

## **Year A Proper 19, 13 August 2023**

1 Kings 19: 9-18

Romans 10: 5-15

Matthew 14: 22-33

### **Journeying with Elijah**

I don't often focus on the Old Testament reading when preaching, but the lectionary gives us a such a wonderful story today, about Elijah, that I felt drawn to explore it for us and our times. Much of the inspiration for this sermon comes from my retreat on Lindisfarne in April where Scott Brennan based his talks on Elijah chapters 18 and 19.

I would be surprised if in your lives, like mine, you haven't experienced a perfect storm of some sort or another. When external events, quite often beyond our control place us under pressure and stress, and our own resources and skills, life experiences or general personality seems ill-suited to deal with the situation. We may be unprepared or lack the skills, and we can feel disempowered and adrift, at a loss about what to do about it. Or maybe it has been when we experienced internal, emotional or spiritual distress, relationship breakdown, bereavement, personal criticism of our behaviour or leadership. We can be our own worst critic, of course, adding more stress and discomfort, further intensifying our storm.

I know I have experienced this a few times, especially in leadership roles and at a personal level in the two years leading up to my wife's death and for about a year afterwards.

Our reading this morning from 1 Kings ch 19 commences with Elijah in the midst of his own time of personal crisis. The back story of how he reached this point is interesting and although I am sure we all know it, it is worth repeating.

Elijah had experienced a spiritual high point; he had challenged Ahab and the 450 prophets of Baal, and comprehensively defeated them and their false gods, but only with God's help. On the back of that you would be forgiven for thinking that Elijah would feel invincible, with God protecting his every step and guiding his every thought.

Not so, for soon Elijah experiences a spiritual low as he goes to Jezreel and then flees to Beersheba and into the wilderness after Jezebel threatens his life (1 Kings 19:2-3). A bit like Jonah, Elijah sits under a plant and prays that he might die. Elijah fell asleep, only to be wakened by an angel with food for him to eat, and water to drink. Not surprisingly Elijah fell asleep again, and on awakening the angel encouraged him to eat and drink more. This was an essential time of refreshment and restoration for Elijah. Nourishment from the food and water, and nourishment from the company of the angel who cared for him. Only after this time of refreshment was Elijah able to receive and follow the angel's direction to go to Horeb, the mountain of God, a forty day walk away, where our reading this morning picks up.

Sitting in the cave, Elijah encounters God, where the still small voice speaks to him. And we can probably all recite the list of phenomenons that came before God's voice was heard by Elijah. God wasn't in the wind. God wasn't in the earthquake. Nor was God in the fire. God was in a gentle whisper.

God had no need to shout, it did not require a 'Brian Blessed performance' from God. God's still small voice by the cave was sufficiently loud for Elijah to hear. And why was that? Clearly, Elijah's time of recovery and rest, with food and drink, in the company of an angel of God, was critical. That plus a forty day walk to Mount Horeb was all that was required to restore Elijah to a state where he could listen to God and be able to receive and act on God's next commission for him. The forty-day walk hopefully resonates with us, as we recall Jesus's forty days in the wilderness, a time of testing and discernment prior to commencing his ministry.

And as we have read, God re-commissioned Elijah. God gave Elijah a new vision and mission. Elijah was to go through the land and in partnership with Elisha, Elijah was to prepare the next generation to be adherents to the faith and trust in God.

Elijah had been pleading with God to end his life, as if his ministry had been wasted and had come to an inglorious end. But, after rest and recuperation and time listening to God, he realised he was nowhere near the end of his ministry. There was urgent work to be done in God's name amongst the people of Israel.

You may have noticed that after his first night in the cave, the word of the LORD came to Elijah, saying "What are you doing here Elijah?" Elijah was able to respond with a report of his acts in support of God against the Baals.

And again, in the silence that followed the wind, earthquake and fire, the word of the LORD once again came to Elijah and repeated the question, “What are you doing here Elijah?” Elijah responded with the same answer as he had the first time God asked him the question.

