

I Kings 19

June 23 2019

Oh my goodness this is good stuff.

I know I keep saying this, but it keeps on being true...

This piece of scripture, this story.....has sermons just falling out of it all over the place. It's hard to pick just one and it deserves so much more time that we'll give it today.

The good news is that we'll be in the stories of Elijah and then Elisha pretty much all summer...so this isn't the last you'll hear of them.

I'll tell you a bit about what's been going on in my life these past two weeks. It happens a lot but I think the fact that summer is upon us and people are laying down a lot of their committee work and other commitments and trying to discern which of those layings down is temporary and what they need to let go of for good...I think that has something to do with it.....

People are in my office not exactly sitting under a broom bush

But often pretty close.

Tired. Discouraged. Having worked hard and long at matters that....matter

So many of you are engaged in social justice work, work with organizations and groups that are seeking to make a difference...to call the world, the community, back to the ways of sanity and compassion, justice and truth

You work hard

And sometimes you feel like it doesn't make a difference. Sometimes you pay a price for your passion.

Personally, socially, or even in your jobs. Sometimes you just want to lie down under a broom bush and say I'm no better than those who have come before me....I quit.

And sometimes, when it is known that you are doing the work you're doing because of your faith, that's harder still because people of faith are increasingly misunderstood, judged before they begin, motives questioned, beliefs assumed,.....

And you can pay a price for that too. You want to wear a sign saying "yes I go to church. But I'm not like you think I am!"

And then you say "or am I" and you get questioning yourself in the ways that drain the energy from what's really important, and.....

You know how that goes? I think you do. So....35 years ago when I was ordained, we sang a hymn, a line of which says "I will hold your people in my heart" and when I sang that I meant it, and I have always tried to do that. I hold you in my heart. And I am feeling your fatigue and your grief for how things used to be when you had more energy and maybe more naiveté about things....and your fear about the future and your... ..maybe not despair, but questioning it is worth it. I'm holding that, and you, in my heart. And then this text pops up.

This text, like most of the stories of Elijah and Elisha, has all the marks of a great piece of poetry, of sacred text. It smells...old. You can tell it's ancient, and that we'll never completely understand it – but it calls, and coaxes, teases a little bit....

It smells of burning sands, and foreign spices,

But also there's something here intimate, familiar – kind of like our hearts' home. It's a mystery. It's beautiful.

My role in this?

To invite you into that mystery.

Frederick Buechner, in a kind of rant about this, warns preachers who try to reduce or explain it. This is what he says:

*“Scientists speak of intelligent life among the stars, of how at the speed of light there is no time, of consciousness as more than just an epiphenomenon of the physical brain. Doctors speak seriously about life after death, and not just the mystics any more but the housewife, the stockbroker, the high school senior, speak about an inner world where reality becomes transparent to a reality reeler still. The joke of it is that often, it is the preacher who, as steward of the wildest mystery of them all, is the one who hangs back, prudent, cautious, hopelessly mature and wise to the last when no less than St Paul tells her to be a fool for Christ's sake, no less than Christ tells him to be a child, for his own sake and the kingdom's sake
Let the preacher tell the truth....and finally, let her preach this overwhelming of tragedy by comedy, of darkness by light, of the ordinary by the extraordinary, as the tale that is too good not to be true because to dismiss it as untrue is to dismiss along with it that catch of the breath, that bat and lifting of the heart near to or even accompanied by tears, which I believe is the deepest intuition of truth that we have”*

My role is to invite you into this text and so into the mystery inside you and among us and beyond us.

So...let's dive in.

Let's start with some silence.

Of all the places this sermon could go, I want to stress two: To be a person of integrity, to be true to the light of the Holy that is in you and in every. Creature. That. Breathes.
To be true to what's real and right and ultimate

You have to do two things:

1) speak out and step up when things are wrong

And

2) take care of yourself because doing that can get you in all kinds of trouble, and you can't do it alone.

Does that make sense? Both of those things are true. The brokenness of the world compels people with hearts and heads to speak and act to change things

And the brokenness of the world can sometimes break YOU, and you need to do whatever you can to sustain yourself, care for yourself. We're in this for the long haul.

First, the speaking up part. That's what Elijah had done. That's what prophets do...it's their job. Speaking truth to power. Not good strategy for career trajectories. But that's what people of faith do. Showing up. Speaking up. Stepping up.

You all do that in your own ways.

Here's how Elijah did it: (to understand I have to give you some background...I'll try not to get carried away because this stuff is really interesting)....

At this time in the history, the country was divided. That happened in the year 922 BCE. Israel in the north, Judah in the south. There was no love lost between the two. Of course, this material is being

written, put together, years after the events they describe, and the author has a particular point of view. Let's just say this author is not a monarchist.Ahab was king of Israel, and that's where Elijah lived. Ahab, this writer says, was not a good king. The word used for him is "evil". THEN to make matters worse, he marries Jezebel, a "foreign" woman – a Phoenician princess, (probably to cement political alliances). What's wrong with that? Well, she was not a worshipper of YHWH, but rather worshipped the Canaanite god Baal. And set up altars to Baal all through Israel. She was hated, and Ahab along with her.

