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Unexpected, God
I Kings 19 vs 4-18

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Did that story of Elijah resonate with you?

Have you at times felt called to do something, and found that things did not turn out as you expect?

At times you thought you understood God, only to have events in life, leave you questioning?

Have you had times when you were sure that God was answering your prayer,

And times that prayers seem to bounce off the ceiling and you wonder if God can hear or answer?

Although I have had profound experiences of God's presence and of God's silence.

I have found it is easier to trust God is leading when things are going well, than when cancer is diagnosed, or loved ones die, or when relationships are falling apart.

If this sounds like your walk of faith, take heart, because scripture is full of such stories

Throughout scripture God continues to reassure us that God will never leave nor forsake us.

That God with us in the good times, but also in the difficult times that WILL COME

Stories of real people, who came to a profound understanding of God in their real lives

And that there are times when even the most faithful need to be reminded God is with us.

We turned to one such story about Elijah this morning.

Elijah was called by God to conduct a show down with Baal.

Resulting in a spectacular display on the mountain top revealing God's power for all who cared to see.

It should have been the high point in Elijah's career, vindication of Elijah's trust in God, but it was not

Elijah had thought that when Baal did not show up, when the prophets of Baal were killed,

that he would usher in a new era of faithfulness to God for all Israelites,

But it seemed like nothing had changed. Like Elijah had tried that and failed,

The people did not rise up against Jezebel or her worship of Baal,

Instead enraged, Jezebel took action to have Elijah killed, and no one seemed ready to intervene.

So Elijah ran for his life into the wilderness outside the promised land.

The wilderness is a place where people are tested, where they are left open to the elements

And more dependent on God. As such wilderness experiences challenge and change people

Out of steam, out of hope or vision for a future, Elijah prayed for death.

God was with Elijah even as he ran, even as he awaited death.

God provided food and provision for Elijah, even though Elijah would use it to run further away

After 40 days he found himself in a cave near the top of a Mountain

And huddled in that cave, weighed down by his sense of failure, Elijah heard God's voice,

"What are you doing here Elijah?" (I think God knew what about you?)

It seems that God is wondering why his prophet is not where he should be, not doing prophetic things.

Elijah's answer came from his hurt deep within.

He said something like "I have spent my life and energy serving you Lord, in case you missed it, the people of Israel no longer live according to the covenant they made with you

They have ruined places of worship to you and killed those who serve you.....AND They want to kill me. I am all alone, what I do makes no difference. There is no one else left, I have done my best."

Have you ever thought that? Felt discouraged and wondered what's the point in doing anything?

If so then you may resonate with the next part too...Elijah continued:

"I am here hiding in a cave, not because I want to be, but because they will kill me if I go back...and it looks like you will let it happen God!"

Wow, that is more than discouragement, it is anger with God....

But it seems that God is not quick with lightning strikes on impertinent and disrespectful prophets,

But notice, God does not justify what God is doing, does not strike Elijah, instead God answered

Elijah's unspoken desire for God to be present in a way he could understand.

God commanded Elijah to go out of the cave ...(But it doesn't seem that Elijah went out)

There was a hurricane forced wind, surely this was the wind of God....

