

Circle of Mercy Sermon
“What Are You Doing Here?” 1 Kings 19:1-18
Circle of Mercy
August 9, 2015

The story of Elijah is one that, I suspect, we know well. If the details of how Elijah’s story unfolds in the narrative of 1 Kings are a little fuzzy, don’t worry. I will fill in some of the fuzzy details.

Elijah is one to whom we can relate, maybe more than we want to admit.

Elijah had been called by God to be a prophet. He had been faithful to God’s call to bear witness to God’s presence in the midst of the people of Israel. Elijah called the people’s allegiance back to God, as they were prone to wandering away, offering their allegiance to that which the political leaders deemed worthy and true.

When I think about Elijah, I consider how exhausting and frustrating being right – all the time – had to be, and what a lonely place it must have been for Elijah when he alone carried the torch, calling God’s people back to faithful lives.

It’s important to have a little background to remind us what happened just before Elijah fled to Beersheeba and then beyond, into the wilderness. He had just had a

major showdown with the prophets of Baal (450 of them to be exact) in front of the people of Israel at Mount Carmel.

Meeting silence from the people of Israel who would not answer his question:

“How long will you go limping with two different opinions? If God is God, then follow God. But if Baal is God, follow Baal,” (1 Kings 18:21), Elijah decided it was time to stage a little scene to make his point.

He asked for two animals – one to be offered by the prophets of Baal and one to be offered by himself to God. Each prepared their sacrificial offerings. Elijah let the prophets of Baal go first and instructed them to call upon their god to set fire to the sacrifice. The prophets of Baal called upon their god, doing all that they knew to do, but they received no response. Elijah goaded them, “maybe your god is out of the office – maybe your god is asleep – maybe your god is on a trip – maybe you need to cry out louder.” The prophets Baal continued to cry out. They marched around and cut themselves, spilling their own blood, but still, nothing happened.

So Elijah took the stage and started to build an altar. He made a circle with 12 stones, dug a trench, arranged wood for a fire, placed the sacrifice on the wood, and then instructed the people to douse the whole thing with four jugs of water,

even filling the trench that had been dug out around the altar – not once, not twice, but three times. When it was completed, Elijah stepped back, prayed to God. And following Elijah’s prayer, “the fire of God fell and consumed the burnt-offering, the wood, the stones, the dust, and even licked up the water in the trench.” (1 Kings 18:38)

The people fell down on their faces and proclaimed that the God of Elijah was indeed God. The prophets of Baal were gathered and killed. (Unpacking that particular turn of events is another entire sermon.) Elijah sent word to Ahab from the top of Mount Carmel that the extreme drought was about to come to an end.

This is where our story tonight begins. Ahab returned and reported all that he had seen and heard to Jezebel – the faceoff between Elijah and the 450 prophets of Baal – how Baal was defeated, how all 450 prophets were now dead. Jezebel was enraged and sent a messenger to Elijah, warning him that she would have him killed the following day.

So Elijah took off, fleeing to Beersheba, and then on into the wilderness – out of the territory that would have fallen under Jezebel’s rule. After about a day’s journey, he sat down under a broom tree and asked God to just let him die. He was

ready for his life to end right there. And he fell asleep. It's interesting to note that while Elijah was fleeing Jezebel's death warrant, he found himself, in the wilderness, wishing for God to just go ahead and take away his life right there. Elijah was worn-out, exhausted and just plain done. He was ready to throw in the towel and quit. He was ready to die.

But here we witness a God of compassion. God didn't lash out at Elijah. God didn't chastise him. Instead, God sent a messenger to provide food and water for him. He was given time to recover from a lethargy and exhaustion that made him feel so desperate that he didn't care if he lived or not. Elijah woke up, ate and drank, but he was still so weighed down by the heaviness of his life that all he could do was go right back to sleep.

The messenger woke Elijah up a second time and invited him again to eat and drink. It makes me wonder if, at first, Elijah refused, wanting to drift off into the comforting escape of sleep. Because the second time, the messenger offered Elijah food and water, it included an invitation beyond just nourishing his body to stay where he was. The messenger said to Elijah, "eat and drink, otherwise the journey will be too much for you."

