

1 Kings 19:1-18 – Encounter with God (+ Luke 9:23-36)

Background to this passage

God's people, the Children of Israel, had fallen out with each other. The Kingdom that had once been ruled by David and Solomon was now split into a northern kingdom, confusingly called Israel, with its capital in Samaria (though its kings often lived in Jezreel); and the southern kingdom called Judah with its capital in Jerusalem.

Ahab was king over the northern kingdom of Israel and was married to Jezebel, a princess from the Phoenician city of Tyre. Led on by his wife, Ahab had turned his people away from worship of the Living God, Yahweh, the God of Abraham and Moses, and had encouraged them to worship the Canaanite fertility god, Baal, whom they believed to be responsible for rain and for harvests.

The Lord God, the living God, was not going to sit idly by and see his people led away from him. He raised up a prophet called Elijah to confront Ahab and declare God's word to him. Elijah told Ahab that the Lord was going to withhold rain from the land for some years. The Lord would demonstrate that he, and not the powerless idol-god Baal, was the living God, the one who controlled rain and harvest.

In the third year of the drought there was a great showdown on Mt Carmel. King Ahab assembled his men on the mountain along with 450 prophets of Baal, 400 prophets of the female fertility goddess Asherah. There they faced Elijah, the one prophet of the living God. The prophets of Baal could not get their god to answer their increasingly desperate cries for him to send fire from heaven to burn up their offering. But, in response to Elijah's simple prayer, the living God sent fire from heaven to consume both offering and altar. Seeing this demonstration, the assembled crowds cried out, "The Lord, he is God! The Lord, he is God."

In accordance with the law given through Moses, Elijah had all the false prophets put to death.

Then, again in answer to Elijah's prayer to the Lord, rain fell on the dry and thirsty land as Elijah ran the 20 miles from Carmel to Jezreel in front of Ahab's chariot.

This is the context for the passage we have read from 1 Kings 19.

Elijah flees for his life

We read that Ahab told his wife Jezebel "everything that Elijah had done." But it is not the miracle of fire from heaven, proving that the Lord is God that impresses Jezebel. It is not that the Lord has sent rain to bring life again to the land. It is that Elijah has had her prophets of a powerless god put to death. She is determined to do the same to Elijah before the day is out.

Elijah is afraid and flees for his life. The one who knows that he serves the living God and that God is with him – the God who sent fire from heaven and who had fed him in the desert by sending ravens to him with bread is afraid and runs for his life.

Elijah flees with his servant as far as Beersheba in Judah. Beersheba is on the southern border of the southern kingdom of Judah, as far from the northern kingdom and from Queen Jezebel as it is possible to go before encountering desert. Elijah leaves his servant there and goes on into the desert a day's journey where he lies down in the shade of a bush and prays that he might die: "I have had enough, Lord. Take my life."

It's easy to be critical of Elijah here, but remember, he is emotionally and physically exhausted. He had run the 20 miles from Carmel to Jezreel following Ahab's chariot and thinking that the age of idolatry was over only to discover that Jezebel – the power behind the throne – is set on destroying him. He has now fled throughout the length of the land, over 100 miles. He is exhausted physically and spiritually.

And God knows the exhaustion of Elijah and is gracious to him. He ignores Elijah's pleas for death and instead sends an angel to him with food that will empower him for a further journey of 40 days through the wilderness to Mt Horeb, the Mountain of God – perhaps better known as Mt Sinai.

What is the significance of this journey and this mountain? This is where God brought his people when he rescued them from Egypt. This is where God had met with Moses and the mountain had shaken at God's presence and been filled with fire and smoke. This is where Moses had seen God's glory and been transformed by it so that his face shone. From this mountain, God had led his people through the wilderness for 40 years, feeding them with bread from heaven and providing them with water. Now Elijah has been brought back to this mountain. He has been led through the wilderness for forty days being fed by an angel and provided with water. Surely God is going to meet with Elijah as he had met with Moses. Surely this will mark a new beginning not just for Elijah but for the Children of Israel – a new great act of redemption!

Encounter with God

So Elijah waits in a cave in the mountain, as Moses had hidden in a cleft in the rock, waiting for God to display his glory.

And in the morning the word of the Lord came to Elijah asking him, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" It's a strange question isn't it, for it is the Lord who has brought him here rather than leaving him to die in the desert south of Beersheba.

Elijah answers, "I have been very zealous for the Lord God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, torn down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too." It's a sad answer that speaks of Elijah's spiritual exhaustion and personal breakdown. It's a sad and self-pitying reply, but it is one that I can identify with. I have suffered the same kind of breakdown when I gave up on a ministry the Lord had given to me saying, in effect, to myself – and at God – "I've been faithful in the work you've given me but no one appreciates me and I'm exhausted and empty and I've just had enough." I don't know whether any of you can also identify with that.

Elijah is told to, "Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by." Isn't that what happened to Moses when he saw the glory of God? Is this what is now to happen to Elijah? What might Elijah expect? Did he call to mind Psalm 29, a psalm of David?

The voice of the LORD is over the waters;
the God of glory thunders,
the LORD thunders over the mighty waters.
The voice of the LORD is powerful;
the voice of the LORD is majestic.
The voice of the LORD breaks the cedars;
the LORD breaks in pieces the cedars of Lebanon.
He makes Lebanon leap like a calf,
Sirion [Mt Hermon] like a young wild ox.
The voice of the LORD strikes
with flashes of lightning.
The voice of the LORD shakes the desert;
the LORD shakes the Desert of Kadesh.
The voice of the LORD twists the oaks
and strips the forests bare.
And in his temple all cry, 'Glory!' (Psalm 29:3-9)

Was Elijah expecting the same fireworks that had marked Moses' encounter with God on this mountain?

