

**Sermon**

Sunday 12 August 2018

Lessons 1 Kings 19: 4 – 9

St John 6: 35, 41 – 51

The queen had cursed him and called for his death: he was to die by the sword. Elijah fled for his life. Afraid, he made his way into the wilderness. The queen was Jezebel; by birth a Phoenician princess. Jezebel was the daughter of Ethbaal, king of Tyre; she was a priestess of the fertility god Baal *and* she was the wife of the Hebrew king Ahab. It was at her request that altars in honour of the god Baal were built; Jezebel desired nothing less than that the worship of Baal, the Phoenician god, become the religion of Israel. There is much bloodshed in the story but we join it at the point when the Queen has called for the death of the Jewish prophet Elijah. In fear and to escape the sword, Elijah flees into the wilderness.

We are told he went 'a day's journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a solitary broom tree'. Believing himself to be at the end of the road, he pleaded with God that he might die: 'It is enough now, O LORD, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors'. With the dreadful prospect of death hanging over him, Elijah lay down under the broom tree and fell asleep.

Suddenly an angel touched him and told him to get up and eat. We are told, 'There at his head was a cake baked on hot stones, and a jar of water'. He ate and drank and once again lay down. The angel appeared a second time and again he ate and drank. With renewed strength, Elijah got up and journeyed forty days and forty nights to Horeb, the mount of God. Elijah entered a cave and spent the night there. God spoke to him: 'What are you doing here, Elijah?'

Like so many stories in Scripture, the story of Elijah is packed with imagery and possibilities abound. Elijah entered the wilderness: the wilderness may be a physical place or a place of testing and loneliness within the soul. It was in the wilderness that Jesus faced His own demons. In the Bible, many encounters with God, with the Holy One, take place in the wilderness, in the wilderness of the soul. The church is a community and together we worship God and witness to God, but whether we are alone or in company our encounter with the Divine is always personal; in a sense, we face God on our own.

In the wilderness, Elijah lay down under a broom tree. He asked God for death: 'Take away my life'. A broom tree is more of a shrub than a tree; it is most beautiful between January and April when it is covered in a myriad of small white flowers, flowers with fragrance like honey. The broom tree is a symbol of renewal, of new life and new beginnings. After a day's journey in the wilderness, Elijah lay down physically and mentally exhausted, emotionally and spiritually drained; and desiring death. With the light of the morning sun, the broom tree will have been alive, the white flowers dazzling; in a sense, a burning bush. There at the heart of the story is a symbol of renewal. There is an old Christian legend that while Jesus prayed alone in the garden of Gethsemane he was continually disturbed by the crackling of the broom trees. As He was led away by the soldiers, He said to the trees, 'May you always burn with as much noise as you are making tonight'. In the legend, in the garden of Gethsemane, a symbol of renewal.

Under the tree, Elijah fell asleep. The phrase 'fell asleep' may mean more than sleep. In the Gospels, we are told that Lazarus fell asleep; the synagogue ruler's daughter, whom Jesus raised to life, had fallen asleep. It may be that Elijah's wish was granted: that indeed he died

that night in the wilderness. Could it be that when he is told by the angel of the LORD to get up, this is in fact a moment of resurrection? Could it be that in the chapters which follow we are reading post-resurrection stories? The Elijah story closes when he ascended to heaven. In a whirlwind, Elijah is taken up to heaven. He did not die before his ascension because, perhaps, he has already fallen asleep and been raised to new life?

Besides the symbol of renewal and hints of resurrection, there are parallels between the story of Elijah and that of Moses. In his encounter with the angel, Elijah is offered cake and water; a better translation would be a cake of bread and water. It was in the wilderness that God offered Moses and the Hebrew people manna and water from the rock. Moses and the Israelites travelled for forty years in the wilderness, while Elijah journeyed for forty days and forty nights to Horeb, the mount of God. Like Elijah, there is a desperate moment in the life of Moses when he asked for his life to be taken away. It is in the cave, in the darkness, that Elijah encounters the Sacred, in the cave at Mount Horeb. It was on Mount Horeb that, in the cleft of a rock, Moses saw God.

