

Sermon 10-9-23 'Doing a New Thing'

Passage: 1 Kings 19:9-18

Where do you go when you are afraid? It is a humbling question, because as adults we don't like to admit that there are times where we feel overwhelmed or frightened. After all, this is London, an elite city full of well-turned out, competent people.

But the chances are, that each of us, will have an attachment to a place that we find ourselves magnetically drawn to in times of immense pressure.

In the days after my father died, I found myself returning to Titchfield Abbey, the ruins on the edge of the village in which I grew up. And psychologically, there was something comforting about being back in that familiar setting. Perhaps it's the same for you. There is something comforting about returning to the scenes of your childhood, or of returning to the destination of a well-loved holiday, or recalling the place where you met your beloved for the first time. Where do you go when you are afraid?

I mention this, because our Bible reading today follows Elijah on exactly this sort of journey, returning to a familiar setting in a season of immense pressure.

Let me just offer now a word or two about the context, to explain how Elijah got here. Ancient Israel had always been a complex political entity. And in the days of Elijah, "Israel" referred to one half of a broken union. Israel was the territory to the north, that now ruled as a separate kingdom to Judah in the south. And Elijah was a prophet called to minister to the northern kingdom of Israel. His task was to call the people back to covenant fidelity with the God of their forefathers. But this task was particularly perilous, because he was ministering in the reign of wicked king Ahab, and his even more wicked queen Jezebel.

What is interesting though, is that our Bible passage today takes place immediately after Elijah's single greatest career highlight. We find Elijah in the days after his famous confrontation with the false prophets, the prophets of Baal. And in a miraculous display of signs and wonders, Elijah wins the day; that is, the God of Israel revealed himself with great power and authority. The people who witnessed it found it compelling, convincing even.

So logically, you would presume that this would be a moment of supreme confidence for Elijah. That he would be riding high on the crest of this wave. But no. Elijah is not in a good place. And even that observation is important. All of us know, or at least should know that what we see on the outside can tell a different story to what is happening on the inside.

So Elijah is not in a good place, and he flees from the wrath of Queen Jezebel. And he runs from the Northern Kingdom of Israel, right to the Southernmost point of the southern kingdom Judah. And from there, God pulls on the heartstrings, and leads Elijah back to a familiar setting. Familiar not just for him, but for all God's people.

And as the readers, we are meant to see in the opening verses of 1 Kings chapter 19, a sort of symmetry; a symmetry that reflects another story in the Bible.

You see, Elijah is retracing the steps of the Israelites in the time of their forefather Moses. Elijah is reconnecting with the journey of Israel when they moved from slavery in Egypt to freedom in the promised land. Elijah, like Moses, is heading to Mount Horeb, the Holy Mountain of God.

And note the literary motifs here: Elijah is miraculously sustained in the wilderness for 40 days with heavenly bread and water, just as the Israelites of old were miraculously sustained for 40 years with heavenly bread and water.

Elijah is being led to Mount Horeb to encounter God, just as Moses, generations before, went to Mount Horeb to encounter God.

And so being reminded of that episode, where Moses met with God face to face on Mount Horeb, in the midst of smoke and flame to receive the ten commandments, we are naturally expecting Elijah to encounter something equally as dramatic. But what do we get.

¹¹ The Lord said, "Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by." 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. ¹² After the earthquake came a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper. ¹³ When Elijah heard it, he pulled his cloak over his face and went out and stood at the mouth of the cave.

There are times in the Christian life, when we can feel tempted to replicate certain experiences, or try to return to particular seasons in life when we thought things were going well. We try and manufacture a sense of spiritual wellbeing by returning to the past. But Elijah is not called to be a Moses. Elijah doesn't meet with God in smoke and flame like his predecessor. Rather, God meets with Elijah in the stillness of a gentle whisper.

You, see, although Elijah had returned to something and somewhere familiar, he was in fact being called to something new.

And here I think is our lesson today; wise leadership is often a matter of discerning the small gentle whisper against the calamitous elements of the storm. All of us face change. Whether that's a new job, new home, new church. And in the midst of that pressure, we can be tempted to return to what is familiar, expecting the same results. But what if God wants us to do a new thing? What if God wants us to listen out for the still, small whisper against the backdrop of the storm? God meets with us in the familiar, because he is gentle and loving, but he leads us forward into new seasons, and new pastures.

Friends, I say this to you knowing that we are all entering a season of change. Whether that's the continuing joys and challenges of parenthood as it is for David and Emma; whether it is the appointment process to find the next vicar here; or whether it is something in your personal life. Can I encourage you to be open to the fact that God might be making space for something new? God might be calling you to discern a still, small whisper against the calamitous elements of the storm.

God meets with us in familiar settings, but he leads us forward, gently, into new things.

May the Lord bless you, and keep you. Amen.