

July 13, 2014

Psalm 13

1 Kings 19:8-16

Elijah: From Mt Carmel to Mt Horeb

Against my better judgment, I finally saw the movie, Gravity. I didn't want to see the movie. Not because I don't like Sandra Bullock or George Clooney, but because I don't really like movies where people are floating in space and running out of oxygen. And the previews showed that that's what the movie was mostly about. It was about people floating in space, running out of oxygen. Just the thought of it makes me really, really anxious. And I am anxious enough about life as it is, so why would I want to spend an couple extra hours being even more anxious? But everyone was saying how good it was and I thought maybe it would be good for me and give me some perspective. After all, I'm not drifting in space and I have plenty of oxygen to breathe: I do have some things going for me. So, I saw the movie. And yes, I was very anxious through the whole thing, but the movie was also about deeper human anxiety. The fear that all is lost. The hopelessness that nothing matters. The deep despair that life isn't worth it anymore.

That deep despair is where we begin with Elijah today. And while he is not drifting in the void of space, he is drifting in the void of the wilderness. He is alone. He has no friends. He has no community. He is cut off from humanity. He is alone and he is hopeless and suicidal. And deeply disappointed. He is alone. All his words as a prophet have meant nothing. All his miracles have meant nothing. Everything he has done to demonstrate the power of God, none of it has changed anything. The powers that be are still in control. And they are still hunting him down to kill him. Elijah is all alone and all is lost.

Despair is what Elijah feels. He is on the run again from King Ahab and Queen Jezebel. And he resents it. Because he shouldn't have to be running again. He, the prophet of the Lord, shouldn't have to be running like a terrified rabbit because he, the prophet of the Lord had just done something spectacular. He, Elijah, had brought down the fire and fury of the Lord God of Israel upon the pagan god, Baal. He had defeated the idol worshippers. He had won victory for the Lord. He should be basking in his triumph.

On Mt Carmel, it had been quite the showdown. Elijah versus the priests of Baal. And all of Israel had gathered to see it. First, Baal's priests had set up their altar and sacrificed their bull. Then they had called on their god to send down fire to consume their offering. Their priests had prayed and pleaded. They had thrown their arms heavenward for hours and hours. But nothing had happened. Then they had cut their bodies with knives and bled and bled. But still nothing had happened. "Perhaps Baal is on vacation," Elijah said. "Or maybe he is napping. Or maybe he has stepped away from his desk. Maybe if you leave your number, he'll call you back."

Then it was Elijah's turn. He made his altar and positioned the wood. For added drama, he had them dump water over it the wood and the animal carcass and the altar itself. And then he had them do it again. And then he had them do it again. Three times they soaked everything with water. Then Elijah prayed, "O God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, answer me, so that this people may know that you are God." And it was like Charleton Heston had spoken the words himself. Lightning shot down from the sky and a massive fire consumed not only the offering

but the altar and the wood and the dust and even the water it had been saturated in. And the people of Israel fell to their knees. And they confessed that the Lord God of Israel was their God and that they would serve him. And then Elijah, full of the fire of the Lord, killed every priest and prophet of Baal who was there, all 450 of them. And then the rain clouds rolled in. And water fell from the sky. And the drought that had afflicted the land came to an end.

If there ever was a good day in the life of a prophet, you'd think this would be that day. God answered your prayers. You called down fire from the sky. You caused rain to come and break the drought. The people turned away from their false idols. Because you produced spectacular proof that your God was in charge. You defeated your enemies and put them to the sword. With your zeal, you won victory for the Lord. This kind of day has to be a good day for a prophet.

And yet, just a moment later, we find Elijah lying under a bush in the wilderness, wishing that he would die. He is hopeless. He is full of despair. He cannot go on with life. Even though he was just a part of an amazing displays of God's power. Even though he won the day, by

wiping out the priests of Baal and returning Israel to the Lord their God. In spite of all of that, Elijah can't go on. Because somehow, in spite of everything, things have not changed. Evil is still in control. Ahab and Jezebel still want to destroy him. And he is still a prophet in the wilderness. Adrift and alone. In that wilderness, God meets his burned-out prophet. And God sends food and drink and coaxes Elijah to Mt Horeb for a little rest and recovery.

Mt Horeb is a mountain way on the other side of the wilderness. It's a journey of 40 days and 40 nights. Why go from one mountain, Mt. Carmel to another mountain, Mt Horeb, which is at the edge of the earth? Because Mt Horeb is not just any mountain. It's THE mountain. It is the mountain of the Lord. Otherwise known as Mt Sinai. It's the mountain where God appeared to Moses in the burning bush. It's the mountain where God where God gave Moses the Ten Commandments after freeing Israel from slavery in Egypt. This mountain, Mt. Horeb, was the mountain of covenant, THE mountain of fire and flame. The stage seems set for some fireworks between Elijah and God.

