



Second Sunday after Pentecost

Sermon by Ven Moses Thabethe



Sunday 19 June 2022

READINGS

1 Kings 19: 1-4, 8-15a; Psalm 42; Galatians 3: 23-29; Luke 8: 26-39

Why are you here Elijah? Or what's wrong with Elijah?

At some point in our lives we all go through moments of loneliness, anxiety, or darkness and doubt. In that moment, we may feel pitiful or lost, believing we are alone in our journey – more so, if we have had relative success and consolation leading to that moment. The prophet Elijah must have felt the same way and thought he was the only prophet left. Broken by guilt, despair and probably burnout and fearing for his life, God speaks to him in the still voice, revitalizing him for the work ahead. Our Gospel passage too, echoes the same message that no situation is beyond Jesus' saving power. Even when we can't see the light at the end of the tunnel, God reminds us that he will never leave us. It was Winston Abbott who said: "It is not easy to remember that in the fading light of day... the shadows always point toward the dawn" An apt message for us at St Michael's Bryanston as we remember and celebrate 60 years of the establishment of youth ministry in our Parish. An equally fitting message for all our fathers as we join the rest of the world in celebrating Father's Day.

In November 2007, Forbes Magazine ran a front page with the headline: "Nokia, one billion customers – can anyone catch the cell phone king?" Fast forward 15 years: Nokia has become irrelevant, battered by particularly Apple and Samsung. In 2014 Microsoft bought Nokia and then got rid of the business two years later. What about Kodak the company invented the digital camera, but now is bankrupt. Numerous other companies failed to keep up are now out of the game. I'm supposed to start by making you laugh, but it sounds like this is going in the wrong direction. The only thing funny about it is what on earth does this have to do with Elijah? Well, here's a clue: these companies learnt what Elijah discovered in the reading we heard today. Past success is no guarantee of future results.

Elijah is running for his life. He is exhausted. He lies down and thinks he is better off dead. "I've had enough." Can you relate? Favourite part from a human point of view is, he has a good sleep and a meal, we all need when we are in crisis and running for our lives emotionally, and after food and a rest, he sets off for Mount Horeb where he has this encounter with God that we just heard about. And God speaks to him there and says: what are you doing here Elijah?

Fair question. This is where my point about past success not predicting future results comes in.

Elijah the great prophet. The one who stood for justice in a land of injustice, who challenged King Ahab. Earlier in the first book of Kings it is recorded that Ahab "did more evil in the eyes of the Lord than any of those before him" (1 Kings 16:30). Married to queen Jezebel I know what images come to mind when you hear that name, she was the one who introduced the worship of Baal and she hated God's people, put to death all the prophets she could find.

Now, in the face of cruelty, evil, ungodliness, Elijah had relied on signs and wonders, announcing a drought as God's punishment, raising a dead boy, and ultimately putting to death all the prophets of Baal. Ahab called him "the biggest trouble maker in Israel." A Superhero prophet, if you like! Queen Jezebel wanted to kill Elijah because he had just singlehandedly stood on Mount Carmel 1 prophet of God in a test against 450 prophets of Baal, and with great show and drama, after mocking them all day while they tried to call down fire to burn a sacrifice to Baal, he then took his sacrifice, poured four jars of water 4 times all over the altar, drenched it, and then called down God's fire from heaven to consume the offering. This is not a timid reluctant man. Elijah should be on top of the world - there is no better superhero display of God's power shown through his prophet, but Jezebel wants revenge and immediately he is terrified and flees in fear: and now it's God's turn to ask him:

What are you doing here, Elijah?

I sometimes think of us as individuals and as a church, that is God's question: what are you doing here? Maybe it's just a chance for us to take stock on our journey, maybe it's asked to Elijah with a tone of surprise or disappointment, or anticipation – what are you doing here? Or what are you doing here?

The sign that Elijah is very much missing the point, (and possibly the warning for us) is that Elijah goes into a rant about how hard he's tried and been zealous for the Lord, and the other Israelites have pulled down the altars and turned away and he's the only one left. Can you hear him in the way we speak? Look at what these people have done to this place.. look at how ungodly they are. But I think it's a good question for God to ask and for us to ask – is this where we are called to be, and if so, what are we doing? Now Elijah was about to learn the important lesson God had for him. In his mercy, God said, I'm going to pass before you... and Elijah, the prophet of the signs and wonders and the drought and the fire learns in that encounter as he pulls his mantle over his face and stands at the mouth of the cave, he finds that God is the silent voice. This time, God was not there in the wind or the earthquake, or the fire, because Elijah needed to understand that for God it's not about the drama and the signs, it was about his faithfulness.