There was more ahead. Elijah's journey wasn't quite over. The sustenance of the meals provided by God's messenger enabled Elijah to rise up, walk for another forty days and nights, and eventually find a cave to sleep in at Mount Horeb (also called Mount Sinai), which was known as a place where people met God.

One of my co-workers at Warren Wilson is Jewish. On Friday, she wore a shirt that had the star of David in the middle of it, and the words on her shirt read: *What would Moses do?* I kind of picture Elijah wearing my co-worker Shuli's shirt, sitting in the very place where God appeared and spoke to Moses and had established the covenant with the people of Israel – wondering “*What **would** Moses do if he were in my situation?*”

But Elijah wouldn't have had much time to ponder what Moses would have done because God was ready to speak directly to him - almost. After providing for Elijah's physical needs, God was ready to engage him with a very direct question: *What are you doing here?*

I wonder how Elijah heard this question, which word was emphasized? In the context of the story, I think the emphasis landed on the word *here*. *What are you doing **here**?*

Prophets called by God were not expected to relegate themselves to far-off, removed places. Rather, they were expected to be with the people, to be voices calling people back to faithfulness. It was kind of hard for their primary task to be done in the middle of nowhere, with no one else around.

What are you doing here? This was the first question God asked Elijah. But, as soon as God got the question out, Elijah launched into his whole “woe is me” speech, counting off all the people who had been unfaithful – who had broken covenant with God, destroyed God’s altars, and killed God’s prophets – how he was the **ONLY** one left who had been faithful to God.

Sound familiar?

It is at this moment that the real issue becomes clear. God didn’t immediately launch into a counter-argument with Elijah because that likely wouldn’t have been productive in the first place. Elijah was spent.

Maybe God recognized that Elijah had lost perspective. Elijah was convinced that it all depended upon him, and now that he was the **ONLY** one left, what was the point of continuing?

Don't we know this story so well in our own lives?

Haven't we been in those moments (or in those longer stretches of time) when our work seems to be in vain, when we convince ourselves that no one else cares about what is most important – that we feel alone in what we are called to do and who we are called to be in the world?

Who among us has not experienced a time when our own skewed perception of a particular situation – at work, at home, with friends, with a community – seems so true and unalterable and broken that we begin to operate and make major decisions out of that skewed perception, that, to us, seems *so right*?

When we operate out of such skewed perceptions, we become blind to and isolated from the presence of people and communities, committed to the very things we long for. I don't know about you, but I've made some of my 'not so greatest' decisions in these moments of such blindness.

Isn't it far easier to hold onto being right or being the only one, than it is to enter into the conversations that name not just our commitments and successes, but our own vulnerabilities and challenges while creating some room for others to name

what makes it hard for them to do what they are called to do and to be who they are called to be in the world.

God responded to Elijah in this way: Elijah was told that God was about to pass by him. Elijah was to go out and stand on the mountain, and there he would witness some dramatic, weather-related drama, which had been known to happen at other times on this same holy mountain.

There was strong wind – breaking trees, splitting rocks into pieces. But God was not in the howling, tumultuous wind.

There was an earthquake – shaking the ground beneath Elijah’s feet. But God was not in the earthquake.

There was fire – burning before Elijah’s eyes. But God was not in the fire.

Now remember that fire had been a central way that God spoke to Elijah (remember the showdown between Elijah and the prophets of Baal)? Elijah had witnessed fire as one way God showed up and made God’s presence known.

But *here* at Mount Horeb, the huge display that included fire (in addition to wind and an earthquake) indicated to Elijah that God may not always be in *everything* in our lives – God may not be in the big displays where we most expect to encounter God. Instead, God *is* here somewhere, just not always in the ways/places that we expect or think God may appear.

Then, there was a sound of sheer silence. In some translations, the sound is described as a “quiet, thin voice.” It was there in the “sheer silence” in the “quiet, thin voice” – where God was made known.

Elijah wrapped his face with his cloak, went to the entrance of the cave on Mount Horeb and heard the voice of God.

As you heard in our reading of the text, God asked Elijah the same exact question, a second time, “What are you doing here?”

