Like where and when we meet him today. Elijah is not doing so great. He is on the run and out of sorts. The altar challenge didn't sit so well with Jezebel; she orders Elijah be killed. And so Elijah runs, far away. At first Elijah must have had some traveling companions, at least one, because the text tells us of the point when Elijah leaves his last servant behind, and then goes on alone, far into the wilderness, where, at last, drained and despondent, he finds a setting that matches his inner state. "He sat down under a solitary broom tree." It's a lonely landscape, and a lonely prophet, a dejected and burned out prophet, who says to God, "You might as well kill me now."

There is some irony in this. The place Elijah runs to is far, far away; he has exerted much energy evading danger and death, he has traveled about as far away from the threats he knows as he possibly could, only to then say to God, "Go ahead and kill me." Instead, God sends an angel to feed him. Elijah is offered baked cake, cake!, and it's even hot, and he is even given seconds, and angelic encouragement, "Come on now, keep eating, keep journeying."

Elijah gets up and goes to a mountain, a holy mountain, the mountain where Moses received the law. Elijah finds a cave, and goes inside. Again, the setting evokes Elijah's inner state: a cave: a solitary, somber, dark and lifeless location. It's hard not to think of another cave, in another Bible story, that quintessential story from the gospels, the cave that was a tomb. Elijah tucks himself into a cave, and then God speaks, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" I can imagine God asking it in any number of ways, in a wide variety of tones, perhaps tender, or incredulous, or pointed, or pained. In whatever way the question was asked, though, I think it was a rhetorical question. I think God asked it to get Elijah thinking, reflecting, reassessing. As is supposed to be the case with rhetorical questions, the expected response should be silence, contemplation. "What are you doing here?"

Elijah, however, has lots to say: "I've been working zealously for you, and all your people, who want nothing to do with you, have no interest in your altars, have killed your prophets. I'm the only one left, and they want to take my life." There's some irony here, too. First of all, because he's not exactly working, there. Secondly because not long ago Elijah said, "Go ahead and kill me," and now he's complaining when people are trying to do just that.

God speaks again to Elijah. God does not risk a rhetorical question now, God gives Elijah clear directions. God says, "Get out of that cave, I'm going to show you something, I'm going to

reveal myself to you.” And then there’s a terrific wind, a gale force wind that shakes mountains above and around, breaks rocks. But God is not in the wind. And then there’s an earthquake, the ground below shakes. But God is not in the earthquake. And then there’s a fire, a great conflagration, but God is not in the fire. And then there’s silence. [Silence]

Elijah hears the sound of silence, the silence after the storm, the silence after the cracking open of the very ground beneath you, the silence after an astounding blaze of light and heat, the silence that comes when you encounter the Divine, an encounter for which language is inadequate. Before the magnitude of that, confronted with the vastness and power of this world and its maker and our respective matter, our respectively small matters, in the presence of that, words fail us, or ought to. After the sound of sheer silence, God says again to Elijah, and now it is not just a rhetorical question, it is an existential question, “What are you doing here?” And Elijah says, again, “I’ve been working zealously for you, and all your people, who want nothing to do with you, I’m the only one…” Elijah has been given one of the most astounding theophanies in all of scripture and he returns to his grievance list. Even great prophets can get like this, even we can.

God, who has more right to be aggrieved than anyone, God who could out-loud anyone, God shows up in the quiet. This is often God’s way, to be quiet, to be in the “gentle whisper,” in the “still small voice,” in the “sound of sheer silence”—all of those possible other translations for this elusive, mysterious phrase, this huge and holy quiet. God invites Elijah into it, invites us into it, into contemplation, into awe, into wonder that the source and force of the universe would have a relationship with us, little specks that we are.

And then God says to Elijah, “Go, return. Go to Damascus, go back to the place where you were a prophet—a place that needs a prophet.” The same sort of charge happens in the today’s gospel story, when Jesus tells the Gerasene demoniac, now healed, “Go back to your home; go back to your people.” Remember, those people had not been especially kind to him either, they put him in chains. That’s how they treated someone who was suffering. Still, at the end of that story Jesus says to him, “Go back to them and declare what God has done for you.” So also God says to Elijah, “Go back to that hostile place, with its lousy leaders, that place that is more interested in idols than God, go back there and be a prophet.” Continue reading past where today’s excerpt ends and you hear God also pointing out to Elijah that he’s not the only one being faithful there. There are thousands still who are being faithful. God says to Elijah, “Get out of this cave and do what you’ve been called to do; others are there doing it, too.”

You may know that these weeks of June we have various middle and high schoolers staying at the church, they’re with an umbrella organization, which also provides their on-site leaders, a Lutheran nonprofit called “Serve Boldly.” The young group participants come from out of state, they camp out in our building and then volunteer at various places around the city, including here. To help the weekly participants know how to navigate our facilities, the Serve Boldly leaders put up signs around the building, especially downstairs by the offices. If you’ve been down there you know it’s a little mazelike down there; dark nooks and lots of doors, some of which lead to, for example, the boiler room. So to help the middle and high school youth avoid places like that, the group leaders put up signs on door of all our subterranean rooms, signs which say, “Do Not Enter!” and then, below that, parenthetically, the name of this Lutheran nonprofit. Perhaps it was because I was thinking about Elijah and caves, but those signs on the doors downstairs seemed to me to have a double meaning. They felt like cautions against wallowing, against hiding oneself away, alone. The signs on the doors felt like, well, signs, reminders that God calls us out of caves, God calls us out of tombs: “Do not enter! Serve Boldly.”