For Elijah, that realisation happened in the still, small voice, which some translations have called "the sound of sheer silence." And after that realisation, God recommissions Elijah, he gives him a new vision and a new mission and he says "Now Go." (I have 7000 faithful Israelites who never bowed down to Baal or kissed any idol, so get over your self pity and keep moving).

So today, this isn't the sermon I wanted to preach about the value of the still small voice. Rather, it's the sermon about how easy it is to miss the point. To think that God is doing things here, in this way, because that's the way it's always been, that's the way it's always worked, and, like Nokia and Kodak and Xerox and many others, we are looking the wrong way, focusing on the wrong piece of the puzzle, while not having the vision of God's bigger picture.

This is what Paul was writing about in his letter to the Galatians, that beautiful passage we read where he says that in Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, neither slave or free, neither male or female, because we are all one in Christ Jesus. The Galatians were embroiled in an argument over whether the Gentile followers of Christ were full members of the covenant with Abraham in the way that the Jews were, or whether they first had to be circumcised in accordance with the law. Just like Elijah – focusing on what worked before, but past success does not define present or future experience, and Paul says no, you don't get it, we are no longer imprisoned by the law, because faith has come and set us free. We are all heirs of the covenant, because the covenant wasn't in the act, but in the heart. You're still focusing on the puzzle pieces, when God has already shown us the full and beautiful picture. Don't get stuck.

I've heard people get stuck on the Elijah passage with the message of God in the still small voice – that God is no longer in the wind and the flame. Well, if that is the case, then what was it all about 2 weeks ago when we celebrated Pentecost and God's spirit came to the disciples in wind and flame? We like our comfort zone. We want our experience or our revelation to become definitive, but the message in this event really is the question, the encounter and then the commissioning: What are we doing here? What do we need? How will we encounter God in the way that is most life-giving and liberating? Are we prepared to recognise God in the flame as well as God in the silence? God in the offering as well as in the bread and wine? Or will we always be looking this way, when what God is doing is somewhere out there where I might only glimpse it accidentally out the corner of my eye?

When we speak of the failures of Kodak, Nokia, Blockbuster video decimated by Netflix and those companies, a buzz word in business, leadership and management today is that we live in a vuca world – V-U-C-A. Are you familiar with that term? It's used to describe why the 21st century is so much more challenging than any gone before. Vuca stands for Volatile, Uncertain, Complex and Ambiguous. And the response is vuca leadership: Vision, Understanding, Clarity, Adaptability.

Does this sound new, or does it sound like Elijah's encounter with God?

The chaotic, violent, power hungry, drought tormented, corrupt world of King Ahab and Elijah, was also vuca: volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous. And Christians like Elijah, require vision, understanding, clarity, adaptability.

Our role is to be prophetic, wherever we are – whether preaching on the heights of Mount Carmel or trembling in the cave of Mount Horeb. We are today's Elijahs. We are the prophets proclaiming the truth of God's kingdom breaking through in the face of all evidence to the contrary. Whether in this church, suburb, city, country, world. And not just proclaiming it, but by proclaiming, to partner with God in bringing that kingdom into focus.

Some days we run and hide under a bush in the desert like Elijah, and we throw in the towel, but tomorrow God wakes us and feeds and calls us and we learn to listen. It is often in silence where God changes the conversation. Where God changes OUR conversations. We listen in silence, we hear God's voice, and something new arises. And into this chaos, we speak hope. Into the violence, we speak peace. Into the storm, calm; where there is division and exclusion, we proclaim unity and belonging, where we are imprisoned by our past, we step forth in freedom and faith.

To our young people, I want to quote Pope Francis' message from one of his letters:

“(Christ) is in you, he is with you, and he never abandons you. However far you may wander, he is always there, the Risen One. He calls you and he waits for you to return to him and start over again. When you feel you are growing old out of sorrow, resentment or fear, doubt, or failure, he will always be there to restore your strength and your hope” (Christus Vivit 2)