

'Called out of your cave'

When we look at Peter in the account of Jesus walking on water and Elijah running for his life in 1 Kings 19, you could say it's not looking like a good day for disciples in today's readings.

Peter drops like a stone into the water when he loses his focus and is overwhelmed by the wind and the furious storm. He started out full of confidence didn't he? He asks Jesus to command him to jump overboard so he can walk out on the water to meet him.

Peter's bold, but then everything gets a bit hazy & soggy and before he knows it he's saying the most direct and honest prayer of his life as he drops into the water, 'LORD save me!'

Meanwhile poor Elijah has a contract out on his life as Israel suffers under another evil King named Ahab and his wife Jezebel. Jezebel loves to kill God's prophets and is seething after Elijah confronted her false prophets on Mount Carmel. Do you remember what happened up there?

850 false prophets' vs. Elijah to see whose God is real. When the false prophets were having no success calling down fire from Baal, Elijah even had the courage to taunt them asking whether their gods were indisposed - in the toilet or maybe asleep as they marched around their altar, paraded, cried out and cut themselves trying to be heard by their false gods.

Of course Elijah prayed and the LORD came down with fire from heaven and consumed everything Elijah had prepared on the altar of sacrifice. Even after he had the false prophets drench his offering and all the timber with water – God cleans it all up.

Elijah is vindicated, the Lord has shown himself to be the only God and all Jezebel's false prophets are killed with the sword that day - and she is one angry woman!

She sends word to Elijah saying, ***"May the gods deal with me, be it ever so severely, if by this time tomorrow I do not make your life like that of one of them [that is like one of her dead false prophets]."*** You're dead – and I'm going to make sure it happens if it's the last thing I do. A revenge killing.

The bible says that ^a ***Elijah was afraid and ran for his life.'***

That's the setting for where we find Elijah this morning tucked away in his cave.

People head for the hills (and their caves) for all kinds of reasons.

Caves provide cover when you need to hide out. But you don't need a physical rock cave in order to hide out do you? You only need to slam a few doors behind you in the family home; you can hide out in your garage or bedroom. Husbands and wives can be present together in the same room, even on the same couch and not be present or available for each other.

You can use your work as a hiding place; the computer can be your cave. You could be doing absolutely nothing in front of the TV – and be absent and unavailable to everyone around you because you're actually in your cave. And I'm not talking about men and their inability to multi-task!

People usually try and bury their problems and imperfections in caves so no-one can see their weaknesses or sins. You've seen it in the news recently with the Murdoch's and the media scandal. Everyone is retreating into their hiding places and denying responsibility for the privacy breaches and back room deals that have happened. No-one wants to be found out.

So what are the pressures you're facing at the moment - in your thought life, your home life, personal pressures, with your family or employment pressures and struggles? What are the things that are weighing on you? [PAUSE]

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We all have 'stuff' going on - no-one is immune here. And yet the pressures that crush our spirits aren't too big for the LORD whether you believe that or scoff at it. There's no place, no cave too deep where the LORD's grace and compassion can't reach you – even if you can't see a way out yourself.

That's important because carrying heavy burdens around with you comes with a cost. They eat away at you, wear you down and they're not good company! Just ask Elijah...

He was having a bit of a self-pity problem in his cave. Fire from heaven hadn't produced repentant hearts like he was hoping for. For all his efforts he felt like there was no return – apart from a complete backfire that put his own life at risk! What a waste of time!

And so here he is in his cave back on Mount Sinai.

- It's the same place where the LORD appeared in the burning bush and commissioned Moses
- It's the mountain where the LORD gave the 10 commandments.
- The mountain that trembled in the awesome presence of God and was covered with smoke.

Elijah came back here himself and not because of the Word of the LORD, but because of the words of Jezebel who threatened his life.

Elijah is weighed down with all kinds of pressures and frustration.

He's in his cave all upset and trying to make sense of his circumstances and God says, ***'What are you doing here Elijah?'***

He answers, ***'I have been very zealous for the Lord God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, broken 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.'***¹

For the most part - he's right too. Elijah had a consuming passion to serve God, to live in His will and uphold the Lord's honour even in the face of ungodly people. **But he's not the only one left like he laments!**

Elijah knew that an official of the king's court had 100 of the Lord's prophets hidden in caves away from Jezebel and her kill squads. But he's filled with self-pity and frustrated things hadn't worked out the way he hoped and now he's lost his focus. Sound familiar?

Like all of God's people from time to time, Elijah is in desperate need of some reassurance. He needs God to call him out of his cave...and so do we.

¹¹ The Lord said, "Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by." Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake. ¹² After the earthquake came a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper. ¹³ When Elijah heard it, he pulled his cloak over his face and went out and stood at the mouth of the cave. ²

It wasn't the destructive blast of the wind; or the shaking of the earth, or the intense heat of the fire that brought Elijah out of his cave. And the LORD didn't announce his presence with thunder.

