

St Nicolas Church, Carine-Duncraig
Pentecost + 2, June 19, 2022
1 Kings 19.1-4, 8-15

Let us pray. May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of all our hearts, be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Today's reading from the Old Testament tells us of the prophet Elijah's encounter with God. Perhaps, let's pause for a moment and consider, each of us, what we think it is to encounter God.

In our reading, Elijah describes himself as having been "very zealous for the Lord, the God of hosts." In Elijah's time, the people of Israel no longer offered worship solely to their God; the cult of another, foreign deity, Baal, had been established. This cult was endorsed by the monarchy, and promulgated by Baal's prophets.

Elijah's story is a dramatic one. His ministry begins with the declaration of a drought – perhaps, God's judgement against the Israelites for their disloyalty. Eventually, Elijah comes into violent conflict with his religious opposition. He seeks to demonstrate the power and the reality of Israel's God – to show that the foreign God is no God at all. This is achieved in a dramatic fashion. Elijah challenges the prophets of Baal to call upon his power, which they do – and nothing happens. Then, at Elijah's call, the fire of the God of Israel comes down on the earth, and consumes even stone and water. Elijah wins the acclaim of the people, and he then puts four hundred and fifty of the prophets of Baal to death, killing them in a river bed.

Jezebel, the Queen of Israel, a follower of Baal, is not pleased. She sends a messenger to Elijah – his violence will be reciprocated; she declares that she will have Elijah killed. And so, in today's reading we find Elijah on the lam – running from the authorities. Desperate, afraid for his life.

Elijah has done what he believed he was called to do. His calling is even spelled out by his name – like many figures in the Hebrew Bible, Elijah's name has a direct Hebrew meaning: my God is Jah—; that is, an abbreviation of the sacred personal name of the God of Israel. Elijah's very name declares his unswerving allegiance to God.

Elijah, in the wilderness, comes to despair of his life – he asks God to allow him to die. And God responds by providing food, and drink, provision for a forty day trip to one of the holiest places in the Hebrew tradition: Mount Horeb, where Moses himself encountered God.

We paused, earlier, to consider what it is to encounter God. What do we think it would be for Elijah to encounter God? What might Elijah, this fervent, zealous, lately violent man, expect from an encounter with his Lord?

Our reading tells us:

“Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the LORD”

Perhaps this is the God that Elijah expects: a God of power, of strength, of violence; a God who rends the Earth, a God who asserts dominance.

Our reading continues:

“... but the Lord was not in the wind and after the wind an earthquake”

God isn't in the wind, but perhaps the wind wasn't a great enough sign. Now we have an earthquake – we might picture the hillsides shaking, Elijah struggling to keep his feet. Surely this is Elijah's God.

“... but the LORD was not in the earthquake;
and after the earthquake a fire,”

God wasn't in the earthquake either – but perhaps, again, the sign was not great enough. Now comes a fire, perhaps so huge that it seems to engulf the mountain.

“... but the LORD was not in the fire;
and after the fire a sound of sheer silence.”

God, it seems, isn't to be found in in the fire, or the earthquake, or the wind, or in any other great and terrible sign of violence, power and domination. Elijah instead encounters an unexpected God; a God present in a stark silence.

Actually, and perhaps quite wonderfully, we don't quite know how Elijah encounters God. The Hebrew is hard to interpret: renderings into English range from “stark silence”, to “a still small voice”, “a voice of a light whisper”, “a soft murmuring sound”, or even “a gentle breeze.” I had a go at translating this passage myself, when I was studying Hebrew, and came up with “a sound of a small whisper.”

I wonder how many of us would expect to experience God, to encounter God, in this way? The Roman Catholic theologian James Alison offers us this reflection:

“One can understand what might be meant by zeal exercised on behalf of a God who appears with hurricanes, earthquakes and fires. But what on earth might it mean to be zealous in the service of a still, small voice?”¹

Elijah perhaps expected to find his own zealotry reflected back to him, in his experience of God. It's easy for us to fall into this trap. It's easy for us to expect God to look somewhat like ourselves; maybe a better version of ourselves. Or perhaps we expect God to resemble some other figure from our lives. Sometimes, this can lead to a difficult and negative understanding of God – something that I've experienced myself.

I believe that the story of Elijah helps us to move beyond such understandings of God. It helps us to remember that God is surprising. That God is a mystery. After all, who could have expected that the Word of God would take on flesh, and dwell among us?²

Who could have expected that the Word would be born to a peasant woman, Mary, of no apparent distinction, who by her assent became the Theotokos, the Mother of God? Who could have expected that Jesus, the Messiah, would not be a figure of might and power in the way we might expect, but would instead humbly die upon the Cross, enduring the worst that humanity can do, and in so doing transcend sin and death?

The story of Elijah calls us to be open to growth in our understanding of God. We are called, each of us in our own way, to be theologians – we are called to be drawn into the mystery of God. You might like to read more from the Bible about Elijah. The story of his life begins in 1 Kings 17, and is only a few chapters long – perfect for an hour or two of devotional reading on a winter afternoon.

Each of us encounters God in different ways; perhaps we might see God in the love and care that our neighbours and friends offer to one another; or in our relationships; or in the majesty and wonder of creation. After this service, when we go back out into the world, let us pray that we might, each of us, listen for that sound of silence, for that still small voice, and in so doing open our hearts to encounter with our Lord, and so grow in our lives of faith and discipleship. *Amen.*

¹ James Alison, *Faith beyond Resentment: Fragments Catholic and Gay* (New York: Crossroad, 2001), 30.

² John 1:14