

August 9, 2020
The 10th Sunday after Pentecost
Lectionary 19, Year A
1 Kings 19:9-18
Matthew 14:22-33
Emmanuel, Norwood, MA
Pastor Amanda L. Warner

Sinking Down

Elijah had been on the top of the world. He had spoken, and the words that he had spoken had come to pass.

He had spoken a word of the Lord to the idolatrous king, Ahab, and what he had said was what happened. He had said, “As the Lord the God of Israel lives, before whom I stand, there shall be neither dew nor rain these years except by my word.”

And it was so. The land was seized by a drought, but the word of the Lord spoke to Elijah and his needs were provided for. He was directed to a river bed where there was water and where ravens fed him, bread in the morning and meat in the evening.

When the drought caused the river to dry up, he was sent to a widow who was commanded to provide for him. By the word of Elijah and the faithfulness of God, the widow’s meager stores did not run out while the drought lasted so that she could provide for herself and her son, and for Elijah.

Then the widow’s son died, and when Elijah prayed to God, the widow’s child was brought back to life.

Finally, when the word of the Lord came to Elijah and told him that it was time for the drought to end, Elijah told the king, Ahab, to gather the priests of the false god, Baal, for a showdown between the gods.

The story of what happened can be found in 1 Kings chapter 18. The prophets of Baal gathered, numbering 450 men. Elijah had two ritual sacrifices prepared, two bulls placed on two piles of wood to be burnt offerings to the gods. Then he told the prophets of Baal to pray to their god so that their god could send fire to burn up the offering.

So, the prophets of Baal did as Elijah had said, from morning until noon they prayed and called upon their god to hear them.

Elijah taunted them, saying, “Cry aloud! Surely, he is a god; either he is meditating, or he has wandered away, or he is on a journey, or perhaps he is asleep and must be awakened.” (1 Kings 18:27)

The prophets of Baal continued their prayers and their cries, but nothing happened.

Then Elijah made an altar to his God. He prepared the bull for offering and placed it on the altar. Then he ordered that the bull and the wood that it was sitting on be drenched with water three times. And then, he prayed. He said, “O LORD, God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, let it be known this day that you are God in Israel, that I am your servant, and that I have done all these things at your bidding. Answer me, O LORD, answer me, so that this people may know that you, O LORD, are God, and that you have turned their hearts back.” (1 Kings 18:36-37)

After Elijah’s prayer, the fire of the Lord fell from heaven and consumed the offering and the wood, the stones that the offering was sitting on, the dust beneath that, and all of the water that had been used to drench the offering. The people who had been called to watch the contest of the gods repented for having worshiped Baal. They fell to their knees, they pressed their faces into the dust and they said, “The Lord indeed is God, the Lord indeed is God.”

After that, Elijah killed the prophets of Baal for having led the people astray into the worship of a false God. And then again, the prophecy of Elijah was fulfilled in the presence of the King and of all the people. Clouds filled the sky and it began to rain. But there was at least one person in the land who was not thrilled by this display of God's power.

Ahab's wife, the queen, Jezebel, was the one who had established the worship of Baal in the nation of Israel. The prophets who Elijah had killed had been Jezebel's prophets, people who she had supported, whose god she believed in, who she had been using to change the religious character of the nation over which she was queen.

She could not let this slaughter of her prophets and this mockery of her god go unpunished. So, even though the prophecies of Elijah had consistently come true, even though her prophets had been proved to be powerless, even though it was raining, even though the drought had ended, Jezebel did not convert, she did not repent like other's in Israel. Instead, she put Elijah under a sentence of death, saying, "So may the gods do to me, and more also, if I do not make your life like the life of one of [the prophets of Baal] by this time tomorrow." (1 Kings 19:2)

And Elijah was afraid. He ran away from the court of the king, he ran away into the wilderness, he sat under a tree and he prayed, "It is enough; now, O LORD, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors."

All along, this was the way that Elijah's life had gone. There was some kind of crisis and then there was God, providing, caring, guiding, and giving Elijah the tools that he needed to do the work that God was calling him to do.

But, after his confrontation with the prophets of Baal and then with their protector, the queen, Jezebel, Elijah just gave up. For some reason, at that point in his life, Elijah no longer believed that God could or would provide for him, could or would protect him. He believed that he, like the faithful before him, like the prophets before him, would be killed and he just wanted it to be over.

But still, even after this statement of unbelief, even after this declaration that he no longer believed that God would protect him and care for him, still, God sent an angel to care for Elijah. He was given rest and food and direction to a new place, where he would have a new experience of the Lord.

And that brings us to today's Old Testament reading, where we find Elijah, encountering God again, encountering God in the wilderness, encountering God on the mountaintop and still struggling to believe, struggling to hope, drowning in deep waters of doubt.

He was asked the question, "What are you doing here, Elijah?"

And his answer was filled with despair, filled with doubt, "I have been very zealous for the LORD, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away." (1 Kings 19:10)

Elijah said, "I alone am left", meaning that he was alone, the only one left of all of the prophets of the Lord, even though, he should have known that that wasn't true. Earlier in the story he had been told that another faithful follower of God, named Obadiah, had sheltered 100 other prophets of the Lord, keeping them safe from Ahab and Jezebel's violent religious purge.

Elijah felt alone, even though he truly wasn't alone.