Darkness and silence are core spiritual themes found in many central and significant biblical stories. We do not always notice them. Of darkness and silence, the Trappist monk, prophet and mystic, Thomas Merton, wrote:

My love is darkness!  
 Only in the Void  
 Are all ways one:  
 Only in the night  
 Are all the lost  
 Found.  
 In my ending is my meaning.

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Closer and clearer  
 Than any wordy master,  
 Thou inward Stranger  
 Whom I have never seen,  
 Deeper and cleaner  
 Than the clamorous ocean,  
 Seize up my silence  
 Hold me in Thy Hand!

Of silence, even in church, Merton wrote:

Let there always be quiet, dark places in which people can take refuge. Places where they can kneel in silence. Houses of God, filled with God's silent presence. There, even when we do not know how to pray, at least we can be still and breathe easily...a place where your mind can be idle, and forget its concerns, descend into silence, and worship God in secret.....

It was at night in the cave that Elijah heard the voice of God. In this ancient faith narrative, sensitively crafted, God said, 'What are you doing here, Elijah?'

How do you interpret that question? Does God ask, 'What on earth are you doing in this place?' Or, is the question, 'In this moment, what are you doing? How are you spending this sacred moment? What are your thoughts?' The former Chief Rabbi, Jonathan Sacks, had long looked forward to meeting the Canadian psychologist Jordan Peterson. With over 800,000 followers on Twitter, Peterson has written on the nature of belief and the structure of beliefs and myths. He is described as an iconic intellectual for many young people.

During his conversation with Sacks, Peterson spoke about his daughter Mikhaila who, at the age of six, was diagnosed with a severe form of juvenile arthritis. Thirty-seven of her joints were affected and through her childhood and teenage years she had a hip replacement, ankle replacement and, for much of her ordeal, suffered acute and incessant pain. At times near tears, Peterson said:

One of the things we were very careful about and talked with her about was to not allow herself to regard herself as a victim. And man, she had reason to regard herself as a victim.....[but] as soon as you see yourself as a victim....that breeds thoughts of anger and revenge – and that takes you to a place that psychologically as terrible as the physiological place. And to her great credit I would say this is part of

what allowed her to emerge from this because she did eventually figure out what was wrong with her, and by all appearances fix it by about 90%. It's unstable but it's way better because of the fact that she didn't allow herself to become existentially enraged by her condition....People have every reason to construe themselves as victims. Their lives are characterized by suffering and betrayal. Those are ineradicable experiences. [The question is] what's the right attitude to take to that – anger or rejection, resentment, hostility, murderousness? That's the story of Cain and Abel, [and] that's not good. That leads to Hell.

Sacks says that, like Peterson's daughter, the many victims of the Holocaust whom he had met did not see themselves as victims. With almost superhuman courage, he said, they looked forward.

God asked Elijah, 'What are you doing here, Elijah? In this moment, what are your thoughts? You have fled from death, you say you are no better than your ancestors, you say you want to die? What are you doing, Elijah?' Like Elijah, as we face the challenges that come our way, we can look back, slip into the narrative of victim, and ask, 'Why did this happen to me?' Or, at God's behest, we can ask, 'What shall I do going forward?'

We cannot change the past and we are all subject to forces we cannot control. Sacks says, 'Looking forward, I see myself as a subject, a choosing moral agent, deciding which path to take from here to

where I want eventually to be'. The neurologist and Holocaust survivor, Viktor Frankl, said that, even in Auschwitz, there was one freedom they could not take away from us: the freedom to choose how to respond. We cannot change the past; we can be held hostage by our resentments. The future we can change. Sacks says the life changing idea is 'never define yourself as a victim'.

Perhaps in the wilderness, in that cave, in that moment of silence and darkness, there was a moment of personal resurrection for Elijah: it was the moment that he no longer thought of himself as a victim. He rose up and lived the post-resurrection life, life in all its fullness.

Amen.