And along comes Elijah. The prophet. He's furious. He believes with all his heart that this is taking the country down a road to destruction. He criticizes, he belittles, he makes their lives miserable. In chapter 18 he challenges the prophets of Baal to a contest....essentially a "My God can whup your god" kind of thing ...like you have in grade three. It's written as a comedy, as a cartoon like political satire – read it when you get home today. Chapter 18.

ANYWAY....

Ahab and Jezebel are furious, and Jezebel threatens his life. That's where we find him at the beginning of this reading. He's spoken what he believes to be the truth. He's risked his life for that. He's worked long and hard and endured ridicule (there's a great passage where Elijah is approaching the king and the king says "what do you want, you troubler of Israel?")

He's followed what he believes is the truth. And where has it got him?

Many of those who did the same are dead, Jezebel saw to that.

And she's vowed to kill him as well....

And he sits under a broom bush and wants to die. Maybe he's thinking back and second guessing what he's done all those years? Maybe he's discouraged, focusing on the mistakes he's made, things he could have done better....he says "I'm no better than my ancestors"....and he wants to justdie.

And what happens?

READ THE TEXT AGAIN

I don't know about you but this text gives me goosebumps.

When I have been at my lowest, my LOWEST,

It has sustained me. Like bread and water in the desert. The text itself, the story itself, nourishment. I have hugged it to myself even when a kinder, gentler text would have given more immediate but temporary comfort.

Why AM I doing what I'm doing? Why do I go to meeting upon meeting when it would be easier to stay home on my couch? Why do I give money to this place, to other causes, when I could use it for....more personal, delightful things? A jacuzzi for example???

Why do you? You spend yourself and your resources in countless ways to make the world a better place. And I bet there are times when you sit under your own broom bush and say – this isn't fair....it should be easier than this – is this how you treat your people?

And you want some sign, some recognition, some inner deep peace at least, some assurance

And all you get is

Silence.

And it drives you back to the basic question - why are you doing it? A Christian ethics professor – Beverly Wildung Harrison, once said at a conference where I got to listen to her...she was talking at that

time about feminism and women's rights....but it applies. It just applies. She said "I used to think we were going to win this thing. I used to think that it would happen. And in my lifetime. I no longer think that we're going to win at all. But I keep doing it because I have to look at myself in the mirror and I have to be able to tell my children and my grandchildren that I did what I could."

Why are you doing what you're doing? That's the question. It's bigger than you. It doesn't depend only on you. But ...not to act, not to speak truth to power, not to do whatever you can will do intense and painful violence not only to you but to the light of God within you.

And you're not alone. This scene acknowledges that sometimes there is only silence. And while silence can be beautiful and restorative and deep and filled with meaning
Sometimes it's just silence when you need a word.
And that's just how it is.

But even when there is only silence, even when there seems only a formless void.....

Even then, there is asome translations say a still small voice. Others say a sound of sheer silence. Still others "a fine silence, or gentle whisper. New English translation says After the fire there was a sound. Thin. Quiet"

And the silence calls you back to who you truly are, and sends you back into the fray.

And that's the second thing, though. The danger in preaching this to tired activists is to focus on this part. The "Get back into it" part...

But an equally strong thread here is the message to rest and be fed.

(go back and read that part)

- one bit of Bible study I can't resist.....the word for coals here is, scholars say, not a common word. Not the word they'd use normally for coals used for cooking...the one other place it's found in the Bible is in Isaiah 6...do you remember? Isaiah's vision...where the angels sing holy holy holy.....and one of those angels takes...what? A coal. A hot coal from the throne of God, and touches Isaiah's mouth with it. There is WAY more going on here than a first reading would reveal.

Rest. Be fed. Otherwise the journey will be too hard for you. Sleep. Eat. Let others take care of you. That too is holy. That too is your life's work. Your sacred task. Taking care of yourself. Otherwise, this messenger says, otherwise the journey will be too hard for you. Rest. Eat. Rest again.

And here's the beautiful part of this reading

These two things merge beautifully in the scene where the angel – another translation is messenger – when someone – taps him and says wake up – you have to eat.
It's a perfect melding of the two things we've been talking about. You can't read this, really, - read about Elijah's trek across the desert to escape violence threatened against him...one of the commentaries I read this week said "A 21st century mind, aware of global migration and aware too that this has been true for millennia, wonders....does he come across human remains during his trek? Those who tried that journey before him and didn't survive? A political/theological imagination pauses to ask that question". Well, I hadn't thought of that, but really, you can't read this without thinking of those who are doing that very thing right now. Walking across deserts, hostile landscapes, escaping who knows what threats and

violence left behind?

And you can't think of that without thinking of those who risk themselves to take them water, and bread.

Those who are risking so much by walking in a hostile terrain hoping for a better life, hoping for LIFE....

AND those who are risking so much by feeding them

Are a perfect whole...inhabiting a sacred realm, embodying the divine intent.

Wherever you are along the freedom spectrum....whether you are an intense activist, a troubler of Israel

Whether you do what you can by giving money and support to those who do,

Whether you say to someone who is discouraged and despairing

How about I bake you a cake.

Let us always be the community offering encouragement and support. Let this time together and what we do through the week be a place where cakes and water are offered

Where the silence is honoured

Where the question is asked "why are you here? Why do you do what you do?"

And again, when there is silence in response, let us honour and trust it

May God bless you and sustain you with cakes and water and each other. Amen