

1Kings19:9-18: Matthew 14:22-36

Down and out?

Have you ever had enough with the Christian thing, been ready to hand in your badge, and not come in next week. Perhaps you've wanted to leave God your resignation note on the altar one Sunday, after it got too hard, for too long, and he didn't seem to be doing much to change the situation? That's how Elijah felt in this passage.

He'd recently had a showdown with the prophets of Baal on Mt Carmel. The confrontation was not just about the prophets of another God, Elijah had spoken truth to power: to the King and Queen of Israel who should have been God's ambassadors but were working for the enemy. Ahab's wife Jezebel was a foreign Princess who worshipped Baal. She encouraged her husband to support her new priesthood, and then set about killing the other religious leaders. The Israelites had followed in their king's footsteps, walking away from the God who had rescued them from Egypt. They forgot the expectations Yahweh had of them.

At Mt Carmel, Yahweh had been seen to be the true, and powerful God, and faced with the hard evidence the people had renewed their allegiance. In response, God had broken a 3.5yr drought. Spectacular. Answers to prayer don't get much more dramatic than that.

Afterwards Elijah has an angry king and an queen on his hands. Jezebel sends a message...

"May the gods deal with me, be it ever so severely, if by this time tomorrow I do not make your life like that of one of those priests you killed."

Elijah has a clear picture in his head. He heads for the hills. As courageous as he was on Mt Carmel taunting powerless Baal, now he is filled with fear, and he is spent. He finds a safe place to hide under a tree,

"Take my life," he says in miserable humility "I am no better than my ancestors."

The Lord is still watching over him, he knows his reserves are out. He sends an angel to feed Elijah so he can continue his journey.

He travels for forty days and nights and arrives at a cave at Mt Horeb and rests. It's a significant place. It's the place Moses saw the burning bush, the same place he hit the rock and water came out. Do you know it's other name? It's Mt Sinai, the place the Israelites received the Law. It's the place Moses was allowed to see the Lord as he passed by. As he did for Moses, the Lord comes near to his new servant.

Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake came a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper. When Elijah heard it, he pulled his cloak over his face and went out and stood at the mouth of the cave.

Then the Lord speaks...the words come from the Father who provided his food and water for his servant...

"What are you doing here, Elijah?"

Elijah answers.

"I've been working my heart out for you, Boss. The people of Israel have abandoned your covenant, destroyed the places of worship, and murdered your prophets. I'm the only one left, and now they're trying to kill me!"

Can you hear his exhaustion? He has the weight of the world on his shoulders. He's done with work and life. Remember his words back down the road?

I've had enough, end it now.

He's more than depressed, he has no hope left, and no energy to persevere. He's suicidal.

He says there are no prophets left serving God. He's overstating the situation because he's overwhelmed, but at Mt Carmel he said the same thing - I'm the only one left. WE know from ch 18 that Obadiah was a devout believer in the Lord who had taken a hundred prophets and hidden them in two caves. Perhaps Elijah didn't know about this, but perhaps part of his problem is that he was a little OVER zealous, and had lost some perspective.

It can happen when we get caught up in the things immediately affecting us, and we miss what else God is doing a little further away. Nevertheless, the walls have come in on Elijah, he's not in a good way.

God's response is interesting. He doesn't speak out of the whirlwind or the earthquake showing his awesome power and dominating the scene. He doesn't speak out of the fire to cleanse the overstated words of the prophet and restore his plans and purposes.

He speaks in a whisper. And so Elijah is not terrified. The whisper speaks to his fear, to his sadness, to his grief, he wraps his cloak around him and comes to the mouth of the cave. It's a moment of invitation and a response of trust.

But the Lord doesn't let Elijah wallow in self pity. He gives him instructions - go back to work, I have things for you to do.

Go back the way you came... When you get to Damascus, anoint Hazael king over Aram and Jehu son of Nimshi king over Israel, and anoint Elisha...to succeed you as prophet. Jehu will put to death any who escape the sword of Hazael, and Elisha will put to death any who escape the sword of Jehu.

The Lord has plans to keep moving, he is not as Elijah feared, inactive. There are new Kings to put in place and justice to be enacted, Elijah is invited to find meaning and purpose in his work again. The Lord responds to Elijah's own needs too, he is not unconcerned about the personal cost of faithful ministry. A new prophet will be anointed to ease Elijah's heavy burden.