Elijah said, “they are seeking my life to take it away.” He felt in that in spite of his faithfulness to God, there was no way that God could protect him from the power, from the vengeful sword of Ahab and Jezebel. In spite of all of the ways that he had experienced the presence and the providing care of God, in his crisis, he believed that God would not be there for him. Elijah felt abandoned even though it wasn’t true.

Elijah hadn’t been abandoned. Elijah wasn’t alone. All he had to do was look around to know that. He had fled to the wilderness seeking his own death, and instead an angel had found him and had fed him. All he had to do was to realize that the one who had asked him the question, “What are you doing here, Elijah,” was the word of the Lord who was promising him more. Elijah was cowering in a cave, but he was told to come out, into the open, onto the mountain, so that he could experience the presence of God. But Elijah didn’t do it.

I’ve heard this story, I’ve read this story probably a hundred times since my Sunday School days, and I never noticed until this time, that Elijah didn’t do what the word of the Lord told him to do, at least not right away. Listen, to what the word of the Lord says to Elijah, “Go out and stand on the mountain before the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by.”

My whole life I pictured Elijah standing on the mountain, in the great wind, so strong that it split mountains and broke rocks. I pictured Elijah standing on the mountain, in the earthquake. I pictured Elijah standing on the mountain in the fire.

But that’s not what happened. Elijah stayed in the cave through it all. He did not do what the word of the Lord had told him to do. The word told him to “Go out and stand on the mountain,” but Elijah stayed in the cave. I

know that now, because, it was not until Elijah heard the sound of sheer silence that he actually moved. When he heard the silence, he went and he covered his face, and he stood at the entrance of the cave. And then the Lord who had come to him in this deep silence, spoke to him, asking him the same question that he had be asked before, “What are you doing here, Elijah?”

I see this as almost the same question that Jesus asked Peter when Peter noticed the wind and the waves and started to sink after he had come out onto the water, at Jesus’ command. He started out right, trusting Jesus in the storm, trusting that Jesus could protect him even in the most treacherous footing, trusting that Jesus could do anything.

But his trust didn’t last. It was overwhelmed; he was overwhelmed by fear, by the seeming reality of his situation. So, he faltered, so he fell, so he began to sink beneath the waves, only to cry out, “Lord, save me.”

And Jesus did. He took him by the hand, but he still wondered, why. Why Peter hadn’t trusted. Why he needed saving. Or course, Jesus was there for him, but Jesus didn’t understand why he needed saving.

To Elijah, “What are you doing here? Why are you hiding? Why have you given up? Why don’t you trust me?”

To Peter, “You of little faith, why did you doubt?”

These are two stories where the reality of God’s care confronts the reality of human fear. Human beings cannot believe that God will care for them, and God can’t believe that they don’t trust.

Perhaps this year, of all years, we can understand why. Why Elijah hid. Why Peter faltered.

We are tired. Communally, as a society, we are tired. Individually, we are tired.

As people who are surrounded by beloved family members all of the time who just need a moments peace, as people who live alone who feel like the walls are closing in, we are tired.

As people who are working all of the time to try to face the challenges that coronavirus has brought to their work, as they reimagine how to do their job in a changed world whether they are working from home as people or going out to work every day to do essential work, we are tired.

As people who are unemployed, having watched the work that they do fall to the virus, watch their income vanish, their money run out, and with it, their ability to care for themselves and their families and their hopes and plans for the future, we are tired.

As people who have had to face trauma on top of trauma, as if coronavirus weren't enough, as if pandemic and lock downs weren't enough, as if losing plans, celebrations, trips weren't enough, as if seeing people we love get sick, as if seeing people we love die weren't enough, as if not being able to mourn them the way that we normally would if weren't enough, as if having to deal with looking into the disturbing void of individuality run amuck as mask wearing for the well-being of our neighbors and for the health of all has become debatable weren't enough, as if economic crisis weren't enough, we have also faced the reality of racial inequality in our country.

We have seen people take to the streets to plead for their lives, to demand the lives that should be their God given right, in a country where safety, where protection, isn't colorblind.

And as if that weren't enough, there have been the storms, that have destroyed homes, workplaces, churches, where lives have been lost, in

hurricanes and in tornadoes. Even right here our hospital has been shut down by what has been called the “storm of the century.”

There’s been so much, too much to list, and we are tired. And perhaps we are scared. And perhaps we are wondering, “Can God see us through this?”

Perhaps like Elijah, we’re ready to sit in our cave and sulk. “It is enough.”

Perhaps like Peter, following Jesus into the water, we are starting to feel overwhelmed by the wind and the waves around us, perhaps we’re starting to sink.

So maybe these stories are just what we need right now. They are stories about God coming to people who had just about given up, who had only enough left to come to the edge of a cave when God showed up in a way that he did not expect, who only had the presence of mind to call out “Lord, save me,” as he was going under.

Perhaps that is what we need to remember, that it’s okay to be scared and it’s okay to be tired. God’s love for us, God’s care for us is not only based on us always being on our best behavior, trusting and faithful.

Even when we’ve reached the end of our rope and feel like there’s nothing left for us, God seeks us out in the wilderness, God speaks to us, feeds us, tells us that we’re not alone, and gives us strength for the journey.

Even when we feel like we’re going under, God is reaching for us, to save us. Thanks be to God. Amen.