And what did Elijah do? Surprise, surprise . . . He hit the rewind button and immediately launched into his whole “woe is me” speech, counting off all the people who had been unfaithful – who had broken covenant with God, destroyed

God's altars, and killed God's prophets – how he was the ONLY one left who had been faithful to God.

Aren't the stories we replay in our minds something? Isn't it amazing how loud and persuasive those stories can be? The story that haunted Elijah day and night was the story that said he was alone, the only faithful one left.

He failed to remember a couple of things: First, he seemed to forget what actually happened after the showdown with the prophets of Baal. The people of Israel didn't just walk away, having enjoyed an afternoon of pyrotechnics and entertainment. No, when they saw God's immediate and powerful response to Elijah calling down fire from the heavens, they fell on their faces and declared that the God of Elijah was, in fact, God.

Second, earlier in 1 Kings, Elijah had crossed paths with a man named Obadiah who was a servant of Ahab, the king. Obadiah had saved many of the prophets of God, hiding them in caves and taking them food and water, when Jezebel was on a rampage, killing the prophets of God. After Obadiah encountered Elijah, he did exactly what Elijah instructed him to do. He returned to deliver a message to Ahab – even though it meant certain danger for himself.

Had Elijah just written off these people, considering them fair-weather friends of God? Obadiah still took part in the system – working for Ahab and Jezebel, though willing to take risks when called upon to do so. Had he written off the people of Israel gathered at Mount Carmel, who after witnessing the standoff between Elijah and God and the prophets of Baal fell on their knees and declared their allegiance to the God Elijah served.

Obadiah and the people of Israel were faithful, but it was a complicated faithfulness, a lived-in, imperfect, real kind of faithfulness that I can relate to.

But Elijah didn't see it because he was looking for the ones, just like him, who were 100% faithful to God. And, if that's the level of commitment he was looking for all the time, then he was actively writing the story where he was sure to be very, very alone – 100% of the time.

What would it have looked like if he had been in conversation with the people who fell on their knees, acknowledging God after the showdown with the prophets of Baal?

What was going through Elijah's mind when he was talking with Obadiah?

If Elijah was replaying in his mind the story that he was the only faithful one left, then I am guessing that he missed a lot of the actual conversation, the nuances that might have indicated the internal struggle, felt by those he was face to face with in those moments, of what it means to be faithful and the struggle involved in even attempting to live faithful lives.

He missed the clues and opportunities because he had already convinced himself how the story was going to unfold.

So God hears Elijah's "woe is me" speech for the second time. Still, God doesn't lash out at or chastise Elijah. God hears him out for the second time. Then, God offers an invitation for Elijah to turn back toward the wilderness and Damascus, with some specific tasks: go look for these people and anoint them.

Anoint them? Can't you imagine what might have been going through Elijah's mind at that moment? But I thought I was the only faithful one.

God didn't come back at Elijah, railing against his arrogance and inflated sense of self-importance. Instead, God invited Elijah to return to the place from which he

just fled to meet some of the others who are and have been on this journey with him all along.

Elijah's task as a prophet was to stay engaged with the people. Elijah's work was to continue calling other people into this covenant story of relationship with God. Elijah's work was to pay attention to the "quiet, thin" places where God was at work and alive.

What does faithfulness look like for Elijah now? It's not just a mindless surrender to God's will. Instead, he's being invited into an active role in the future *with* God. God invites Elijah to go back where he came from to join the others. The story was being rewritten. The real and true story was that Elijah was not alone. God was basically saying, "Elijah – you are not the only one. Look at the other faithful ones. Go and join them." Elijah just needed to pay closer attention to what he was doing *here*, no matter where the *here* may have been.

What is the story we replay in our minds? Where might we be missing the movement and work of God in the places and through the people we least expect? Might we consider the possibility of being present *here*, where we are, as a way of accepting this same invitation into a future with God?

Might we still ourselves long enough to rest in the “sheer silence,” to hear the “quiet, thin voice” that invites us to notice the others who have been with us all along and to recognize that we, too, are not alone?

What are you doing here?

Amen.