

Sermon Archive 162

Sunday 13 August 2017

Knox Church, Christchurch

Lessons: 1 Kings 19: 9-18

Matthew 14: 22-33

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



Let's go back to last week's sermon - back to the world of alpha animals responding to stress by forming factions, getting violent, spouting "fire and fury". Exactly such animals have pounced onto this week's sermon, seizing and shaking by the throat the world of Elijah. Everywhere Elijah looks he sees violence and desecration. Horrified, he cries out to his God "I see them throwing down your altars and killing your prophets with the sword". Poor Elijah! Killing the prophets and destroying the altars.

-ooOoo-

Until March of 2001, in the Afghan valley of Bamiyan, there stood two giant statues of Buddha. Carved directly out of the rock of the valley, they were, apparently, a beautiful pair. One was 53 metres tall, originally painted carmine red. The other was 35 metres tall, painted multiple colours. Over time the colours had faded. Washed away had been the finer details of the faces and folds of clothing, created with mud mixed with straw. Weathered by time, softened by the elements, they stood magnificently. They were the work of Buddhist monks during the sixth and seventh centuries. The monks were hermits who lived in small caves in the same valley. By carving caves for the Buddhas to live in, next to *their* caves, it was almost like the monks were saying "as we are present in the world, so the Buddha is present in the world. In our art we make room for Buddha to be part of our world. Life in this far-flung valley, on the Silk Road from East to West, is conducted in sacred company." I think that's what people say when they put religious artworks around their world. Maybe it's something like engraving on the West End mantle of the now ruined Cathedral of the Blessed Sacrament: "Ecce Tabernaculum Dei cum Hominibus", "behold the dwelling of God is with humanity". God is here. Let us live sacredly.

In March of 2001, the Taliban inserted dynamite into nooks and crannies around the giant Buddhas and blew them up. In Elijah's complaint to God, he notes that people have thrown down the altars of God. The destruction of art. The destruction of beautiful petitions to live sacredly. Why would people do this? Elijah doesn't know;

he can't get his head around it. The alpha animals seize and shake the world by its throat. Elijah watches.

This is not all he sees. He also sees what he calls the "killing of God's prophets by the sword". Prophets are people who speak for God. Theirs is a tradition of speaking truly, of exposing foolishness and wrong, of demanding sacred living from the people. Which of the persecuted prophets should we choose? Martin Luther King, shot by James Earl Ray? Bishop Oscar Romero, gunned down during mass by persons never identified? Dietrich Bonhoeffer, executed by the government in Flossenbürg Concentration Camp? Te Whiti and Tohu, imprisoned by the New Zealand courts for doing no wrong? There is no shortage of example. Why do we do this? Elijah doesn't know; he can't get his head around it. In his complaint to God, he laments the killing of the prophets by the sword. The alpha animals are seizing and shaking the world by its throat. Elijah is watching, and despairing.

In his despair he cries out to God "I alone am left, and now they're seeking me". I alone am left. I alone am left.

Perhaps, in a world seized by alpha animals, the assured effect for people who seek the sacred will be a sense of being alone - of isolation - of not belonging within the workings of the world. Perhaps broken community, social-spiritual dislocation, is a guaranteed feature of a world run by alpha animals. (I don't understand this way of working. I don't share the goals of this way of thinking. I am a stranger to how everyone else seems to have chosen to live. I'm like the sole survivor of another world that's disappeared. Thrust into a sense of being alone.)

Feeling alone, Elijah acts out his aloneness. He withdraws to a cave - all by himself - withdrawn from the world that's going mad. Maybe here, in isolation, he can be safe. Maybe here, sleep will give him rest from those images of broken statues and dying prophets. Maybe here, his sense of not belonging to the Alpha World will find some relief.

Unfortunately, it doesn't. Even in his cave of withdrawal, Elijah keeps having his attention drawn to what's going on just outside. Just outside there's a huge damaging wind, splitting mountains and breaking rocks - sounding like an exploding statue. Just outside there's an earthquake, knocking down the Portico upon which is written "God is with us". Just outside there's a raging fire, the destructive force of which he really doesn't want to contemplate (don't look at the flash - it'll make you blind). He's here to get away from all that, but from right outside his cave, all these things are presenting themselves - and God's in none of it. Not in the blowing and breaking. Not in the shaking and destroying. Not in the burning and flaming. God's

in none of it. It's just the Alpha Animals fashioning a world in their image. I alone am left. Amid the destructive fashioning, "humanity seeking hope" is feeling desperately alone.

A conventional reading of Elijah's situation next has a "still small voice" speaking to Elijah. That's what's reported in the King James English translation "a still, small voice". And since, in that translation, God's absence is not announced in the voice (as it was in the wind, earthquake and fire), the traditional assumption is that God is in a still, small voice. In fact, the New Revised Standard Version, a more careful translation than the King James, makes no mention of a voice. Nor does it claim that God is in it. It notes only that suddenly the world outside the cave had gone deathly quiet - the sound of sheer silence.

What does it mean when a lonely man, hiding from the world, suddenly notices that the warring world has gone silent? What's happened? Have our fears come true? Has the whole thing actually just blown itself finally to death? Were the sounds of the wind, earthquake and fire the sounds of the end? I alone am left!

It's too much for Elijah. He needs to go out and see if he's now completely alone.

Emerging from his cave, he is met by a question: "what are you doing here, Elijah?" Elijah's response is to repeat his despair over the tearing down of the altars and the killing of the prophets. Elijah's response is to state again, word for word the same, that he alone is left. He's terminally, intransigently alone!

God instructs Elijah to go back into the world. And God assures him that out there, in the world so grievously harassed by Alpha Animals, waiting for him are 7000 faithful people. To the man who fears that he is alone, God promises the company of 7000 people.

*We are not alone,
we live in God's world.
We believe in God:
who has created and is creating,
who has come in Jesus . . .
to reconcile and make new . . .
We are called to be the Church:
to celebrate God's presence . . .
to love and serve others,
to seek justice and resist evil . . .
In life, in death, in life beyond death,*

God is with us.

We are not alone. [A New Creed of United Church of Canada - 1968, edited]

The hidden 7000 companions. Elijah is not alone.

Some number of centuries after Elijah, another human being finds that his world has become a hostile, frightening environment. It's become, for Peter, a stormy sea that's lapping at his feet. He's not designed to function here. He's not designed to tread these waves. Indeed he's beginning to sink, and it's all really frightening. As he cries out in fear, God comes to him as someone - - - holding out a hand. A saving sign that we are not alone - the extending, in God's service, of a human hand. For Peter, it's someone with him on the water, extending a human hand. For Elijah, it's the giving by God of a company of others - many, many human hands. To both people of faith, it's an affirmation that in God's world they are not alone - the gift of human solidarity within the world that belongs to God.

And so we say to the Alpha Animals: this world does not belong to you! It belongs to God. With your bombs and rhetoric, you are ham-fistedly attempting to make us fearful, divided and lonely. But we stand, hand in hand with the many, many others, with the seven thousand times seven thousand who are building another reality. You promise us fire and fury, the likes of which we never before have seen. But we **have** seen it. We've seen the pulling down of altars and the killing of the prophets. We see you, and we recognise your work. But we will not serve it. We don't belong to you. Like the world which you are attempting to snatch, we belong to God.

So while you do the launching of missiles, we will do peace. While you threaten fury, we will pursue purity of heart. While you knock down the altars, we will build brotherhood and sisterhood among God's people. And while you draw your violent lines of loneliness, to one another we will hold out our hands.

Living in God's world, in celebratory defiance of the Alpha Animals, we hold out our hands.

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