

Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost
Proper 14
Year B

1 Kings 19:4-8
Psalms 34:1-8
Ephesians 4:25 - 5:2
John 6:35, 41-51

Have you ever had a time when, after doing great things and being on top of the world, your world crumbles and all you want to do is curl up under a tree and die? That is where Elijah is in our reading today. In the passages right before this reading from the First Book of Kings, Elijah had challenged the prophets of Baal and defeated them. Hundreds of those prophets were slain and Elijah showed that the God of Israel was the true God. This infuriated the rulers and the queen put out a contract on Elijah's life. In our reading, this prophet of God was running for his life trying to escape the wrath of Jezebel.

Being a prudent man, Elijah first heads south, away from the territory ruled by Ahab and Jezebel. He heads into the wilderness and collapses under a broom tree, a common shade tree in the wilderness of western Asia that is related to the juniper. In his distress, he calls on God to end it all, to let him die. Some might suggest that Elijah was depressed, suffering doubt and despair. While that might be a good diagnosis, there are other issues to be explored.

Throughout the Bible, we see incidents where a prophet or other man of God has escaped into the wilderness for a time of solitude. Whether it was Moses fleeing Egypt after killing an Egyptian taskmaster, or Jesus bringing the disciples away from the crowds for rest, or Jesus Himself seeking solitude after His baptism, the wilderness represents an opportunity to get away from the pressures of life and take time to be with God. It is a place of prayer and a place of rest. The wilderness is anywhere we can go to have time to reflect on all that is happening in our lives and seek God's refreshing strength before we have to go back and face the world.

This past week we celebrated the Feast of the Transfiguration. In this story, we remember that Jesus takes a few of His disciples with Him as He goes up the mountain to meet God. While there, He is visited by Moses and Elijah. These two historical leaders of the Israelites define the totality of the Hebrew Scriptures - the Law and the Prophets. Thus, it is appropriate to take a closer look at these two men, especially as reflected in today's reading.

Both of these men went into the wilderness to escape people who were seeking their lives. Both spent forty days alone with their thoughts, trying to make sense of their lives. And, both of them end up at Mount Horeb, also known as Mount Sinai. We also know that, when he led the Israelites through the wilderness, God provided Moses with bread from heaven and water from a rock. Likewise, God sent an angel with bread and water to strengthen Elijah for his journey to the mountain. Additionally, both have an encounter with God at that mountain - God telling Moses to stand in the cleft while God passes by, and Elijah being told to stand on the mountain while a strong wind blew, an earthquake shook the mountain, fire swept the landscape, and then a sound of sheer silence prevailed. In that silence, Elijah met God.

Where is your wilderness, where can you go to get away to meet God? When I was working at the university, we talked about taking a mental health day - a day off to get away from the pressures of work and recharge our batteries. In Genesis, we read that God rested after the creation. We too need an opportunity to get away, to rest and recharge. Without such breaks, we are susceptible to burnout - physically, emotionally, and spiritually. While a sabbath rest is a good start, we all need a more extended break. Moses and Elijah each took forty days of R & R.

You all know that I say going up to work in the archives is relaxing and refreshing. What I am suggesting here is to not go to more, even different, work, but to get away from everything and tune in to God alone. It can be a retreat, a hike in the woods, or a chance to sit by the lake and watch the sunset. That is what Elijah needed. After his encounter with God, Elijah returned to his work, recruiting Elisha as his assistant, anointing a couple of kings to confront Ahab, and continuing his work as the prophet of God.

Perhaps we should each consider how we can get away - not to some other task or job or even family - but just an opportunity to go into the wilderness of our choice to meet with God. I know Rob is going to ask me when I am going to take my vacation, get my rest. Yes, I know I am terrible at following this advice myself, but I implore you to find that opportunity for you to get away, to find your wilderness of rest. I'm working on that myself. This is God's plan for us - REST!