

The Tenth Sunday after Pentecost – Proper 14 - Year A - 8.9.20 - The Rev. Canon Joan Anthony
Kings 19: 9-18, Psalm 85: 8-13, Romans 10: 5-15, Matthew 14: 22-33

I have a fondness for the prophet Elijah. We heard a portion of his story this morning in our first reading. Historically Elijah was the first real prophet in what was to become a long line of prophets in Israel. To this day when observant Jews gather for Passover and for the Seder meal, there is an empty chair, the chair waiting to be filled by Elijah as a sign that the Messiah was coming. But that's not why I have a fondness for Elijah. I have a fondness for Elijah because he was both cranky and a curmudgeon. Cranky and curmudgeonly make Elijah seem real, someone to whom I can relate. Who among us has not felt set in their ways, sometimes unreasonably so? Who among us has not been cranky before morning coffee?

Elijah had good reason to be cranky. Centuries earlier, Moses climbed Mount Sinai, summoned by God to receive the 10 Commandments. These were the rules which were to govern the life of the people of Israel as they entered the land promised to them. It was a covenant. God would be their God and never leave them and they would live in a certain manner. Through the years the people were sometimes more successful doing this and sometimes less successful living up to the covenant. They were human, just like us. They had good intentions which they were unable to fulfill just like us. They were tempted to contravene the agreement with God and they did so, just like we do.

Elijah's role as the prophet was to speak the words of God to the people and to draw them back into a right relationship with the Creator of all. There was only one way, God's way for the people to live in peace and in prosperity. But the people were human and they were often disobedient, confused and led astray.

No wonder Elijah was cranky. After many years of trying to lead the Israel back into a right relationship with God, the King Ahab married an Egyptian princess, Jezebel by name. When Jezebel came from Egypt she brought her gods and a community of priests who served those gods with her. Ahab was weak, Jezebel was strong and she believed in the power of her gods. The very first commandment given to Moses so long ago was this: "Thou shalt have none other gods but me." The second commandment followed the first. "Thou shalt not make to thyself any graven images...thou shalt not bow down to them nor worship them." But that is exactly what was happening in Israel. The god Baal was worshipped as were images of Baal and a host of other gods and goddesses. God was far away from Israel and it was the task of the prophet Elijah to bring them back. Elijah had good reason to be cranky.

Just before the reading we heard this morning a rather spectacular and dramatic event took place. Elijah challenged the priests of Baal to a contest.

There has been drought in the land of Israel causing famine and economic disaster. Ahab is desperate and seeks out Elijah to find a way to end the drought and return the land to prosperity. Elijah sees his chance to convince the King and the people that the God of Israel is the one true God and that Baal has no power to save them. He asks the King to gather the people on Mount Carmel together with 450 of the priest of Baal. Elijah is sure of himself, one against 450. They agree to a contest, they will kill a bull, place it on an altar of sacrifice and ask Baal to ignite the

fire consuming the sacrifice. It is very specific. “Then you shall call on the name of your god while I shall call on the name of Yahweh. The God who answers with fire is the true one.” All day long the priests of Baal pray and yell, cut themselves with knives, dance, shout, and rave until they become exhausted. I imagine Elijah standing off to the side, in the shade, arms crossed, yawning as hour after hour pass and nothing results. Now it is Elijah’s turn. He calls the people close, builds an altar with 12 stones representing the 12 tribes of Israel. He digs a deep trench around the altar that will hold 30 liters of water about 8 gallons. He arranges the firewood, cuts up the sacrificial bull and three times orders the people to soak the wood on the altar with water. Then, Elijah, standing alone, prays that God will send fire to consume the sacrifice. And God does. The people are convinced and are ready to forsake the foreign gods and return to the Creator.

And then Elijah, who has been so faithful, so much in tune with the will and word of God makes a false step. He takes action in a way that was not part of the instructions of God. Elijah lets his ego, his anger, pride take over and he orders the people to kill the priests of Baal. That was not part of God’s plan.