What does happen?

First there is a raging wind that shakes the mountain and shatters its rocks – "But the Lord was not in the wind."

Then there was an earthquake that shook the mountain just as it had quaked in the days of Moses, "But the Lord was not in the earthquake."

Then fire fell upon the mountain, as it had flamed and smoked at the time of Moses – and as fire had fallen on Mt Carmel – "But the Lord was not in the fire."

Then, at last there was a gentle whisper, a still small voice, and Elijah knows that this is the Lord. We read, "When Elijah heard it, he pulled his cloak over his face and went out and stood at the mouth of the cave." Like Moses hidden in the cleft of the rock, protected from the glory of the Lord. What will the Lord say to him? How will the Lord display his glory?

This gentle voice asks again, "What are you doing here Elijah?" To which Elijah responds with the same self-pitying answer, "I have been very zealous for the LORD God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, torn down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too."

Elijah is saying that it has all been pointless. He has done his best but he is defeated, and what's more, because the cause of God rested with him, that too is defeated.

Many years ago, when I suffered a breakdown, I read this passage completely wrongly. In my delusional state I identified myself with Elijah and believed that the Lord's response to him was, in effect, "I can't use you anymore. Go and appoint someone else to take your place."

But that is not what God has to say to Elijah. Here this broken man is recommissioned for service. God makes plain that he is still at work to establish his kingdom – he is even at work through those who do not acknowledge him like the Arameans – and Elijah has a key role in the next stage of God's plans. Yes, he is to train up one who will succeed him but that is not because his ministry is finished. The Lord will have much more to do through Elijah before Elisha takes over – including a further confrontation with King Ahab over Naboth's vineyard. Oh, and by the way, Elijah has not been the lone faithful voice holding up the Lord's cause in Israel, there are 7,000 in Israel who have been faithful to the Lord and not bowed the knee to Baal.

The Lord does not come down to Elijah in fire, wind and earthquake to crush him with the appearance of his glory. He comes in the gentle correcting but encouraging voice that recommissions Elijah for service and opens his eyes to see beyond himself to the great plans that God has for the establishment of his kingdom.

Encounter on another mountaintop

I want to take you now to another mountaintop where God displays his glory to Elijah – and to Moses.

In Luke 9 (along with other Gospel accounts), we read that Jesus took Peter, John and James with him and went up on a mountain to pray. Here his appearance was changed before them, his face and clothes shone with glory – bright as lightning. And there on that mountain, Moses and Elijah appeared with Jesus, talking with him about his departure – literally his 'Exodus' – which he was about to accomplish in Jerusalem.

Here Moses and Elijah saw the glory of God in the face of Christ Jesus. God has manifested his glory in Christ to do again what he did at the time of the Exodus, but to do it now in a final way. He has come down to save his people and to rescue them from all that holds them captive. He has come to redeem them in and through Jesus Christ, God made flesh.

And how does God redeem his people? Not with a great show of power that shatters all that stands in his way but as the glory of God is seen in a man hanging on a cross. God has come to meet us and rescue us not in an act of overwhelming power but in apparent weakness. Here the glory of God displayed in Christ Jesus is the glory of suffering, redeeming love.

There, on that mountain, Moses and Elijah see the glory of God in the face of Christ the Suffering Servant and know that in him is fulfilled all that God promised to Abraham, and declared through Moses and the prophets. This is the day that changed the world, the day the revolution began.

The challenge for ourselves

Here is the ultimate place of encounter with God. Here is the place where evil is conquered and dethroned. Here is where the powers of this world are shaken and crumble. Here is the place

where we see the glory of God in the face of Christ Jesus – it is at the cross. Here is where we encounter the living God, where he comes to meet us and where we meet him. He meets us in all our brokenness, tiredness and despair. He meets us in forgiving, embracing and transforming love: love that raises us up and equips us afresh for service; love that restores us and lifts us up when we are broken and without hope; love that sends us out re-equipped for service because we have seen the glory of God in the face of Christ Jesus. We are compelled, not by brute force but by grace and love. We are compelled by the gentle whisper of the Spirit calling us to follow the Saviour and to serve him.

What do we learn from Elijah's encounter with God on Mt Horeb / Sinai and the Mount of transfiguration?

Elijah had seen God send fire from heaven, but he had to learn that God does not always work through dramatic displays of power. He also works through the gentle whisper that speaks into the hearts of his people. He is also at work through the events of history. The heart of the work of God is to be seen in the cross of Christ – in sacrificial love which redeems us and calls us to follow him.

This is how the author of the letter to the Hebrews expresses the contrast:

You have not come to a mountain that can be touched and that is burning with fire; to darkness, gloom and storm; to a trumpet blast or to such a voice speaking words that those who heard it begged that no further word be spoken to them... But you have come to ... Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel. (Hebrews 12:18-19, 22, 24)

What today will make crowds cry out "The Lord, he is God! The Lord, he is God!"? It will be when they see the glory of God in the face of Christ Jesus. It will be when they see the love of God those who name Christ Jesus as their Lord and whose lives reflect his glory.

So the gentle call of Christ comes to us each one asking, "What are you doing here Peter /...?" Feel afresh the embrace of his sacrificial love by which you are made his own. Listen to his call. Follow him, serve him and call others to see the glory of God in the face of Christ Jesus and be drawn into the embrace of his love.

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