

Luke 8:26-39b
St. Andrew's, Nogales

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Poor Elijah. He sure is feeling sorry for himself up on Mount Horeb, also known as Mt. Sinai, the same mountain where Moses encountered God as he was leading the Hebrew people out of slavery in Egypt.

Elijah has been on a serious roller coaster ride as a prophet of God and he's currently in hiding up on that sacred mountain.

Let me give you a little background to Elijah's predicament.

Under the famous King David and later his son Solomon all the tribes of Israel were part of a single kingdom, but after King Solomon's death the northern tribes split off and set up a separate kingdom, called Israel, with its capital at Samaria.

Only two tribes remained in the southern kingdom, which became known as Judah with Jerusalem continuing as its capital.

The two kingdoms were sometimes friends and sometimes enemies for about 200 years until the northern kingdom fell to the Syrians, but that's another story.

Elijah lived in the northern kingdom of Israel during the 9th century before Christ at the time King Ahab ruled. Now King Ahab had married Jezebel, a name many of you may be familiar with. She was the daughter of a Phoenician king and Ahab married her in order to form an alliance with the Phoenicians. And what got Elijah worked up was that King Ahab allowed his people to worship of the God of Jezebel's people, the storm God, known as Baal.

So Elijah challenged the prophets of Baal, some 450 of them, to a showdown on Mount Carmel, to decide whether YHWH or Baal was the true God of Israel. Elijah publicly mocked the prophets of Baal, won the contest and then led his followers to slay all the prophets of Baal (I won't go into the gory details here).

Elijah was feeling pretty confident about that triumph, but, as might be expected, Queen Jezebel was not happy that the god of her people had been publicly humiliated and his prophets killed. Queen Jezebel threatens Elijah's life, he becomes persona non grata, and runs south into Israel and then further on into the wilderness. He gets so disheartened while hiding out in the wilderness that he hits a real low, begins to have doubts, and even asks God to let him die.

But God does not abandon Elijah. He sends an angel to feed him so that he has strength to continue on his long journey to Horeb, that sacred mountain. He climbs up the mountain and hides in a cave there, where we find him questioning and complaining that he alone is left and that people are seeking his life to take it away. Elijah has lost his prophetic voice and nerve and he's a pretty miserable sight.

We might just want to say to him “get over it”, but God doesn’t approach him that way. So how does God deal with a prophet who has lost his nerve?

God does not abandon Elijah. Remember that God watches over him on his journey and an angel feeds him so that he has strength to travel far into the wilderness to that sacred mountain.

And there on the mountain God comes to Elijah in a different way, not in a dramatic miraculous moment like in the contest on Mt. Carmel, and certainly not in a way that Elijah was used to or was expecting.

Instead God comes to him in the silence, or a whisper, as the word used in Hebrew can also be translated.

God knows there’s a future for Elijah and for Israel and God sends Elijah back to work, telling him to go to Damascus and anoint a new king. And Jezebel dies and Elijah eventually calls another prophet named Elisha.

We need to remember that Elijah was a political and religious dissenter for his time and he learned that it was not always easy to interpret God’s call, nor was it easy to serve God when called upon to challenge the powers that be.

God works in many and mysterious ways and through all kinds of people in many walks of life and continues to do so today. So the question arises as to how God calls us here in our day and time.

When we sometimes lose our connection to God and may be ready to give up on ourselves and our ministries as Christians we need to remember that God continues to provide for us.

But God’s presence is not always obvious to us. We may have preconceptions about how God communicates to us, just like Elijah did. Elijah, who had experienced God in many powerful ways, comes to find God in the silence.

For others of us, used to finding God in the silence, we may be surprised to find God in a much more dramatic moment.

A call from God can also be a challenge to each of us. We may at times need to step back from our daily routine, and from our culturally accepted assumptions, to hear God’s call to us. That call may be to do more of what we are doing, or to resist certain pressures on us and move in a different direction, or it may be a call to take an unpopular stand.

Taking an unpopular stand comes to mind, as I’ve been reading a book by Morris Dees, a lawyer who for decades has fought discrimination against blacks and other minorities as well as poor people of any race facing serious sentences and unable to afford good legal help. He was raised a Southern Baptist who, as a young adult Sunday School teacher, began to take the New Testament to heart, and over time reached the point where he has risked his life fighting for equal rights for all.

When Dees was a young adult Sunday School teacher some words from the letter of First John started to get to him, “If a man say I love God, and hateth his brother, he is a liar: for he who loveth not his brother whom he hath seen, how can he love God whom he hath not seen?”

How are the words of our Savior Jesus Christ and the writers of the letters preserved in our Bible challenging us here at St. Andrew’s? How are we sharing and spreading the good news of God’s love and forgiveness in this place and in our time?

I think of the Gerasene man who was tormented by so many demons he had no name but Legion. Jesus speaks to the demons and they are forced to leave the man and he is cured of what today we would call a very serious mental illness.

The man, now clothed and in his right mind, wants to go with Jesus, but rather than encourage the man to follow him, Jesus asks him to return to his home and declare how much God has done for him. And the man goes and proclaims throughout the city how much Jesus has done for him. By staying there among the people who knew him in his former state, his testimony to the healing power of God’s love would have been extremely powerful.

The bottom line is this: We are called to tell people here in our communities the good news of Jesus and God’s love in our own lives, and then invite them to join us in serving others.

Amen.