BUT God was not specially present in the wind,
 Nor was God's presence specially in the earthquake
 Unlike the burning bush, God was not specially present in fire.
 But then there was silence, it was the stillness, the silence, that brought Elijah from the cave.
 Perhaps he came out wondering if God had left him alone in anger,
 But it was in this silence, this stillness, that Elijah knew God's presence.....
 He covered his face in reverence of God, there sheltered in God's embrace,
 Elijah answered God's question again. Just as he had before.
 But although none of the circumstances had changed, although facts, excuses, danger remained,
 Something had changed for Elijah.
 Again God did not explain away the problems, did not justify God's inaction or action.
 Instead he sent Elijah back, to anoint kings and prophets, to lead the community of faith.
 In other words, to be the prophet he was called to be, to do what he was called to do,
 Regardless of whether he understood or not,
 Elijah did as God commanded,
 And as he did he found that he had been wrong, his vision and understanding limited
 He found that his actions were not pointless, Nor was the situation in Israel hopeless
 There were thousands who remained faithful to the living God,
 waiting for God's word to come to them through Elijah,
 There was a successor to Elijah's prophetic ministry waiting to be mentored by Elijah.
 To be ready to take over Elijah's ministry when the time was right
 Far from being absent or having given up,
 God was continuing to work behind the scenes,
 Using hands and feet of ordinary people, people like you and me, Elijah or Paul
 Trusting that Through them God could make a difference in the world, in people.
 Who would follow God's way in the world, trusting in the shepherd, in good times and difficult.
 The truth of the journey of faith is that it will not all be easy.
 Fear, disappointment, anger and loss can blind us to the ways God is working in and around us.
 This may lead us to believe that either God is not longer with us, what we do makes no difference,
 Is regardless of how things may look to us, feel in us, God does not give up on us or in our world.
 In fact people of faith of all times have experienced ups and downs of faith---Elijah, King David, the
 early church, Even Jesus cried "my God, my God why have you abandoned me?"
 Because our faith is a lived reality, our journey of faith is affected by situations in our lives
 We can be discouraged when things do not turn out the way we expect.
 But not perceiving God's presence with us does not mean that God has abandon us,
 We are not alone, God is with us, often working in ways we may never perceive,
 What we can learn from Elijah and other in scripture is
 1. ups and downs are part of faith journey.
 To often we think of maturing in faith as moving from valley to mountaintop...
 Being faithful is often less like climbing a ladder and more like snakes and ladders.
 We trust more in God's faithfulness than in our appearance of success.
 2. We are never beyond the reach of God: God continued to provide for Elijah even when Elijah was
 running away from God.
 Fear, sleep, wilderness, long journey, complaining, running from vocation, God was there.
 In fact in what seemed like running away, in God's grace was a journey to God led by God.
 In life, in good times, in difficult time, in death, in life beyond death, God is with us.
 3. Elijah reacted to the situation, but was not defined by running away,
 Instead, as he responded to God in a new way, he was defined by his trust in God's faithfulness.
 Although it looked bad for Elijah for a while, Elijah still had a future, a ministry, a job to do.

No matter where we are in life, God continues to provide for us, and calls us to respond.
Ups and downs do not just happen to individuals, David's psalm has been repeated by congregations of God's people for over 3,000 years, the early church also at times were discouraged by persecution and loss, by a lack of understanding what God was doing.
As a congregation we find ourselves once again in transition, in a time of upheaval,
Such times can be like wilderness times, where we feel like we are wandering again,
Where we feel we are vulnerable, defined by loss or disappointment,
Remember wilderness times are also times we are more dependent on God for the journey ,
Wilderness times are not defined by a clock or calendar, but are God times "40" times.
In such times, in God's grace, we are on a journey to God, and to more faithfulness in God.
Unfortunately in such times there is a strong temptation to act on our disappointment,
To give up since it seems that our actions are getting us nowhere
Or to act on the fear that there is no longer a future for us as a congregation.
But we follow the one who cried my God why have you forsaken me, then followed God to a cross,
And resurrection, new life and hope for the world.
Just as God continued to be present with Elijah, providing for journey through hands of others, and continued using Elijah to speak God's word, and the faith of others to encourage Elijah,
God can use each of us in this time, use our words and actions, our prayers and faith
To move toward the future God has in store.
There is much work for us to do together. God is already preparing a way forward.
Searching for a new minister is not taking a step backward,
But is one more step in the journey of faith, and faithfulness for St. Andrew's
It is one more step toward our mission south of Fish Creek and continued strong ministry to all ages and stages in our community,
It is one more step toward the future of ministry in the this neighbourhood, in Calgary, in the world,
So let's take heart, listen for God's voice,
Let's move forward together, confident that God is with us. We are not alone.
God is with us.....