

November 7, 2021

1 Kings 19:1-18

All Saints

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Sermon and Scripture

All Saints Day is one of my favorite days. I love the extra candles in our worship space and the time to remember and reflect on all the living that was done through the people for whom we have lit candles today. In addition, today is a day when big feelings bubble to the surface and it's okay. As we remember the people we love, there is sadness and loneliness for some of us, but also joy and hope are found in our memories of them and in all the ways their lives affected our living today. You don't need my permission, ever, to feel how you feel, but please allow yourself to feel however you want to feel today. Just know that if you are missing someone, if you are still grieving years later, you are not the only one. The people we love affect our lives while they are with us, so it makes sense that they continue to affect us when they are gone. Love transcends the here and lasts forever.

Today's story is about the prophet Elijah. The biblical writers paint a somewhat complex picture of Elijah. He was a faithful man, unafraid to speak truth to power, willing to go and do the big things and the small things God called him to. But that life, we know, doesn't come without a cost. Sometimes it's dangerous and scary, and it leaves even the most faithful servant ready to call it quits. That's where we find Elijah today, amid his own big feelings, running in fear, begging for relief.

Before we get to it, let's remember where we ended last week. You will recall we heard about Solomon building the Temple in Jerusalem. Unfortunately, between the forced labor required to build the Temple, Solomon's political alliances through multiple marriages, and the inequality between the palace and the people, Solomon's 40-year reign ended in disarray. Unable to accept Solomon's son Rehoboam as king, the northern tribes split from the southern tribes, creating two kingdoms-Israel (in the north) and Judah (in the south).

Today's story takes place during the reign of Ahab, who was the seventh king of the northern kingdom. Ahab did not follow God's word. He married a princess from Tyre, who brought with her the religious, cultural, political, and economic traditions of her land of origin. Her name was Jezebel. Ahab allowed himself to be

heavily influenced by Jezebel. This included worshiping her god, Baal. When I've preachers talk about Jezebel, I've usually heard them say something derogatory about her influence on Ahab. Here's the thing: Jezebel was practicing the faith of her land. It's Ahab who was supposed to be faithful to the God of Israel. Why is Jezebel always viewed as the problem? Shouldn't Ahab have known better? Anyway, that's a sermon for another day.

Back to Elijah, in order to bring Ahab and Jezebel to faithfulness, he declared there would be no rain in Israel until they repented and turned toward Israel's God. Following that, Elijah went to stay with a foreign widow and her son, promising that her jar of flour and oil would never run out, and even healing her son when he fell ill. In the third year of this drought, Elijah had a standoff with Ahab's royal court prophets, who were prophets of Baal. They and Elijah each set up a sacrifice on top of Mount Carmel, with the wood and the animal ready, and they called on their respective gods to send the fire. Baal did not answer, but Israel's God did, in a spectacular way, and everyone declared "the Lord is God."

Elijah used this as an opportunity to have all the court prophets killed. We pick up the story that night in the royal palace, as King Ahab reports to Queen Jezebel all that happened on the mountain.

This is 1 Kings 19:1-18:

19 Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done, and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword. ² Then Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah, saying, "So may the gods do to me, and more also, if I do not make your life like the life of one of them by this time tomorrow." ³ Then he was afraid; he got up and fled for his life, and came to Beer-sheba, which belongs to Judah; he left his servant there. ⁴ But he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness and came and sat down under a solitary broom tree. He asked that he might die: "It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors." ⁵ Then he lay down under the broom tree and fell asleep. Suddenly an angel touched him and said to him, "Get up and eat." ⁶ He looked, and there at his head was a cake baked on hot stones, and a jar of water. He ate and drank and lay down again. ⁷ The angel of the Lord came a second time, touched him, and said, "Get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you." ⁸ He got up, and ate and drank; then he went on the strength of that food forty days and forty nights to Horeb the mount of God. ⁹ At that place he came to a cave and spent the night there.

Then the word of the Lord came to him, saying, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" ¹⁰ He answered, "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 He said, "Go out and stand on the mountain before the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by." Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake; ¹² and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence. ¹³ When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. Then there came a voice to him that said, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" ¹⁴ He answered, "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." ¹⁵ Then the Lord said to him, "Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus; when you arrive, you shall anoint Hazael (Haza-el) as king over Aram. ¹⁶ Also you shall anoint Jehu son of Nimshi as king over Israel; and you shall anoint Elisha son of Shaphat (Sha-fat) of Abel-meholah as prophet in your place. ¹⁷ Whoever escapes from the sword of Hazael, Jehu shall kill; and whoever escapes from the sword of Jehu, Elisha shall kill. ¹⁸ Yet I will leave seven thousand in Israel, all the knees that have not bowed to Baal, and every mouth that has not kissed him."

