

Seeking God in Thunder. Found by God in a Whisper.

A sermon shared with the congregation of St. Andrew's United Church

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Poor Elijah. He is a prophet, a speaker of truth for God, in the land of Israel that around the time of today's Bible reading is ruled by a royal couple, King Ahab and Queen Jezebel, who have opted for a different god, Ba'al. Elijah's mission given him by God is to publicly confront the King and Queen by issuing a challenge to their 450 priests of Ba'al.

The story is sensational; two bulls will be sacrificed, and Elijah issues the challenge to Jezebel's priests of Ba'al, which deity Ba'al or Elijah's LORD, will be able to consume a bull in fire.

The priests of Ba'al try, and try again, to coax Ba'al to send fire, no fire comes. Even more, Elijah decides to taunt them as the people of Israel watch the spectacle unfold on the sidelines. No fire. It is now Elijah's turn to call upon Yahweh, the LORD of Israel, to bring fire. But it is not enough just to say a prayer; bringing on fire and finishing the battle, he douses the sacrificed bull in water just to reinforce how great the LORD of Israel is! God comes and fire consumes the meat.

Have you ever won in a competition, but after you do the victory dance, you regret it? I can recall in childhood getting beaten up by the class goons. Similarly, Queen Jezebel is enraged to the point that she dedicates herself to having Elijah killed. He heads out into the wilderness of Beersheba. A Bible scholar here points out that Beersheba is actually under a *different* authority; Elijah is safe. But, he doesn't seem to be at peace. Elijah, far from breathing easy, wants it all to end, right there, in the middle of nowhere.¹

The Holy is revealed in that moment of greatest need, gives him nourishment in that wilderness moment, then the divine voice asks: *Why are you here, Elijah?*

Elijah: *I'm all alone here doing your work, and look, all I get is grief!*

Of course, I'm paraphrasing the Bible just a wee bit.

The truth, as it often is, is not quite as Elijah perceives it. He *is* out of the reach of Queen Jezebel, and, in fact, we later find out that he is not at all the only prophet of the Lord left. God has, in fact, saved thousands of prophets. Isn't this story true to life, how we skew our reality?

God replies, "Fine then. Go up to that high place, I'm going to pass by." Now, being the sharp, knowledgeable, listeners that we are, we will immediately recall Moses being told the same by God. Remember him hiding, and God passes by, Moses catching only a slight glimpse?

As Elijah waits and watches for God, a succession of terrifying natural events occur: there is the hurricane-level winds, but God wasn't in that; there was an earthquake, but God wasn't in that either; then the fire, but God wasn't in that. It is in the sheer silence

¹ Sara Koenig's Commentary on 1 Kings 19:15-16, 19-21 (June 23, 2019), www.workingpreacher.org

that the voice of God again is heard. After all this, the holy voice again asks: *Elijah, why are you here?*

Elijah issues the same complaint he gave God before: *I'm here trying my best, here, Lord. People want me killed!* Elijah has not been changed by the holy ground moment. He's human – the Bible story tells us. God has a mission, though, for this person who doesn't get it. God will meet his needs, in spite of the complaining.

Here's the crux of all of this: Your mission and mine, if we should accept it, will require of us some considerable risk. I cannot tell you the risk you are going to have to take: maybe it will be risking your reputation because you take a stand; or, risking your relationship with someone special because your conscience tells you that you need to speak truth; or, maybe it is your life because you are a modern day prophet.

To follow Jesus today, might make us, to quote Bruce Cockburn, "lovers in a dangerous time" because that lifestyle comes at a cost. I know many of you understand this. Others among us might have pondered decisions we made but are wondering if we made the easy choice rather than the integrity one. Gospel storytellers Matthew and Luke both say that Jesus had a blunt moment with his disciples saying:

Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division! [Luke 12:51 NRSV]

Jesus is saying that to choose to follow him is to put him above all our other priorities in life. For some of us who enjoy some amount of power, we know that power and authority is relative – there is always someone in authority over us. The most excruciating and risky moments for us, though, are moments when we come into fundamental conflict with family – our parents when we grow up, our siblings, our partners-in-life. I can't count for you the number of times that a dedicated leader in church has had a partner who is not nearly so dedicated – conflict with family is heart-wrenching, whether it is over financial support of a cause, politics, or time that the partner is dedicating to their ministry.

Here's the good news after my being honest about the cost of discipleship for those of us who want to say "yes". We are told that our risk will pay off and make a difference. Bible scholars tell us that this story of Elijah's showdown with Queen Jezebel and her priests of Ba'al is likely an edit, an add-in to the original royal history in the Bible. Like a number of other stories of prophets like Elijah, "[t]his passage may be the story of a dissenting voice, written by one who took issue with "official" histories."² In other words, sometimes, in spite of power that oppressors possess to tell their version of history, dissenters can ultimately get their say in the final, official, Story.

It took over a century for our indigenous sisters and brothers to have their voices and stories included in the history books that our children and grandchildren read in schools. Our Bible tells us that God is passionately engaged in the work of helping ordinary people to do extraordinary things. Notice that Jesus didn't pick a bunch of educated religious leaders as his disciples. No, in fact, he called peasant and tax collectors (disreputable thieves) women and men to form the core of his team called "The Way."

² Haywood Barringer Spangler, "Homiletical Perspective" on 1 Kings 19:15-16, 19-21. *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary* - Year C, Volume 3: Pentecost and Season After Pentecost 1

When I was in the process of training for ministry, I had more than my share of experiences of what I would call “being invited into the boys’ locker room” kind of talk, rather sexist and otherwise disturbing comments from experienced men in ministry. It came to the point where I felt disillusioned about this church and was preparing myself to quit the process. The timing was strange, no lightening bolt or “mountain top” experience speaking to me, but like so many of my holy moments, the Holy spoke to me more in quiet conversations.

You see, it was a succession of a of conversations particularly with women in ministry who gently pointed out to me that maybe this is good. “Dave, you understood your privilege – white, male, heterosexual – maybe you are called to use your power and privilege for God’s transformational work.”

Now let me say, I did not at all feel that my increasing cynicism about my church and people in authority was a good thing! My fresh sense of call was transformational! I also understood that within that call was great risk as I would find myself calling out colleagues in authority, or taking stands that generated conflict with people I cared about. I was looking for Holy encounters like Charlton Heston’s Moses coming down from the mountain. Spectacular holy moments I looked for. What really happened was God **found me** in the muck of my life, when I was ready to quit.

Have you had moments like that? Did you try to do the right thing, but only get grief? Maybe you expected God to speak to you in a grand voice - the voice of Morgan Freeman? Or Helen Mirren?

Perhaps you and I need to redouble our efforts today; to commit once again (OR maybe for the first time) to God’s vision for our lives in the pattern of Jesus: loving, reconciling, repenting and forgiving.

That kind of work in this unforgiving, unloving world is risky. But may we trust that even if we may wonder if God is there, maybe... just maybe, God will find us. Amen.