However, now, God judged that Elijah was ready to move on rather than needing more time in the cave, so re-commissioned Elijah by giving him a new vision and instructions for how to be a disciple to the Israelites and who to partner with in this work.

In summary, we can identify Elijah’s experiences in five stages:

- *Stage 1* – a spiritual high (defeating the prophets of Baal)
- *Stage 2* – a spiritual low (running for his life in fear of Jezebel)
- *Stage 3* – recovery and rest (this is table time<sup>1</sup>, with the angel of God, eating and sleeping)
- *Stage 4* – an encounter with God (this is cave time<sup>2</sup>, when the still small voice speaks)
- *Stage 5* – a recommissioning from God (this is a new vision and discipling the next generation through Elisha, this is road time<sup>3</sup>)

I can see in these five stages a parallel of the last four years of ministry here at St Mungo’s. I arrived on a spiritual high of sorts. March 2020 saw COVID hit, and when we were able to return to meaningful worship; by that I mean with singing to hymns, no masks and with no requirements to sit apart, none of the families returned to regular and frequent worship with us on a Sunday. I felt and experienced occasional tension amongst us due to both the differing theological perspectives, and the ways I portrayed how our desire to follow the example of Jesus should impact on us today. The AGM in January was a particular low point for me. That was soon eclipsed by news of Neville’s diagnosis and his and Tilly’s deaths in such close succession. I was in need of

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- <sup>1</sup> **Table** is the place of refreshment, of restoration. It is often communal, a place of caring and sharing. It can be human and angelic.
  - <sup>2</sup> **Cave** is the place of intimacy with God, a place of silence and solitude, sometimes it is a place of darkness. It is the listening place; it is the boiler room and often brings moments of revelation.
  - <sup>3</sup> **Road** is the place of hope, action, recruitment, and training. It is where the rubber hits the road, where mission happens, anointing successors for future generations.

rest. As well as a led retreat on Lindisfarne, I have enjoyed some good spiritual direction and then I had my holiday in early July. Now I feel I have experienced a time of recovery and rest, a time of spiritual guidance and refreshment, and time to encounter God in the silence.

That is my personal reflection on the Elijah story. For us as a congregation, we all need to be able to share 'table time' together, and collectively move to listening for God's voice to speak to us, and for us to receive a recommission from God.

With Vestry's approval I have been contacted an organisation identified by the Diocese that provides trained facilitators to support congregations. I hope that we may be able to hold an away day later in the year (probably Nov or Dec), to meet together, and with the facilitator's support, reach a point where we share a vision and mission for this church that will enable us to move forward together, and be an effective witness and an attractive place of episcopalian serving this area. I am awaiting some dates that a facilitator can offer us, and then I will circulate them to find the best date to meet.

The LORD said to Elijah, "What are you doing here?"

I hope we are all here because we know Jesus as our LORD and saviour and therefore desire to follow the new commandments that Jesus gave to his disciples, and which we recite each week:

"Here, O Israel, the Lord your God is the only Lord. You shall love the Lord your God, with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength", and,

"Love your neighbour as yourself."

These commandments sound easy, but we know that given the human condition and the human systems mankind has developed (called 'powers and principalities' in the older liturgies of our church), we often struggle to meet them, and need to call upon the Holy Spirit's help and guidance.

These are the commandments Jesus gave, and because of our love of Jesus, I am sure we all wish to follow them. It is time for us to reflect on God's still small voice asking us "What are we doing here?" I pray that with the support of a facilitator we can work together and align ourselves with God's mission for West Linton.

I will finish with some words of Rowan Williams that may also help us. "Church is what happens when people encounter the Risen Jesus and commit

themselves to sustaining and deepening that encounter in their encounter with each other”.

*Nick Bowry*  
*13<sup>th</sup> August 2023*