Elijah begins the story afraid. So, he did what human beings are wired to do in the face of fear, He ran away and, in the middle of nowhere, found a tree to sit under where he begged God to let him die. He was done. He had done everything he had been asked and he had nothing left to give, "It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors," he said. Elijah's words are reminiscent of Moses's words in the book of Numbers, chapter 11, when he said to God, amid the incessant complaining of the Israelites, "I am not able to carry all this people alone, for they are too heavy for me. If this is the way you are going to treat me, put me to death at once..."

This sentiment expressed by both Moses and Elijah is complete and utter despair. It is deep sadness all the way to the core. While none of us have been entrusted with saving an entire nation of people, it is likely some of us have experienced

leadership at times when it seems like our very best was not enough and nobody could possibly understand what we were going through. Good times. It is lonely and isolating when we feel like despite our best efforts, we have missed the mark. Or maybe your deep sadness hasn't come as a result of leadership bumps in the road. Maybe your sadness is a result of profound loss-loss of a dream, loss of financial security, loss of health, loss of relationship, loss of someone you love. Whatever the source of your sadness, this story of Elijah has a word for you.

And the first word is, allow yourself to be cared for. And even if other people are not caring for you or angels are not bringing you cake or water, care for yourself. Elijah flung himself under a tree, wished for death, and fell asleep. When the angel woke him up, there was cake! He ate and he drank and then went back to sleep. To be honest, sometimes that's what we need isn't it? A major carb load and a nap. When the angel woke him up again, there was more cake and he was told to eat and drink in order to give him strength for the journey. Because God wasn't done with him yet.

But to be clear, before God said, "Go get 'em Tiger, get back out there," Elijah was to rest and refuel. I feel like if a nap and cake is good enough for Elijah, it's good enough for all of us. Friends, it is okay to be exhausted. There are times when feeling sad, lonely, frustrated, angry, or desperate is appropriate, perhaps especially in this weird season of COVID that none of us have known how to navigate. When you feel all the big feelings, you don't have to just power through. You don't have to suppress them, pretend they aren't there, and move on. Feel them, allow yourself to rest, eat well, hydrate, cover up with your favorite blanket, listen to your favorite song or watch your favorite show over and over again. Take care of yourself and allow the angels around you to take care of you too. Again, if it's good enough for Elijah, it's good enough for us.

Once Elijah had reset, he went to Mount Horeb, which is another parallel the biblical writers have drawn between Moses and Elijah. It was on Mount Horeb that Moses communed with God and received the Ten Commandments and where the people entered into covenant with God. There, God asked him, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" Given the opportunity to tell God exactly how he felt, he did...and he exaggerated a bit. He said, "I have been very zealous for the Lord...I alone am left." That wasn't true. There were other faithful people left, but

we can certainly understand how Elijah could feel pretty isolated. Jezebel hadn't threatened to kill the other people, just Elijah.

God told Elijah to go outside the cave he was in and wait for the Lord to pass by. Knowing what we know about the ways in which God generally appears in stories, we might expect God to appear in fire, like he did in the burning bush for Moses, or in a powerful wind or trembling of the earth. Those things all happened in this story, but the text tells us, God was not in the wind, the earthquake, or the fire. Where did Elijah encounter God?

In the New Revised Standard Translation that I read earlier, Elijah encountered God in "a sound of sheer silence." The King James Version says, "a still small voice."

But my favorite is the Common English Bible, it reads, "After the fire, there was a sound. Thin. Quiet."

This last translation reminds me of the phrase "thin place," which we use to describe a moment or place in which it seems that God draws especially near. The phrase has its roots in "the mystical world of Celtic spirituality and the Celtic Christians, who were deeply connected to the natural world and considered every aspect of life to be infused with the presence of the Divine...While historically the ancient Celts viewed thin places as locations or moments in the cycle of the year where the veil between the world and the spiritual realm diminished and they could encounter those who had gone before them, today thin places are more commonly considered locations in which there is an undeniable connection to the Sacred."¹

Whatever that moment and that place were like, Elijah encountered God in a new way. I believe there are holy moments and holy places all around us every single day. And sometimes we are too busy living to notice. Sometimes we are grieving so hard that we can't see past our own sadness. Sometimes God doesn't show up like we expect, and we miss it entirely. But sometimes, we are there for it. And when we are, it is beautiful.

What Elijah got from that encounter with God was his marching orders. God had more for him to do. And the same is true for all of us, no matter where we are

¹ <https://www.asacredjourney.net/thin-places/>

between our beginning and our ending, God has more living for us to do. But first, if you need it, take a nap, have some cake, and then make time and space to encounter God. There is some comfort, I think, in remembering that life is full of beginnings and endings, but the really good stuff is in the living, even when the living is painful. Let us live our lives so that when people are lighting candles for us one day, their memories will be of the ways in which our living pointed them to God and God's love and let's give them really great stories to tell. Amen.