

“NOT ALONE”

1 Kings 19:1-18

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Elijah lived in interesting times. The history of the Hebrew people in the years after the era of the great kings David and his son Solomon is messy - power struggles caused the once-united kingdom to split into two kingdoms after the death of Solomon. Those two kingdoms were at odds with each other, but in fact they had quite a bit in common: political instability, corruption and violence, idolatry, and religious conflict, with a little famine from time to time as well. The book of Kings gives us short descriptions of the reigns of the various kings who ruled during this time, most of which are summarized in one sentence: “He did what was evil in the sight of the Lord.”

Elijah was a prophet in the northern kingdom of Israel about 100 years into this period, during the reign of King Ahab and his wife Jezebel. Their regime was even worse than those before them, according to the writer of the book of Kings. Ahab’s marriage to Jezebel allied Israel with a neighboring kingdom and its religion; he soon abandoned the religion of Israel and encouraged the building of temples to other gods. During Ahab’s reign, violence and corruption grew and even human sacrifice was tolerated. Like other powerful people before and since, Ahab and Jezebel had a particular antipathy toward prophets like Elijah who confronted them and denounced their actions.

When Jezebel makes death threats toward him, Elijah fears for his life, and goes on the run. That seems sensible and pretty normal, except that Elijah is fresh off a decisive victory in a confrontation with the prophets of the religion Jezebel has brought into Israel. 1 Kings 18 tells about this, and how the power of the God of Israel was demonstrated for everyone to see. After that, you might expect that Elijah would have gained confidence in God’s power and in his own calling to speak on behalf of God... but for some reason, at this point all the courage and strength and purpose he had a little while ago just desert him.

He’s afraid, and so off he goes, away from Jezebel and Ahab and the people who do their bidding, away from the conflict and stress, away from the struggle, away from ... everyone.

Alone in the desert, he says to God, “I’ve had enough. I’m done. I can’t do it anymore. I’m ready to die.”

Today we might describe what Elijah was experiencing as burnout, a breakdown, the effects of chronic stress, or perhaps even trauma. Some have suggested that Elijah seems very much like someone suffering from depression. Whatever it is, we recognize Elijah’s depleted state. He’s overwhelmed. He’s exhausted. His spirit is broken. He’s out of hope. He lays down and goes to sleep, because that’s all he can do.

And that’s the very point where I feel the story take a turn. There is no sudden and miraculous infusion of strength that sends Elijah right back into the struggle, nobody tells him to buck up and

keep on... but that's exactly why this story is so full of grace and good news for us. Elijah's strength and hope will eventually be restored, but the story also honors his needs and his brokenness... and it reminds us that healing is often a process.

The first thing that strikes you is how simple and basic some of it is.

Elijah takes a nap. Apparently, until that happens, nothing much else can happen. After he sleeps a while, an angel wakes him, and says, "eat something." And food is there for him, and water. He eats, and he drinks, and he sleeps some more. Then again the angel wakes him up again and says, "eat, or the journey will be too much for you." How true that is, and how often the journey IS too much, if we don't pay attention to the needs of our bodies for rest, nutrition, and hydration. These needs are reminders of our humanity, our dependence, our limitations, our creaturely connectedness to the earth.

It's probably not too much of a stretch to suggest that Elijah may have forgotten these truths in the turmoil of his times and the struggles of his prophetic calling. It's abundantly obvious that he's not really capable of much of anything until he's had rest and food. But like a lot of us, he needed someone to fix him some food, and tell him, "eat, or the journey will be too much for you."

I love that God steps in to care for Elijah in this most basic - one might say even *motherly* - way. And the rest and food and water *do* make Elijah feel stronger. He's able to get up and walk. He walks for 40 days and nights - which in the Bible is a way of saying 'a really long time' and also carries the sense of some sort of spiritual journey. He ends up at Horeb, and that also tells us that his journey is a spiritual one. Horeb is another name for Sinai - the mountain of God, the place of the commandments, the place of the covenant God made with his people. This is the birthplace of the faith Elijah has been defending. A sacred place, a spiritual home.

When he gets there... he sleeps some more. I find it really interesting to notice how important sleep seems to be in this story!

When Elijah wakes up, the time has finally come for some consideration of his situation. God speaks to him: "So, Elijah, what are you doing here?"

Elijah doesn't sound ready to die any more, but he's not exactly cheerful and reinvigorated and ready to get back to work. He says, "I've been working my butt off for you, God, but your people have abandoned your covenant and killed your prophets and I'm the only one left and now they want to kill me, too."

"Go stand on the mountain," he's told. "God will pass by."

There's a great wind. Then an earthquake. Then a fire. (I wonder, is Elijah still standing through all this??) Maybe he expected, as we probably would, that those dramatic and scary phenomena would be perfect expressions of the power of a God who could command all such things - and perhaps impart some of that power to Elijah. But then he hears a quiet and gentle whisper. And in that quiet and gentle whisper, he feels the presence of God.

And the gentle voice asks him again, “what are you doing here?”

I’ll be honest: I expected a different answer the second time. I wanted to think that Elijah was able to find some new perspective in this time apart, this time with God, who, we can clearly see, has accompanied and cared for him all the while. We can see that he’s started to rebound. He’s not the same person who collapsed under the tree and wanted to die.

But Elijah is kind of stubborn. It sounds to me as if he is determined not to hear what God’s trying to tell him. He repeats exactly what he said before, which now sounds like he’s starting to entrench himself in a rut of self-pity.

But God won’t let him stay there. “Go back,” God says. “Here’s what I want you to do. There are some leaders you are to support. There’s another prophet who will work with you, and carry on the work after you. And, you know what else? there are at least 7,000 faithful people remaining in Israel.”

In other words, Elijah is not alone. He has *never* been alone. He may have felt abandoned by God when he was alone in the wilderness, lying down under that tree. But in fact, God has been tenderly caring for him and watching over him throughout this journey, encouraging him to rediscover who he is and what’s he’s about, patiently and gently drawing him out of his despair.

He wasn’t alone before, either. How did he not know there were so many people who shared his convictions and perhaps his fears as well? Who might have been there for him, with him?

Elijah lost his perspective; he thought that everything rested on his shoulders alone. He got so overwhelmed and felt so hopeless about the crises all around him that he forgot he’d seen God do powerful things before. His exhaustion and depletion were so great they blotted out the memory of how God had provided for him in other times of need.

In the end, Elijah *does* respond, and returns to continue doing what God has called him to do. His time away was both a literal and a spiritual journey: running for his life became a sort of pilgrimage - back to himself, back to his calling, back to his people, back to trusting God.

We can learn SO much from Elijah’s story. About understanding our limitations. About the necessity of rest. About how important it is to accept the care and nurture and support we need. About the value of stepping away from our work or our worries or our routine sometimes, to restore our perspective. About finding God in the simple and quiet things. About that question which is really for all of us: “What are you doing here?” About remembering that we belong to a community. About remembering that we are not alone. And above all about trust in a faithful, compassionate God, who accompanies us on every journey. Amen.