

Meditation: "When Life Gets Hard" 1 Kings 19:1-16

Rev. Hugh D. Reid July 3, 2022

Gracious Holy Spirit, shape and bless the humble and human words I speak and the thoughts feelings and responses of those who hear that you might use our language for your living Word. In Jesus name, Amen.

Sunday June 12th was a real high for me. I was the anniversary speaker at my first pastoral charge. Their first anniversary service in three years. It was wonderful to be with and catch up with people I first served some 35 years ago. Of course, none of us had changed a bit, but the children I had served, who were happy to see my puppet Billy again, were parents now, one of them the Chair of the Board.

That Sunday my puppet Billy met their children. Lunch afterward was followed by visiting a number of people who wanted to but couldn't make the service. To top it all off, on the way home, travelling the scenic rural roads of Southern Ontario, I was able to stop in one of my favourite bakeries, which is always closed on Monday, my day off. And I bought two pies, raspberry and apple. It was a full, rich day of reminiscing and feeling the deep bonds of Christian community.

It didn't take long for life to become real again. I was trying to get to a little gathering for a friend in the congregation dealing with cancer. I was trying to get there from a meeting downtown. It took me over an hour to get out of downtown Toronto. It took me half an hour to move a block. Then on Friday, an email hacker got into my address book somehow. By the way if you get an email from me asking you to buy eight hundred dollars of gift guards because I'm in a meeting. Don't, it's not from me.

I asked my Church administrator to give me a new email password to my church account, which he did and, of course, the password didn't work, and I was locked out of my email account for four days. You know how that feels don't you. It's like a juggler suddenly having his hands tied behind his back with 8 balls in the air.

Ahh that's life, isn't it? You go from highs to lows and sometimes the lows keep on coming. Sometimes the lows are more than an annoyance, sometimes they bring you down and wear you out and suck any enthusiasm for life right out of you.

Maybe that's why this story about Elijah is so popular. It is so human.

Elijah had just come off a real high. He had triumphed over 450 priests of Baal and 400 Priests of Asherah. He had prophesied the end of a drought, and as the heavy rain started pelting down, he was so full of life and energy that he hiked up his robe and ran for miles in front of the chariot of King Ahab a victory parade of one.

What a turn around.

His triumph was no triumph to Jezebel. He had proved nothing to his enemies. He had only invoked their desire for revenge. What seemed a damning testimony to bring down a corrupt and faithless administration, only served to enflame them. His life, let alone his credibility was under attack.

We find him not in the throws of victory but the depths of despair:

1 Kings 19:1b He asks that he might die: It is enough, now, O Lord, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors.”

Do you recognize that place? Have you been there?

Has someone you loved been there?

This post pandemic world has only increased a curve our modern western society was already on. A steep increase in mental and emotional illness, depression, alienation, suicide. The incidence of deep depression and suicide attempts and complete suicide among our youth, university students, is at an all time high. We've lost spiritual resilience in our culture which is no surprise because we've lost the spiritual heart of our culture. All those of us who say, I'm spiritual but not religious, well it turns out we're not so spiritual, we're just hoping for a depth that isn't there. That we'll never find in self-help books or vague feelings, only in truth who is looking for us.

How do you cope?

In this chapter from 1<sup>st</sup> Kings, we're given a few strategies that it is good to take note of. When Elijah falls under that broom tree, spent, exhausted. He sleeps and is awakened not once but twice with food and drink. When life bowls you over, I tell those I serve to be sure you sleep and eat. When you cannot think or plan, you live in the moment and your body needs to be cared for. There is a journey ahead. You may not know where that journey will take you, but you need nourishment to sustain you on the way. 1 Kings 19:7 “Otherwise the journey will be too much for you.”

Of course, the journey of Elijah is well marbled with the history of Israel. His journey is a recapitulation of the journey of freed Hebrew slaves, also running under threat of a mighty earthly power, into the wilderness, also given bread in the desert, also going to the same Holy Mountain, 40 days or 40 years, it is a long journey. We are reminded of the One who accompanies us in the wilderness of our lives, we are reminded of the One who entered the wilderness of our lives so in those journeys, we might know, we are not alone.

And when he gets there, we learn something more. A voice asks him, “What are you doing here Elijah?” It’s hard to read that with the right emphasis. There are so many tones you could give to those words. Accusation. Curiosity. Sympathy.

When I was a young man, I fled my university studies for a time to try to figure out who I was. I went to a small lumber town in Northern BC. It was a great time of growing in my life. I gained great friends, I learned about myself, I got my lumber grading ticket, which I used to carry around in my wallet until it began to disintegrate, I finished first in my class. But one day as I was leaving those training sessions. One of the foremen, a South Asian man who I had observed was cut from a little different cloth from the other foremen came alongside me. There was a reflective thoughtfulness about him that I had observed even though he wasn’t my foreman. I didn’t know that he had been watching me.

He came beside me and asked me, “What are you doing here Hugh?” Surprised by the question I told him, I was taking a little time off school and had a friend who told me about this job.” He said, “that’s not what I asked. I’ve been watching you, he said. There are three kinds of people in this world. Those who will make the same mistake over and over again and never learn. Those who will make a mistake a learn from it. And those who will watch others make mistakes and never make the same mistake themselves. You are the third kind of person. What are you doing here?”

Now I was flattered. I knew I made lots of mistakes. But I was forced to ask myself what I was doing there.

What are you doing here?

For Elijah he answered with excuses and then he was treated to the sound and light show. Wind, earthquake, fire, signs of divine epiphany in the ancient world but God wasn’t in any of these things. Then the still small voice, that’s not what I asked you Elijah, what are you doing here.

