

A DAY'S JOURNEY

1 KINGS 19:1-15a

It is a bad time to be prophet. Ahab has killed almost all of them with a sword. 1 Kings says that he has killed all of them, but we know that Elijah has survived. Now that Jezebel knows all that Elijah has done, she sends a message to him saying: "So may the gods do to me what Ahab has done to the prophets if I do not make your life like the life of one of them by this time tomorrow." Translation: if you are not dead by this time tomorrow, I pray that the gods will destroy me. What would you do if you thought that the next 24 hours may be your last?

I don't know if it ever is a good time to be a prophet, because speaking truth to power rarely ends well for the person speaking truth or the person to whom truth is spoken. Then again, it is not about being powerful. It is not about us. It is about God, and God gives prophets something to say. They say it, suffer the consequences and at least hear God declare, "Well done, my good and faithful servant."

Prophets suffer, because they offend. God uses prophets to cry out against injustice, and in crying out, they are brought to tears. Do you consider yourself a prophet? How prophetic is your witness in the church and the world? Who are you willing to offend for God's glory? How willing are you to be humbled for being prophetic? How willing are you to be humbled by God if you blur the distinction between your will and God's? Which is scarier: saying something you shouldn't or being silent when God has given you something to say?

God is in our fear. God is with us when we are afraid, and there is a fine line between awe and fear, especially in Hebrew. One of my favorite Kai Miller stories is when he told Adam, who was laughing at something else when it was time to give thanks for dinner, "Don't joke with God." And I am sure that Adam didn't, but if he did, I don't think his fear would have been the same as Elijah's fear of

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Ahab. Elijah stands in awe of the God of all creation. He is afraid of Ahab, because he doesn't want to die. He is not yet willing to meet God face-to-face. For now, angels, words and voices are enough.

To me, one of the truly disturbing lines in this story is, "But he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a solitary broom tree." The next sentence is more disturbing, because Scripture says that Elijah asks that he may die. How does one go from being prophetic to being suicidal? Fear. How does one go from speaking truth to power to feeling isolated, more isolated than a solitary broom tree? Despair. It is not that he doesn't trust God. He is afraid of Ahab, and now, he knows enough to be even more afraid of Jezebel.

Remember Jezebel? She is the one who orchestrated Naboth's execution so that Ahab could have a vineyard. There are parallels between that story and this one. In the story of Naboth's vineyard, Ahab would rather sleep than eat or drink, which is the same problem that Elijah has in this story. In the story of Naboth's vineyard, Jezebel helps Ahab to see beyond the circumstance in which he finds himself. Beneath a solitary broom tree, an angel visits Elijah and says, "Get up and eat," and when he does, everything changes.

Change comes quickly---during the course of a day---and with change comes hope and fear. Sometimes the change that comes is drastic. It practically restructures our DNA. Yes, God is with us every moment of every day. Life is sacred. Every day is a gift, but I am completely convinced that all days are not created equally because of what happens or what is celebrated or what is remembered. Obvious examples are the events that are written on to the calendar at the beginning of the year: Christmas, Easter, Mother's Day, Father's Day, the University of Alabama's football schedule. Other memorable experiences just happen, like when you wake up in the morning and one amazing thing happens after another, and then, by bedtime, you find yourself giving thanks to God for your amazing

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life. Bad news may come just as quickly. Something tragic happens---and often it takes only one tragedy---and you know your life has changed forever and not for the better.

Change, for better or for worse, brings about changes in perception and self-perception. Listen to what human beings say to each other---listen to what you say to yourself---when good things happen or tragedy strikes. Oh, how wonderful! I am happy for you (and envious of you). Or, oh, no, I am sorry. I am so sorry. I feel helpless, because I don't know how to help. Maybe there is nothing for me to do? When all is well, I feel better about myself. When all is not, I feel worse. No, it shouldn't be that way, but more times than not, it is.

Change, however drastic, should not be feared, because God is in change. From the beginning of time, the world has evolved, and if the world evolves, it is safe to say you and I do, too, or should be evolving if we are not. Our faith tradition celebrates that we are works in progress, that God always is fashioning us in faith. We are reformed and always being reformed according to the Word of God. God transforms us, and through us, God is transforming the world. Now that is Gospel, and the Gospel is bold, beautiful and prophetic!

It also is scary, because with change comes uncertainty, and with uncertainty, fear of the unknown. Like God is in fear, God also is in doubt and despair. God journeys with Elijah in the wilderness. God sits with Elijah beneath a solitary broom tree. Elijah forgets that God is there---that is what despair is, forgetting that God is there or not trusting God to be God---but God does not forget where Elijah is. God sends an angel to bake cakes and fill jars of water, and Elijah is not able to hear God's voice until his hunger and thirst are satisfied.

God provides a table in the wilderness for Elijah to feast. God gives Elijah the strength to journey another 40 days. God gives him words, words of the Lord, a question that has to be answered: "What are you doing here, Elijah?" Ever ask yourself that question? What am I doing here? If you do,

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how does God respond? In this story, God asks the question, not Elijah, and Elijah says, “I have been very zealous for the Lord, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away.” God must like this question, and Elijah must like his answer, because, they repeat this litany at the end of the story.

Between then and now, Elijah looks for God in the places he expects to find God---in wind, earthquakes and fires---but God is not there. When Elijah gives up, when he stops and listens to a still small voice, when he wraps his face in his mantle and goes and stands in front of the cave entrance, God comes to him. Anne Lamott, who, in my mind, has as much to offer the church as any living writer, understands that this is how God works. She confesses, “I do not understand the mystery of grace--- only that it meets us where we are but does not leave us where it found us.” She speaks from experience, and so will Elijah.

The story concludes with God saying to Elijah, “Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus.” Please note that Elijah travels this road well-before Paul does, and God protects and provides for him. Only God knows what Elijah was thinking before he receives Jezebel’s letter at the beginning of the story. Whatever it is must change drastically after receiving the queen’s message. Again, only God knows, and only God knowing is enough.

A story that caught my attention this past week is about a man, who owned a gas station in Mentor, MN, and his daughter, who was working at the station on Friday. When Wes Michaels and daughter Heidi woke up on Friday morning, the plan was to celebrate Wes’ birthday, but there was a tragic twist in the plot. A tornado came through that small town, devastating everything in its path. When Wes saw it coming toward the gas station, he told his daughter step into the cooler, and she did. When the tornado hit and the debris started falling, Wes laid on top of Heidi, protecting her from the

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storm. Suddenly, a birthday celebration turned into funeral preparation. Heidi survived. Her father did not.

God does the same thing for Israel through the prophets and for us in Jesus Christ. In Jesus Christ, God gives us strength to speak truth to power and comforts us when we are afraid. Understanding that change comes quickly and that being prophetic is not enough, God becomes flesh and dwells among us in the person and work of Jesus Christ. In Jesus Christ, God prepares a table in the wilderness where bread and wine are shared. God prepares a table in the wilderness through which you and I journey. When sin and death had scarred the world, when the tornado was coming, God inhabited a body and protected us from the storm for now and forever so that God may be glorified. Only God knows why human beings suffer in the ways that they do. Only God knows why there is grace on both sides of suffering and in between, and only God knowing is enough. To the God of all grace, who calls you to share God's eternal glory in union with Christ, be the power forever! Amen.

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