

16 August 2020

West Kirk of Calder & Polbeth Harwood

By: Rev Dr Jonanda Groenewald

Reading: 1 Kings 19:8-18

Hymn: CH4 176:1-3

PRAYER

As we approach you today, Lord,
we want to ask you to please make it quiet in our heads and our hearts,
So that we can truly hear what you would like to teach us today.

We want to praise you for this opportunity we now have to share worship
together, although we are apart.

We come to you, Jesus,
trusting that even when we don't understand life,
we know you are still there holding us up.
Please reassure us that you won't let go,
no matter how we feel.

Lord God,
we are sorry for the times we don't listen to you,
for the times we doubt and don't trust in your goodness and mercy.
Lord, please forgive our doubts and hesitations,
show us your loving presence,
especially when we most need it,
and teach us to trust you at all times.

We ask this in the name of Jesus, who taught us to pray:

**Our Father, who art in heaven,
Hallowed be thy name;
Thy kingdom come;
Thy will be done;
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our debts,
as we forgive our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation;
but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom, the power,
and the glory for ever.
Amen.**

READING

1 Kings 19:8-18 (NIV)

Elijah travelled for forty days and forty nights until he reached Horeb, the mountain of God. ⁹ There he went into a cave and spent the night.

And the word of the Lord came to him: 'What are you doing here, Elijah?'

¹⁰ He replied, '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.'

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.

Then a voice said to him, 'What are you doing here, Elijah?'

¹⁴ He replied, '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.'

(¹⁵ Then the Lord spoke to him...)

MESSAGE

I know lockdown's been quite *challenging* for everybody, to say the least, but this morning I would like to ask you a question: Is there anything you've been enjoying about lockdown?

I know there are plenty things we've all been finding hard, but – like with everything in life – it hasn't been *all* bad.

One thing I've been enjoying these last few months, was having my boys around me 24/7. The house is so quiet now that they are back at school... I miss them!

Something we've been doing as a family *that we never usually do*, is to watch telly together. Are you also watching more telly than usual?

We've started to look forward to our family film at night, sometimes even up to 4 times a week. In the past, when we only watched a film every now and again – it would always be a battle to decide who will be

holding the remote control and choosing the film, but during lockdown that's not been a problem at all – we could just take turns, because we had plenty opportunities to cuddle up in front of the TV...

The boys of course couldn't believe it when I told them what it was like when I was a child in the 80s. It's not even that long ago – although judging by their expressions you would think that it was just about 100 years ago when I was in primary school!

I don't know what it was like here, but if we ever had a film night at home in South Africa when I was wee, we had to go to a video store to rent a film on VHS, which had to be returned the next day.

You couldn't just switch on the telly and go to "Sky Cinema" or "On Demand" or "Catchup" if you wanted to watch something! And if I try to explain to them that our television screen was quite small but that the whole telly was a like a huge big box, and that you had to actually watch your favourite story when it was *on* – you couldn't record it or pause it – or that there was no such thing as daytime telly, they think I am truly ancient!

Technology has changed so much over a very short period of time, hasn't it?

But all this talk about watching stories on telly made me think about life...

Because our lives are very much like stories – like a film with a beginning and an end. Usually with lots of unexpected surprises in the

plot, and if it's worth watching, there will be a few lessons in there too. Moments when you laugh and moments when you cry. *Your* life story could even change other people's lives...

The only difference between our life stories and films on the telly is, that even in this current time with all the fancy technological gadgets at our disposal – we can't press pause when we just need a minute...

We can't press rewind either, because when a minute in our lives is over, you can never relive it. And although we sometimes wish we could, we can't fast forward our lives either.

I'm sure that many of you have wished for that actually – that we could just fast forward this time of COVID19 and go back to normal again, but you know – if you fast forward even the most difficult time in your life, you will most certainly miss things that were important. You could even miss special or life changing moments, and you wouldn't even know it.

The thing is – we should never wish time away, because there is beauty in every single moment we get. We just need to look for it.

Or like in the story we read from the Bible this morning – *listen* for it...

Elijah's story is a real page turner! To say that he served as prophet of God in challenging times, is an understatement.

The Israelites lost their way completely. If you read his story from the start, you will see that he felt as if he was literally the *only* person left

who served God! And it was his job to lead the Israelites back to serving God again... This was some challenge!