Elijah still had his excuses. That what we do to wall out intimacy, that’s what we do to safeguard ourselves from asking the deep questions, that what we do to keep love out. But love keeps on coming. The love that has loved us from before the foundation of the world. The love that speaks not in wind, earthquake, and fire but in a humble carpenter, in stories and parables, in words of forgiveness from a cross. In words of Peace outside an empty tomb. What are you doing here?

In his book, **Disappointment with God**, writer Philip Yancey relates a touching story from his own life. One time on a visit to his mother--who had been widowed in the

month of Philip's first birthday--they spent the afternoon together looking through a box of old photos. A certain picture of him as an eight-month-old baby caught his eye. Tattered and bent, it looked too banged up to be worth keeping, so he asked her why, with so many other better pictures of him at the same age, she had kept this one.

"My mother explained to me that she had kept the photo as a memento, because during my father's illness it had been fastened to his iron lung." During the last four months of his life, Yancey's father lay on his back, completely paralyzed by polio at the age of twenty-four, encased from the neck down in a huge, cylindrical breathing unit. With his two young sons banned from the hospital due to the severity of his illness, he had asked his wife for pictures of her and their two boys. Because he was unable to move even his head, the photos had to be jammed between metal knobs so that they hung within view above him--the only thing he could see. The last four months of his life were spent looking at the faces he loved.

Philip Yancey writes, "I have often thought of that crumpled photo, for it is one of the few links connecting me to the stranger who was my father. Someone I have no memory of, no sensory knowledge of, spent all day, every day thinking of me, devoting himself to me, loving me . . . The emotions I felt when my mother showed me the crumpled photo were the very same emotions I felt a February night in a college dorm room when I first believed in a God of love. Someone is there, I realized. Someone is there who loves me. It was a startling feeling of wild hope, a feeling so new and overwhelming that it seemed fully worth risking my life on."

What are you doing here?

When you come to a place where there's no going forward and no going backward, it is such a blessing when you discover that at the end of your way, there is someone who has made their way to you and you are not alone. No one is alone. Like a refreshing summer's rain that ends a time of heat and drought, the world changes.

As did the world of Allan who thought he was at the end of his road and discovered another way there. Allan (not his real name) is someone who came to me through my congregation in Hamilton, wanting to be baptised. He was a child or victim of the "me" decade and felt compelled to leave home and family to find himself and, of course, lost himself becoming a stranger to himself and world, wandering the streets of East Vancouver trapped in a world of drugs. One night he managed to get

off the street for a night in one of the shelters. He crashed into the bunk, staring up at the ceiling, listening to the groans, and trying not to be overcome by the odours of the strangers in the bunks around him. He didn't know where he was, he didn't know who he was, but he wanted it to be over with and he considered how he might take his own life.

He was shaken out of his thoughts when someone came in and called out a name from another world.

"Is Allan Roberts here!"

That had been his name once but he hadn't heard it for some time. He hardly knew Allan Roberts anymore. It couldn't be him being called.

The caller persisted, "Is there anybody named Allan Roberts here!"

No one else answered so Allan took a risk, "I'm Allan Roberts (or used to be)."

"Your mother's on the phone."

My mother, no, you've made a mistake. I don't know where I am, how could my mother know where I am.

"If you're Allan Roberts, your mother is on the phone."

Unsure what to expect he went to the desk in the hall and took the receiver. Ah hello? "Allan", it was his mother, "it's time for you to come home."

"Mom, I don't know where I am, I have no money, you don't know what I'm like. I can't go home."

"It's time for you to come home. There's a salvation army officer who's coming to you with a plane ticket. He's going to take you to the airport to get you home."

She couldn't trust him to send him the money or the ticket, he'd use it to buy drugs. She hadn't known where he was, she just called every shelter and hostel for months until she found him.

He went home and supported and loved by his mother, who had never ceased to know him though he had forgotten himself and influenced and inspired by the faith that had sustained his mother's hope and love, he began attending church services and one day he came to my office seeking to be baptised. I had the additional pleasure of later marrying Alan and then baptising his first child.

He did not find his own way to my office, the way found him through his mother's love and faith as it had found her. His own road had ended, the way of Grace met him and opened a new way that was not his alone but a shared path; a journey not away from but toward others; a path, not of his own making, but made by

the love that found him, that knew him better than he knew himself, and invited him to "follow me."

The still small voice. The intimate affirmation of love that came not in wind, earthquake and fire but in a humble Galilean carpenter who said, remember I am with you always. I have need of you. You are mine and I have need of you. You are not alone, and I have need of you. You have purpose, you have meaning, you have love.

There was an old man who always rode his bike to his brother's house every weekend. It took him 2 hours and he always made it by there by 2PM. One day he tried to make it in 1 hour. Collapsing on a hill from exhaustion, while sitting there, a Corvette pulls up and asks him if he needs a ride. The man looks at his watch and sees he would be late if not, but there is already a passenger, so he asks how? "No problem," says the man in the corvette, "I've got a rope in the back and we'll tie your bike to the back bumper and you can ride." The man says, "Ok!" They take off and the driver yells back, "Just yell beep beep if I'm going to fast." No problem the man thinks. They come to an Intersection and a Ferrari pulls up, the man's eyes widen in fright. Sure enough, the light changes and they're off! Anyway, the guy made it to his brothers on time and the Vette lost. Meanwhile, at the local police dept: "Hey guys the weirdest thing just happened to me. A Ferrari and a Vette just passed me doing over 140km on Main Street." "Well, that's crazy but what's so weird?" asks the other sergeant. The first cop says, "Well, there was this old guy on a bike behind them screaming beep beep and trying to pass!"

It is in the small voices, the intimate voices, the voices that speak love to the core of our being that the power resides. The voice of eternal love, where we enough for the ongoing journey, enough and more than enough.

Now what are you doing here?