Jezebel who is furious vows to kill Elijah for what he has done. For the first time Elijah feels fear and he flees into the wilderness. Elijah finally stops under a tree and prays that he might die. But God will not answer that prayer, and sends food and water to Elijah, sending him on a forty day journey to Sinai, the place where Moses received the covenant and promise given to Israel so long ago.

God, the God of Elijah and of Israel, the Creator of the universe is a God of both justice and mercy. In the encounter with Ahab and Jezebel, the justice was in the challenge to the priests of Baal who were shown to be false, but the intended mercy was to let them live. Elijah acted alone and outside God’s intended mercy. And for that reason Elijah felt separated from God and Elijah wanted to die.

But reconciliation and a renewed relationship was what God had in mind for his prophet. God has a lesson to teach Elijah a lesson about what it means to be a prophet and the power of God that is ours in obedience and in courage.

Elijah finds a convenient cave and takes up residence there. This is the point at which our story today arrives. Elijah “...came to a cave and spent the night there.” The next morning, Elijah once again encounters God. “What are you doing here, Elijah?” It is an important question, a question on which the future of the prophet hangs. What are you doing here? The unspoken part of the question continues “...and what are you going to do now?” It is a question about the future. Having been a powerful prophet and then a frightened man, what are you doing and where will you go from here.

Elijah answers with a catalogue of the past, and what he has done for God.

“I have been very zealous for the Lord, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away.” In other words, God I’ve done all these great things for you and you have abandoned me. I am alone. Elijah needs to learn again what it means to be a faithful. And so God tells Elijah to leave the safety of the cave and go and stand “...on the

mountain before the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by.” Elijah obeys. There was a great wind, so strong that it crumbled mountains and broke rocks into gravel. But God was not in the wind. Next came an earthquake, followed by a mighty fire, and yet God was not to be found in these events, powerful as they were. Wind, earthquake and fire were not the voice of God. God was in the sheer silence that follows. Elijah heard the silence which might be described better as a softly whispering voice. Not wind, fire, earthquake or violence but a softly whispering voice, a voice that one must listen carefully for if it is to be heard. And the voice had the same future looking question. “What are you doing here Elijah? What are you doing and what should you be doing to be my prophet, my carrier of the word in this moment and beyond?”

It is the question that God asks of each of us individually and as a community of faith. Not what have you done in the past, but what are you willing to do in answer to the softly whispering voice of God now and in the future?

Centuries later, Jesus, having fed 5,000 men plus also women and children, goes away to a lonely place to gather his thoughts, to pray and to regain perspective and energy. He has sent his disciples ahead in a boat across the Sea of Galilee. From the mountain Jesus sees the little boat battered and tossed by a sudden storm. The disciples were naturally afraid and when Jesus came walking toward them thought he was a ghost. Immediately Jesus spoke to the disciples and said “...take heart, it is I, do not be afraid.” The voice of Jesus might not have been a soft whisper, but the words were words of comfort and courage. The word and action of Jesus was not in the howling winds, or the high waves of the storm but in his gentle voice “take heart, do not be afraid.”

Peter, ever ready to test Jesus responds “Lord if it is you; command me to come to you on the water.” A test much like the test Elijah designed with a trench and water, calling on God to overcome the natural barriers of the storm. But God is not in the waves, the wind, the fire or earthquake. God is in the whispered, gentle voice of Jesus. Come. A voice of invitation, of comfort, of courage. Come. And Peter steps out of the boat in faith, taking steps toward Jesus. The unspoken question of Jesus to Peter and the rest of the disciples is the same question spoken to Elijah. What are you doing here, in terror and fear in a boat? Can you know trust that God who has brought you to this place will continue to sustain you? But Peter, human like each one of us ‘noticed the strong wind, he became frightened...’ and began to sink. Jesus question to Peter, why did you doubt? Why did you doubt?

In those days, the days of Elijah and of Peter, and in our days now, the questions are the same. What are you doing **here?** Why do **you** doubt. The answer??? “Listen for the whispering voice to be heard in the sheer silence that surrounds you if you will permit it to do so. The answer is not in worry, not in taking matters into our own hands, but in prayer, in listening. It may take a while, but if you listen well, you will hear the voice of God.