(It's also a gentle rebuke. A reminder that Elijah is incorrect to think he is indispensable. God tells us he has at least seven thousand in Israel whose knees have not bowed to Baal).

What can we hear from this passage?

This chapter is a glimpse of a close relationship between God and one of his workers.

First the experience of Elijah is a snapshot of reality. Elijah reminds us of the normality of the human situation and the importance of self-care. We are vulnerable and mortal, we succumb to pressures, we stumble, we lose hope, we become overwhelmed and we can lose our grip. Even the best of us.

We may not have the tasks he does, but our lives contain as many extreme ups and downs, our stresses wear us down as much as Elijah's brought him to breaking point. It's not a sin to be depressed, to come to the place where we cannot go on. It's often the result of a combination of circumstances, experiences, external stress, and many other factors.

We can also see the kindness of God. God didn't give a lecture about faithfulness. He didn't make a list of things Elijah could be thankful for. He didn't ignore Elijah's situation but he didn't pander to it either. He gave him respite in the wilderness, far from the bad guys. He fed him with kindness, and roused him from his sleep to give him the nourishment he needed but felt unable to find for himself.

He enabled him to travel out of harms way to a special place. He sent birds and angels to care for him, then met with him personally. He spoke gently, gave him the opportunity to get everything off his chest in words of passion and pain, without interrupting him, then responded with words of hope and purpose, and provided a successor.

Next, this story reminds us to regain our perspective in the company of God, whose plans will come to pass. When we don't include the presence of God in our calculations, we misread our situation, we become overwhelmed and the task seems impossible. Then we REALLY start to sink.

Including God may not change the fact that storms rage - but with Jesus in the boat, with him calling us out on the water, we can impossibly walk on the water and navigate the tempest. With God's grace, presence and provision in our list of resources we can journey through the valley of the shadow of death and out the other side. What seems a one-way, lonely path becomes a broader scene with new roads and other companions.

But, our faith must be anchored in God himself. Our motivation, our will, our energy, our zeal in themselves will eventually leave us empty, flat and exhausted.

Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall;

but those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength.

They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary,

they will walk and not be faint (Isaiah 40:30-31)

What can we learn about how God communicates? Let's be honest, we'd like flashes of lightning when God speaks to us. THAT we can hear clearly. It doesn't demand much activity on our part, but it's very Almighty.

Sometimes God does give us a neon sign. But he isn't performing for our demands. He speaks in the ways that he deems best, not always in a way that we expect. Elijah would perhaps have liked some more of the performance of God at Mt Carmel when he got to Mt Horeb, the sort of show to play to his own indignation at how woeful the world had become and how tough it is being godly these days - he might have liked to hear God's voice boom out of the storm. But he actually needed to slow the pace, take a breath and listen quietly.

We like running to a script, but life isn't like that. And certainly God is not like that. He is indescribable, unfathomable...

He is a God who dwells in a high and holy place, but also lives with those who are broken and humble in spirit. He lives with them to restore their courage and revive their spirit (Isaiah 57:15)

God is the Almighty who sends fire on Mt Carmel, AND the one who whispers in the silence.

Elijah was called to follow God in a particular way, with particular tasks in his time and place in history. It wasn't easy: he had setbacks, he was not preserved from drought - he suffered what the people suffered; he had doubts, he was afraid. He also kept going, he was faithful in difficult situations, he kept coming back to God, he kept the communication open and listened when God spoke, he took the help that was given to him, he persevered. Elijah had a frustrating job, God let him express his angst but directed him so that he would not give in to the frustrations, and the Lord enabled him to continue.

I trust that you will take time seek out God. That you will listen to him amidst the pressures, whether he speaks loudly or softly. That you'll discern his voice above your own, above the voices of others, and follow his direction as you are able, in the place he has given you to serve him. Amidst our disasters, God continues to work out his plans and invites us to join him.

If you find yourself holed up in a cave like Elijah, crying out 'I can't go on! The world's gone to the pack! Find someone else!' Remember you are not alone in this experience among God's people. Take time out with God, circumstances may not alter, but we will be refreshed and renewed, and reminded that we do not travel alone.

Praise God for his grace and mercy to us in our time of need.