¹ *The Holy Bible: New International Version*. 1996 (electronic ed.) (1 Ki 19:10). Zondervan: Grand Rapids, MI

² *The Holy Bible: New International Version*. 1996 (electronic ed.) (1 Ki 19:11-13). Zondervan: Grand Rapids, MI

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God spoke in “the sound of gentle silence.” It was the whisper of the Lord that brought Elijah out of his cave.

Maybe Elijah was there looking for fire and earth quakes and rock shattering winds to sort the people of God out but it was the gentle whisper that moved him.

God doesn't always deal with the situations we find ourselves struggling with according to our expectations either!

Sometimes God, in His infinite wisdom chooses to go to work in your life in ways that will bless you and stretch you in ways you couldn't even imagine.

That's because you don't have the same vision God has. God has 20/20 vision of your past, your present and your future. God knows all the intricate details, not only of your life – but of absolutely everything that is. And sometimes God elects to work through what appears ordinary for His extraordinary purposes.

I'm finding the longer I'm here in Cairns, the more I see God's wisdom and hand behind our appointment here. But it wasn't my choice! I had nothing to do with it. Can I say how frustrating it was as a final year pastoral student to think that a couple of ordinary men (the college of presidents) were making decisions about my family's future without any input from us!? There are now final students in the same situation waiting and chewing the ends of their fingers off wondering where the Presidents will send them and I have the honor of assuring them, 'It's going to be okay – God is in this. Yes there are a few ordinary guys determining where you will go, but God is directing the entire process for His extraordinary purposes. Take heart – it worked for us and God will be with you on this journey too!'

That doesn't always sit well with us though does it? So often we don't want to work through ordinary means – we want the quick fix, the miraculous fix, the instant relief fixes...and when it doesn't come on our terms or how we planned, we accuse God of reckless abandonment. **Of course that's not the case at all.**

Maybe as you think about the pressures facing you today, God knows you need to work things through; that a quick fix isn't what you need at all. Maybe the miracle will happen as you work through the means and people and resources God has placed all around you?

That's how things worked out for Elijah. He was instructed to return and **anoint Hazael, Jehu, and Elisha**. Victory came as a result of an ordinary political process (a “whisper”), as God removed certain kings and set up others in their place according to His plan.

No spectacular fireworks fell from heaven. They didn't need to! Even the gentle whisper of the Lord has power to change world events; to dethrone Kings, to raise up prophets and to set a frustrated people back on the path of discipleship.

That same word of the Lord is yours today in the situations you're facing. Paul says that the word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart. That's the word of the Gospel. The word that points you to God's way of changing world history and your eternal destiny! Through the apparent weakness of the cross of Jesus – came the glorious and mighty power of God to save His people.

This Word that's near you, in your mouth and in your heart is the word that picks you up, dusts you off and continues to call you into the light and life of Jesus.

- It's the word that calls you out of your cave.

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- That calls you to follow Jesus and keep your gaze focussed on Him
- The Word that invites you to take refuge in the LORD and in His promises.
- That continues to declare to you, “Your sins are forgiven.”
- It’s the word that frees you from the **threats** of the things that weigh you down and the situations you struggle against – because you know you’re a child of the living God.

In the gospel this morning that’s what happened when the disciples saw Jesus approaching their storm battered boat. They heard His voice saying, *‘Take heart, I AM, don’t be afraid.’*

- The same I AM who whispered to Elijah on Mount Sinai.
- The same I AM who passed by Moses saying, *“The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, ⁷ maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin...”³*
- The I AM who delivered His people out of the pressure and weight of slavery in Egypt and parted the Red Sea providing a new and safe passage. *Who brought you through the waters of Baptism...*

Today you are gathered in the Holy presence of God who has power over all the elements. There no challenge or pressure facing you or your loved ones or this community that is too big for the Great I AM – the Lord God of hosts.

Look to Him, follow Him, receive assurance from His word and call out to him, knowing that he hears your cries for help and he acts. He’s acted in the cross of Jesus saving you from the power and threat of sin and guilt and death. Know today that he’ll continue to act in your life through the cross’s power and meet your deepest needs. His strong hand is reaching out to you today... How will you respond? **Amen.**

Pray: *Lord God please surprise each person here today as they step out into the week before them. Keep all our eyes and ears open and alert for the sound of your gentle whisper and give us an openness to see you at work through mighty wonders – even when they appear ordinary. In Jesus’ name. Amen.*

³ *The Holy Bible: New International Version.* 1996 (electronic ed.) (Ex 34:6–7). Zondervan: Grand Rapids, MI