

The Sunnybrook Pulpit

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Listening for the Still, Small Voice

Now there was a great wind... but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind there was an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence. – 1 Kings 19:1-18

My friend Jim wanted to die, but he was unable to kill himself. Jim's mind was as sharp as a tack, but his body was a wreck. He was paralyzed and incapable of moving his legs, his hands or even his bowels. He controlled an electric wheelchair by the limited mobility he had in one shoulder. He could move his head, his eyes and his tongue, that shoulder and that was it. But Jim was bright, funny and articulate. I visited him once a week and he tutored me in French. He liked to tell slightly off-colour jokes, and was interested in people. He would often tell me touching stories about the personal struggles of the various nurses, aides and housekeepers who he got to know while they were looking after him. Aside from wanting to die, Jim was an engaging person, and I looked forward to our weekly tutoring sessions.

But he was absolutely desperate to die. He found his life unbearable; depending so absolutely on others for even the most basic bodily functions was degrading; being so helpless and unable to influence his own life was intolerable. At one point he spent months imagining how he might kill himself; the only method he could conceive was to back his wheelchair off the back deck of his house, so that he would tip over backwards and hit his head. He tried it, went over backwards and fell about three feet. He hit his head hard, but not hard enough. He ended up with a few stitches, a headache and a lot of humiliation, as he lay there waiting for someone to find him.

By the time I knew him, that event was long past. Jim wanted to die, and if I had offered to help him die, I am certain he would have taken me up on the offer. But I did not want him to die. I could see value in his life that he could not. I thought that his life was worth living, even if he didn't, because I cared about him.

For very different reasons, the prophet Elijah also wanted to die. He was exhausted and burned out by his bitter struggle with King Ahab and Queen Jezebel over fundamental questions of ethics and religion in Israel. The queen was a foreigner,

the member of the royal family from a nation where the monarch had virtually unconditional power over the people. She was a bit like Donald Trump today, who is also challenging every norm of civilized behavior that have long governed democratic politics. In opposition, Elijah was holding up the ancient faith of Israel – that all authority is founded in the covenant relationship of God with Israel, and must be exercised within the terms of that covenant. Monarchs may not do whatever they want, he insisted, but must seek to cultivate economic justice, mercy and well-being for all the people in the land. And so there was this titanic battle between Queen Jezebel and the prophet Elijah.

Elijah had been fighting the good fight, and now his life was in danger. He fled to the wilderness, a place outside of royal control. He does not want to be killed, but he does want to die. He feels very much alone, and he despairs that he will prevail against such ruthless opposition. He prays that God will take away his life, “for he is no better than his ancestors.” He is at the end of his rope, and he feels he has nothing left. But God has different ideas, and responds to Elijah’s death wish with the means of life. Twice Elijah sleeps and twice an angel, a messenger of God, provides him with food and water.

Elijah may have been wanted by his enemies, but he was wanted even more passionately by God.¹ The angel will not abandon Elijah to his own death wish, but provides for him. Elijah may think his life is over, but God is not done with him yet.

Many of us have times in our lives when we feel utterly drained, spent and used up. It may be because of illness or exhaustion or simple old age. But God may not be done with us yet. At such times, perhaps, we can remember Elijah, and ask what God has yet in store.

- My friend Jim didn’t think his life was worth living, but he was the only one who thought that. Those who knew him valued his friendship, his wit and his insight.
- Some of the elderly people around this congregation may feel as if their lives are pretty much over and they are just waiting to die, but I suspect that God isn’t done with them yet, either.

Elijah goes to the Holy Mountain, where Moses had his legendary encounters with God and forged the covenant that Elijah prized so much. Sometimes, when we feel exhausted and spent, it is important to return to the source, to places and people

¹ Brueggemann, 1 Kings, Knox Preaching Guides, p. 88

and writings that have inspired our convictions and to find there fresh strength and inspiration, and new direction for the next stage in our life journey.

- I have a colleague who struggled for several years with vocational questions and who finally resolved his struggle through participating in a regular Bible Study group. Returning to the source, re-reading the Bible and sharing in a community of disciples was a renewing experience that gave him new direction for his life.
- I came across another example of someone who returned to the source in the story of Dianna Ortiz, a nun who was kidnapped and horribly tortured by the military while working in Guatemala. The experience of torture was devastating and she suffered for years from post-traumatic stress, including long periods when she carried a razor blade in her shoe so that she could end her life at any point. Eventually, she found some measure of healing by visiting the birthplace of her religious order, and learning more about its founder. In doing that she found a new sense of calling in standing up for other torture victims and human rights work.

In times of despair and struggle, returning to the source can help give us new direction and new strength.

When Elijah reaches the mountain he is not disappointed. God questions him. Twice, Elijah is asked what he is doing there, and twice Elijah offers an account of his troubles: “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.” There is an implicit reproach in what Elijah is saying. After all his faithfulness, he implies, God should be looking after him better, not leaving him to face the fury of the spurned monarchs on his own.

After Elijah’s first outburst, God tells him to go and stand outside because the divine glory will be passing by. And there follows a famous story about how God is not in the mighty wind, or the earthquake or the fire, but in a still, small voice, which newer translations render as “the sound of sheer silence.” Often it happens that we look for God’s presence in the dramatic and miss God’s presence in the quiet and easily overlooked.

In that silence, that sound of sheer silence, God speaks, not defending himself or offering Elijah an escape to a life of safety and comfort. Instead God commissions Elijah anew, sending him back into danger, to serve God’s transforming mission in the world. The encounter, in the words of one biblical scholar (Walter Brueggemann), “moves the agenda” from the despair and fear of Elijah, to the

goals and expectations of God. Elijah still has work to do, and God will help him do it. God offers not safety, but significance, not comfort, but consequence.

It is tempting, in times of struggle, to feel sorry for ourselves, to become focused on our own suffering and struggle, to become focused on how unfair life is, and to feel alone and insecure. Ultimately, however, what really matters is not our own comfort and safety, but whether our lives are meaningful, whether God is at work through us. When we keep focused on God's agenda, on God's goals, when we, to use Jesus' phrase, seek first the kingdom of God, then we will, even in our most desperate hour, find a purpose for our lives, and allies who will help us through.

Sometimes, in difficult straits, it can be hard to see how God is at work through us. That can be especially true at the end of life, when limited mobility and failing health contribute to a sense of worthlessness. Even in such times, however, we shouldn't underestimate God's ability to do good through us.

- I think of the last days and weeks of Pope John Paul II, who had a deep sense that his very public infirmity and death might help people learn to cope with their own suffering with hope and faith.
- I think of people whom I have visited on their death beds, who despite their own illness and pain, expressed care and concern for me and my well-being.

I have learned from such people that the God can work in us even when our abilities are very minimal. I have learned that it isn't so much what you can do as much as what you can be. In the closing years of life, it is the qualities of character that shine through.

Let us pray: Life is often not easy, God, and serving you is often not easy. At times of doubt and despair, speak to us, we pray, in your still, small voice, helping us to find a life, not of safety, but of significance, not of comfort but of consequence. May we serve you, in thanksgiving, right to the very end. Amen.