

On Meeting God Unexpectedly  
1 Kings 19:9-18, Matthew 14:22-33, Romans 10:5-15

The prophet Elijah met God. Being a prophet, Elijah was causing some trouble. Actually, he was pointing out to the people and to the government (the king and queen) where trouble already existed. He was doing this on God's behalf calling the people to repentance...In earlier chapters Elijah struggled, along with the people, to deal with a famine that he announced was punishment for the people's disobedience. Today we read more about the ongoing conflict between Elijah and the government, King Ahab and Queen Jezebel (a believer in Baal), where something has happened and Elijah must flee for his life.

In chapter 18, we see a confrontation between Elijah and the prophets of Baal. A contest was set up to prove which God was more powerful. The scene for this contest was an altar with an offering on it – but with no fire. The God that brought fire to burn the offering would be considered the true God. The prophets of Baal start imploring and then dancing and cutting themselves to no avail. Then Elijah comes, prays, and fire comes from the sky consuming the offering and even the water that Elijah had poured over the altar to make his point...A big God doing a big and dramatic thing! The people believe and Elijah had the Baal prophets killed...Other than the killing part, this was quite effective preaching!

As a result of the people's belief in the true God, the drought breaks and the rain comes - Elijah then tells Ahab, the king, to get home before he gets caught in the coming storm. However, he outruns Ahab, in his chariot, as the rain comes...In continuation of the spiral violence (as we know, violence only brings more violence), Jezebel vows to kill Elijah since he had her prophets of Baal killed and was a constant thorn in her side - always predicting doom and gloom.

So, Elijah flees a day's journey into the desert and sits under a broom tree and prayed that he might die saying, "I have had enough, Lord...Take my life, I am no better than my ancestors'. Then he lay down under the tree and fell asleep". Even after his dutiful and energetic prophetic ministry, he sinks low, into what looks like discouragement or depression.

Suddenly he is awoken by an angel - a messenger of God. There is a hot cake - baked over hot coals - and a jar of water. And he is instructed to get up and eat. After this he promptly goes back to sleep - again.

A second time he is awoken and told to eat because "...the journey is too much for you."

Elijah again fled. One would think that after such a definitive victory over the prophets of Baal, Elijah would be jubilant. But instead there is dejection. He scored a big win for God but now feels abandoned...He is the only God-follower left. All the others have turned away. God has left Elijah, a prophet, out to dry - or at least has been insufficiently supportive.

Arriving at "Horeb, the mountain of God" and going to sleep in a cave, the prophet is confronted by God. The text says, "the word of the Lord came to him." God asks, "What are you doing here?"

Elijah - a prophet whose job it is to proclaim the word of the Lord - is called out of the cave to stand before and experience God's presence. As a powerful wind, so strong it "tore mountains apart and shattered the rocks" swept through.

And after the wind there was earthquake – the earth shaken in its foundations! And then a fire came blazing across the mountain slopes with blistering heat.

But God was not in the wind, the earthquake, or in the fire.

Then came a “gentle whisper.” Stillness. Sheer silence...What would seem to be the absence of God, is actually the presence of God.

With this the prophet arose, he put his cloak over his face, and went out and stood at the mouth of the cave...He met God!

In the Matthew scripture, the disciples, after a long day of ministry get battered by a storm on the lake. With little rest and little progress, they are tossed about. And Jesus comes to them...Jesus comes to them.

Peter got out of the boat and walked toward Jesus - in what could be described as a rather unusual show of faith. But then... “he saw the wind”...he noticed the wind. “He saw the wind and was afraid.” The disciples had literally just been “battered” by the storm for most of the night. He was well aware of the storm, of the wind. Despite the storm raging against and all around them - the coming of Jesus was so distracting, so enthralling that he forgot. The coming of Jesus caused him to focus to such an extent that the winds and waves were forgotten. They were rendered inconsequential! Peter was “focused on it.”

Jesus on the water and Elijah’s encounter are unexpected experiences of God. God shows up and changes the game. “I’m focused on it.” Elijah is brought into focus and then renewed.

Peter, at least for a time, is so overcome by the arrival of Jesus that he mounts up on to the raging water.

As ministers [all of us], how do we plan for the unexpected experience of God’s presence? While pastors may officially be tasked with this, this is the work of all of us...Since we affirm the “priesthood of all believers,” this is the work of the full community.

Perhaps it is less “how do we plan for the unexpected presence of God” than it is “how do we make room for such encounters”. How do we invite one another and others into

experiencing God?...While we do have the call to make room for others to experience God, we very well may be the ones in need of such an encounter. I am in need of such an encounter.

Not only may we be discouraged or worn out, but we may even, like Elijah, be fleeing...actively avoiding. Or like the disciples tossed about on the raging seas - the raging seas of our own making or the world's chaos. Perhaps we need a good word and the presence of God.

In Romans we read, "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news".

<sup>14</sup> How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? <sup>15</sup> And how can anyone preach unless they are sent? As it is written: "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news"! Amen.