To make a long story short – the king of Israel at the time, Ahab – did more to displease God than all the kings before him. He was married to Jezebel, who's name became the personification for a wicked person, so you can just imagine what he was like!

Elijah warned Ahab to change his ways, but no to avail, so for 3 years it didn't rain a single drop.

Then Elijah initiated a 'contest' between the prophets of the false god Baal and the God of Israel to remind the people that God is the only real God. In the process all the prophets of Baal got killed, and this made Jezebel so angry that she couldn't wait to lay her hands on Elijah and kill him.

So Elijah was really scared, and he went into hiding. He walked for 40 days and 40 nights – a Biblical expression to indicate the right amount of time – until he reached the mountain of God.

Elijah was tired. Exhausted. Drained. Physically and emotionally. He did everything God asked him to do – but this meant that his life was on the line now and he was at the point where he felt as if he couldn't cope anymore.

So God decided to speak to Elijah.

As Elijah was waiting to be in the presence of God – a great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks – but the Lord was not in the wind.

Then there was an earthquake, but the Lord was not in earthquake.

Then there was a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire either...

In those days the people of God would expect him to be present in powerful winds, earthquakes and fires, because that is how he has revealed himself to his people in the past, like when Moses got the Ten Commandments on the mountain...

But the God who is bigger than everything on earth did not reveal himself to Elijah in an earth shuddering way...

No. After the wind and the earthquake and the fire, there was a gentle whisper, and in this gentle whisper, all of a sudden Elijah could feel the presence of God surround him, and he covered his face.

In the gentle whisper God consoled Elijah, but he also told him in no uncertain terms to stop feeling sorry for himself, to go back where he came from and to go be a prophet again; and whatever God promised him would happen, eventually happened.

He might have felt completely alone, but God reminded him that he wasn't. And that he was safe. Because if God asks you to do something, he will give you the strength to follow it through.

I'm pretty sure Elijah wished he could fast forward his life to easier times after Jezebel threatened to kill him. After he realised that he was practically all alone in the world.

But imagine what would have happened if he did that? He wouldn't have met God in that gentle whisper... He would have missed the biggest, most life changing moment, of his life!!!

God might not appear to us today in the same way he appeared to his prophets in Old Testament times, because in the meantime he sent Jesus, and then his Holy Spirit, to be his constant presence in our lives.

But he still speaks to us today.

And very often not in the way we would expect!

We don't know how our stories are going to unfold. We don't even know what will be happening in our lives tomorrow.

But what we do know is that God is the author of our life stories, and it is more than worth it to live out the plot exactly how he wrote it down for us.

We should never wish parts of our lives away. Just like Elijah we've all been through pretty tough times recently. But even when we are confused, sad, or drained, God still wants to speak to us. He still wants to use us.

It might not always be very obvious what he wants us to do and how he wants us to do it.

But just like you have no idea how a good film is going to end when you've only watched it halfway through, but you know for a fact that you just HAVE to see what's going to happen next; well, that's exactly the same for us.

It was for Elijah, and it is for every single one of us too.

If we don't know what to do next, even if we are at such a low point that we feel completely alone and we fear for our lives, God still wants to speak to us.

Sometimes he might need to shout before we'll hear him, but sometimes he's just there in a quiet whisper.

So let's make sure that we listen. That we live. Because even if it makes absolutely no sense at the time – history has taught us that every single moment of our lives is worth living.

Amen

HYMN: CH4 167

Played by Catriona Lachlan, at the West Kirk of Calder

Guide me, O thou great Redeemer,

Pilgrim through this barren land;

I am weak, but thou art mighty;

Hold me with thy powerful hand:

Bread of heaven, bread of heaven,
Feed me till my want is o'er.
Feed me till my want is o'er.

Open now the crystal fountain
Whence the healing stream doth flow;
Let the fiery and cloudy pillar
Lead me all my journey through:
Strong Deliverer, strong Deliverer,
Be thou still my strength and shield,
Be thou still my strength and shield.

When I tread the verge of Jordan
Bid my anxious fears subside;
Death of death, and hell's destruction,
Land me safe on Canaan's side:
Songs of praises, songs of praises,
I will ever give to thee,
I will ever give to thee.