

## 1 Kings 19:1-18

Today we meet Elijah at a very difficult time in his life. He's outnumbered by prophets of the cult of Baal. He's in the minority in times when tolerance and acceptance of differences between people was not the first priority. Their conflict comes to a head with a powerful showdown – 450 prophets of Baal pray to their god and their sacrifice is not burnt, Elijah does the same with his God and the sacrifice is consumed by fire. Then Elijah kills all 450 prophets with a sword. He then needs to flee as reprisals are promised by the queen Jezebel. That's when we meet him.

He runs for his life and then collapses in a heap. It's all been too much for him. He's exhausted, fearful, depressed. There's been too much tension, too much anxiety, too much going on. He's had enough, he can't take any more.

What God does is astounding. You might expect rebuke for Elijah's unbelief. God just showed him and the whole nation what a powerful God he is. The rule belongs to him, there is no greater God. Elijah was God's tool; he's seen it all firsthand. He's safe – he's in a land beyond Beersheba which means that Jezebel does not rule there. Her threat of killing him within 24 hours wasn't fulfilled – he's beyond that timescale already and he's still alive and away from her. He's safe and has the protection of the most powerful God – and now he says he's had enough? There's no logic in his behaviour. But maybe it's because there is no logic in exhaustion and depression. God must surely know this because instead of doing what we would have done – rebuking Elijah for his weakness – he sustains him body and soul. He shelters him in a cave where he can rest and be safe. What love and what wisdom.

All of us feel overwhelmed at times. All of us are discouraged, anxious, low, depressed even. God says: It's ok, take your time and rest, be nourished and sustained, then you'll go again.

The sustenance of God's provision in today's passage bears powerful connections with other interventions of God. Sara Koenig in her commentary on this passage writes: 'The food that is before Elijah is described as a "cake baked on coals, and a jar of water" (verse 6). The only other place in the Old Testament where we find the Hebrew word used for coals (resapim) is in Isaiah 6:6, referring to the coal that touched Isaiah's lips to purify him, when Isaiah expressed his dismay at his ability to accept God's commission. The word used for jar (sapphat) is another uncommon word, appearing only in 1 Samuel 26:10-16 and 1 Kings 17:12-16. In the latter set of texts, it refers to the jar of oil belonging to the widow of Zarephath. Because of God's provision, that jar miraculously remained full during the drought, and provided food for Elijah and the widow. Thus the very vocabulary used to describe Elijah's food and drink recall another prophet who felt unworthy, and reminds us of God's provisions for Elijah in the past.'<sup>1</sup>

Feeling unworthy and despondent is a very human emotion. All the prophets felt this way at times, we have felt this way. And what God does is to patiently provide for us in our

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=1429](https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1429).

time of weakness or trouble. Such love has no comparison to any other love. It's relentless, searching us out every time and providing for our every need.

The situation of Elijah never changed. But thanks to the rest and nourishment he received, he was able to respond to the call of God on his life and continue his ministry. He had complained he was the last prophet – he now needs to anoint a new one to help him. He's to anoint kings in other countries. His ministry is not taken away from him because he was low and had had enough, the focus of it is different now though. He's strengthened and sent on his way again. God does not give up on us – ever.

What's also interesting about this call is that usually the call stories come at the beginning of someone's life or ministry. This call comes to someone who's been in ministry for many years. His call is renewed and amended to suit God's purposes at the time. The fact that you've lived for so long already does not mean that God has given up on you, even if you have given up on yourself. He's got a ministry for all of us. And only we can respond to this call. The Very Rev Albert Bogle in his moderatorial year kept on calling on the older generations in the Church of Scotland – rise up and respond to God's call. There is nobody else but you and so it's you he's calling. Very powerful and countercultural message. Culturally speaking we would expect – and want – younger people to take over. What he was saying is that there is nobody else and therefore the task of taking the church into the future belongs to the older generations. Whether you want it or not, whether you're despondent about the future or not, this is your ministry.

The little hint in the text for us is where it all happens. Elijah runs for his life but he runs to a very specific place – the mount Horeb. That's the place where Moses enjoyed fellowship with God and received the Ten Commandments and that's also where Israel entered into the covenant with God. God was known to have revealed himself there. Elijah withdrew to the place where he knew God can be found. When in trouble, we should do the same – go to the place where God has been known to be found. Where is it for you? Church? House group? Cliffs and beaches around you? Bible? Prayer? Writing letters to vent off but never actually sending them? Taking a bucket and spade and playing in the sand with your children or grandchildren? Whatever it is, you know that this is the safe place to go to in times of trouble and God himself can be found there.

The Rev Dr Homer Henderson in his sermon 'Silence Bites' reinforces this injunction: 'There is an apocryphal story of several applicants seeking a position as a ship's Morse Code operator. While they're waiting to be interviewed, the room is filled with the sounds of conversation, and so they're oblivious to the sound of dots and dashes emanating from an intercom. Then another applicant comes in, sits down, quietly waiting. Suddenly, she jumps up, walks into the private office, and after a few minutes, walks out with the job. The other applicants exclaim, "We were here first! How could you go ahead of us and get the job?" To which she replies, "Any of you could have gotten the job if you had just been quiet long enough to pay attention to the message on the intercom." "What message?" "The code said, 'A ship's operator must always be on the alert. The first person

who gets this message and comes directly into my office will get the job." That coded message-something like a still, small voice.<sup>2</sup>

Let's search out this still small voice and let's listen to it. Then great things will happen. Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> [http://day1.org/459-silence\\_bites](http://day1.org/459-silence_bites).