But fire is not what God has planned. There has been enough fire. Enough scorched earth. Enough zealous rage. Elijah's spirit is burned up. So God invites Elijah to talk about it. God asks him, What are you doing here, Elijah? It's not a trick question. Or an angry question. Or the question of a god irritated with his prophet. What are YOU doing here? No, it sounds to me like the question of a God who is genuinely concerned about his servant. What are you doing here? What's going on, Elijah? Why have you come? What has brought you to this point? Why are you so full of despair? What are you doing here?

It seems to me like a very deep question, a question that reflects off our own spirits and calls for some introspection. What are you doing here?

We could stay with that question ourselves for quite some time. We could turn the question over and over in our minds—What are we doing here at this point in our lives? But Elijah doesn't need time to reflect on the question. He knows how he feels. He knows his own despair: 'I have been very zealous for the Lord; but your people have screwed everything up. And no matter what I do, nothing changes. Nothing I do matters. I am going to die out here and I am all alone in this.'

Elijah says: I have been very zealous for the Lord, and yet, I am all alone. That's the problem for Elijah. He has been very zealous and yet he is all alone. Elijah had taken a stand and risked his life. Because of his zeal and his passion, he had spoken harsh words and issued angry words of judgment. Because of his zeal, he had murdered 450 pagan priests. For God's sake. He had murdered people, for God's sake. For the sake of the zeal he felt for the Lord.

And now he feels all alone. Elijah is disappointed and angry. With the world. And Elijah feels disappointed with God. All he had said. All he had done. All that had happened, and he felt alone. He felt God had abandoned him. He had been zealous for the Lord, but all it had gotten him was a death sentence and a one-way ticket out of town. All of that zeal had been for nothing. Maybe you know something about that kind of despair.

God knows something about it and God has something to offer Elijah and us in our moments when we feel lost and abandoned. The first thing God does is let Elijah talk. He lets Elijah say what's on his heart and be brutally honest about it. Have you ever been brutally honest with God?

Have you ever told God that you are angry? Or that you are disappointed? That you wish that God hadn't let you down? What would it be like if you could? What if God could take your honesty, because God can. Just like God lets Elijah feel how he feels, God lets us feel how we feel too.

After Elijah has had time to vent, then God responds. God offers Elijah another way to be. See, Elijah's life as God's prophet had been full of drama: droughts and lightning and fire, murderous plots, quick escapes. Elijah's experience of God had been one of tumult and uproar and conflict. But now Elijah needs to know a different side of God. That God is not just a God of earthquake and wind and fire. God is also a God of stillness. A God who whispers in a small voice. God isn't all about drama and conflict. That's not what a good relationship is based on. Not between God and Elijah and not between God and the people of Israel. Being zealous isn't enough.<sup>1</sup> Earthquakes and fires and flashy signs of power are not enough. Real relationship, real love takes patience. And commitment. And a willingness to learn over the long-haul how to be

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<sup>1</sup> See Dini Lewittes, "God in the Silence", [Beliefnet.com](http://Beliefnet.com)

different than the noisy, conflicted world around us. This isn't reality TV. This is faith. And it is a long term relationship in which we learn how to be still and listen through the racket and the drama of the world for the voice of God that says, you are not alone. What you are doing, for God's sake, matters. For God's sake, you matter.

God shows Elijah that he is not alone. And his life is worth living. And that he is still the prophet of the Lord. He still has a job to do. There is still a world that needs his abilities. There are still kings for him to appoint. There are still successors for him to name. Elijah still has work to do. He has purpose within God's purpose. As do we all. And there are times when we might despair. We might feel lost. We might feel abandoned in the wilderness. But God never leaves us alone. Even in the wilderness, God is with us, preparing us. Shaping us for the work that we have to do.

Here, together, we can be honest with God. We can build on that relationship with God. And we listen together for God's still, small voice. For the God who loves us more than we can fathom, who calls us deeper and deeper into communion. Whose great signs are not just

grandiose spectacles. But patient presence. Think of our most powerful signs of God's love: the silent cross and the empty grave. Thus says the Lord your God, "I am Emmanuel, God with you. I'm not giving up on you. You are not alone. You will never be alone. So keep doing what you do for God's sake. Don't despair. Work in the garden, drive Meals on Wheels, listen to a neighbor, welcome a child: that's what matters. That's what makes all the difference in the world."

In the quiet, in the silence, listen. What message from God do you hear?—write it on the doves