

God Speaks to Elijah \ All Saints Sunday
(5Nov17) 1Kings19:1-18

It's hard to feel alone and have to carry on.

That is my first feeling on this All Saints Sunday, not to give thanks, not of celebration or praise, not of hope or blessing. I first feel the hardness, the lament at being left alone, the clear preference for it not to be this way.

Those people who have left me behind, those from our congregation who died, especially Eileen, John, and Lynne, those other funerals, the deaths we're remembering today, parents and grandparents, siblings and sons, aunts and nephews, old friends, and at least one classmate, and dogs and cats, the broken community, and all the other losses we continue to bear with us—even when it wasn't totally tragic and we might admit that the end was a relief, that suffering was over, that the wait had been too long, still I'm not ready to call that my preference. Even when the routines were difficult and existence itself uncertain, still mostly I could keep going in those relationships. In no case am I ready to be done being with the person, sharing life with them. I would rather it not be over. Even when it was a good goodbye, I don't like goodbyes.

While we talk about a hello on the other side of this, about reunion, about being together again, while we confess our hope in life to come, in resurrection, and I cling to that hope, sometimes desperately, sometimes tenuously, mostly enthusiastically...I believe, and I believe it will be so unbelievably good...but still for this moment that later promise doesn't sweep me into eternal joy, but feels like a shabby consolation prize. Even expecting God's ultimate love and goodness, when confronting loss and grief and sorrow and death, it can be hard to see. It's hard to believe when we're feeling lonely, and hard to carry on.

What we've known and trusted and loved about life is missing, and our lives are so dependent on relationships that when those are gone, it's tough to know how to proceed, what to do next, even how to get up and get going in the morning.

In a way, this is what we hear of the prophet Elijah. Not exactly because of the death of loved ones, but still he is feeling alone, abandoned, diminished, with that accompanying uncertainty of how to proceed.

In Elijah's case, he tries not carrying on. He's reasonably running away. This is a veteran prophet, seen even by Jesus as the greatest in the Bible, and yet he's ready to give up. He's afraid and frustrated and is just trying to get away from it all. But, of course, a change in scenery doesn't help, since it's the nagging self-doubt and internal questions that hound after him. He's so done he even asks to die. "I'm no better than my ancestors," he says.

That points to earlier weeks in the Narrative Lectionary, of Elijah's ancestors wandering in that wilderness. They were freed from slavery in Egypt, but didn't find the readiness to live into their purpose. They still doubted God's goodness for them. They kept looking back, as if there were no forward.

Like for those ancestors, then, God's most basic work is in ongoing sustenance. God provided manna to the hungry complaining travelers in the wilderness. God provides a cake or maybe Palestinian taboo flatbread to Elijah to give him strength for the journey. God sustains you, even as you confront your doubts and feeling lost and not knowing where you need to go next or even if you can take the first step. As you gather at this table this morning, you are assured in the smallest bite of bread of God's presence with you, God's blessing for you, God's life within you. And as you go out from this table to all the other morsels and meals, the

bites of food and the breaths of fresh air, the places you sleep and the encounters when you awake, in all of that, you have a never-failing reminder of God sustaining you.

And yet that still may not be enough. The wilderness wanderers groused about manna. Elijah didn't want to go on, so why would he want strength for the journey? It may not offer you any certainty, either.

So Elijah goes to Mount Horeb, where God had commissioned Moses, speaking from a burning bush to reveal God's identity and purpose for liberation. In parts of the story the lectionary bypassed, it also says this was the mountain where God spoke amid smoke and lightning with thundering sounds, to give Moses the 10 Commandments so the people could live together well. Also on that mountain, Moses asked to see God directly, and God tucked Moses' face into a cave and passed by, so Moses could turn to see the back side of God.

Well, that's the cave where Elijah goes. He's sustained for the journey by the food, but still isn't sure why or what. He keeps feeling desperate loneliness and lack of direction. Maybe he has circled back to Mount Horeb to seek some assurance of purpose, to rediscover who God is and what that means. Maybe he needs a burning bush. Maybe he would like a clear command. Maybe he wants to see God. Maybe he longs for a Moses moment. And maybe you, too. For clear revelation. For something that makes a difference. To know that God is on the scene and doing something about it.

That is apparently about to happen in the story. At Mount Horeb, Elijah's in the right spot for a big vision, for God to show up miraculously. Then come what the insurance industry still tries to convince us are "acts of God"—the earthquakes and hurricanes and lightning and raging fire. Certainly God didn't avoid such

phenomena in other places in the Bible. But just as those have at best an ambiguous message for us—more of destructive power than divine power—here, the cataclysmic events don't reveal God. They don't help Elijah.

Instead, finally, after the bombast and spectacle, comes nothing. A sound of sheer silence. Or a still small voice, a gentle whisper, calm and subdued, thin and quiet, a soft murmuring sound. These are all translations of this little phrase. This is God's presence in a non-obvious way, and with it the question: "What're you doing here, Elijah?" Elijah, still stuck in his fearful uncertainty repeats his feeling of loneliness. "I alone am left."

God contradicts Elijah. It's an odd consolation, perhaps. It isn't dismissive that everything is going to be okay. Neither does it overturn the problem, for miracles to reverse Elijah's fortunes. It's a deeper, quieter, more lasting assurance that Elijah *isn't* alone, that he can take the next steps, and, beyond that, God's work will continue.

Admittedly, Elijah is sent to anoint not only his own successor to carry on the work, but with planned nastiness of regime change and brutal international politics against a tyrant ruler. But even amid those large scale words of war, the more important word—the quieter, again less obviously visible, but more lasting assurance—is that Elijah is far from alone; there are 7000 around him also going ahead with God's goodness.

This communion of saints is why we gather here today, a brief pause, expecting God to whisper the reminder that you are not alone. As isolating and tragic as grief is, as desolating and difficult as confronting death can be, as much as only you know your loss and how that cannot be restored, and the solitary feeling of abandonment inflicted on you, still you are not alone. You are with this gathering of others,

these also who are blessed and sustained by God to Keep going.

And not just your own losses, but in larger tragedies and ugliness of violence and politics, you can continue striving, knowing that others—far more than the 7000—also carry on with this quiet, deep, sometimes fearful and often unspectacular blessedness.

Then there's the still bigger picture of generations. As important as your work is, others were before and will come after us. The church of Jesus, this community of God, the work of God's blessing and against tyrants in the world, this will persist. It does not stand or fall in our lives, in our dedication or lack of passion. God's work will continue. That is good news, too.

And, finally, though without the obvious ways you're told God could appear, nevertheless in your moments of sheer silence and deep, lonely, longing, God quietly is present for you in life now and forever. This isn't a fantasy of miracles, not a dismissive faith that everything is okay because heaven is waiting. This today, amid grief and confronting the hardness, is the whispered presence to sustain you and give you strength for the journey.