

## Not Alone

### 1 Kings 19:9b-21

Several years ago, former Surgeon General Dr. Vivek Murthy asserted that we are living in an epidemic of loneliness. Why was the surgeon general concerned about this? Loneliness turns out to be more than just a feeling, it can result in a 29% increased risk of heart disease; a 32% increased risk of stroke; and a 50% increased risk of developing dementia for older adults. Loneliness affects us not only as individuals, but it affects our communal connections. Eric Liu, the CEO of Citizen University — a Seattle-based nonprofit that aims to build community and civic awareness nationwide, notes: “When you are alone and disconnected there's more stress, there's more inflammation, there's more anxiety. And that has effects not only on the body but the ways in which we see each other in community and feel connected to one another... So much of the challenge that we have right now is far upstream of electoral politics and policy, it is a culture problem.” Liu also said that the longer a person is disconnected, the easier it is for them to stop believing that others have their interests in mind or that it's possible to find common cause.

Today we hear the story of Elijah facing his own time of loneliness, disconnected and wondering if anyone else is on his side. That's surprising, because Elijah is one of the superheroes, the great prophets of the Old Testament. He'd performed great signs and wonders to call people back to God. He'd caused a drought on Israel for 3 years to show that God provided the rain, not some pagan rain god. He'd raised the son of a widow from the dead. Most famously, he faced down the priests of Baal on Mt. Carmel, where he called down fire from heaven to prove that God was God and Baal was not. If there was a prophetic superhero in the Old Testament, Elijah was it.

But that's not what the reading today shows us. Fresh from facing the priests of Baal on Mt. Carmel, the prophet was on the run. What should have been a great victory for the people of Israel who still trusted God instead left Elijah running for his life, faced with the wrath of Queen Jezebel. He traveled to the furthest border of the kingdom, and then fled further into the wilderness. Both in terms of distance and time, Elijah should be safe, because no one else is around. That's when he collapses under a tree and cries out to God, “Enough of this, God! Take my life—I'm ready to join my ancestors in the grave!” (1 Kings 19:4). He feels all alone. He is over it all and done with it.

But God wasn't done with Elijah yet. God knew that, like a toddler, Elijah needed food and a nap. God sent an angel to give him bread to sustain him for the journey. He's given time to rest and regroup, food to strengthen and sustain him in the wilderness. God knows the journey will be too much for him otherwise.

God doesn't just give Elijah food, though. He's sent further into the wilderness, to the mountain of God, where our reading today begins. And what happens next is truly amazing. One after another, God demonstrates his power in a mighty wind that shook the mountains to their core, a shattering earthquake, and a roaring fire. But God was not in the wind, and he wasn't in the earthquake, nor was he in the fire. Instead, he came in “a voice of quiet calm,” or that “still, small voice” as the King James Version of the Bible puts it. God came in a voice. God spoke. God was present in his Word.

However we translate it, this voice seems too miniscule for God's magnificent frame. And

that's the point. Elijah is pining for God to do something big and showy, as God had done for Elijah before. He's panicky, thinking he alone is left. In a barely audible whisper, God says, "I've got this. You're not alone. In fact, I have seven thousand more followers, just like you."

And then God gave him instructions for the next phase of his ministry. Elijah was to anoint Hazael king over Aram and Jehu as king over Israel. And then Elijah was supposed to raise up Elisha as an apprentice prophet after him. There was work to do! And Elijah needed to do it! But God in his wonderful grace spoke a gentle Word of encouragement to cheer Elijah along the way. Maybe Elijah was down and out, but with God things were on the rise. No longer would Elijah be alone. God was with him, and Elisha would be too. Not only that, but Elijah was wrong to think that he and he alone was faithful to the Lord. God still had seven thousand people in Israel who hadn't bowed down to Baal. There was a faithful remnant—there always is. Even though we can't always see who our friends and allies are, they're out there, because God never leaves his people all alone. He watches over them and takes care of them so that they can carry out his mission.

So, strengthened by God's Word and food and comforted by his forgiveness, Elijah goes on from there and finds Elisha and calls him to follow him. And for the rest of his life, Elijah carries on a mighty ministry in which he challenges King Ahab and Queen Jezebel, and keeps preaching the Word of God no matter if it's what the people want to hear or not. God came to Elijah at his lowest and raised him up, and gave him what he needed. He had God's word, provision, and forgiveness. He had the others God was placing in his life to encourage and help him in his work. No matter what successes or failures plagued his past, Elijah

knew the journey would not be too great for him. He was not alone, and he had a future with his God.

The world is a lot right now. Life is a lot right now. Wars and rumors of wars, economic uncertainty, severe weather, and whatever else is going on can be draining. But this reading is a reminder that it is ok. When faced with challenges and chaos, maybe you do need to be encouraged to step away. Maybe not flee to the desert, but at least take a nap, eat a snack, find a quiet place. Turn off the news, turn off your phone, and rest. And in doing that, take the time to listen for God's voice and be energized for the work God is calling us back to - work that won't be easy but is ours to do all the same.

But we don't just withdraw. We also reengage. Elijah doesn't just withdraw. He is sent back into the world. He'll be given other people to travel with him. Elijah is given strength, purpose, and community. With God providing those things, Elijah is given a new chance at life, a new life.

Some of you are probably old enough to know the chorus of a song by the Rolling Stones. "You can't always get what you want, but if you try sometimes well you might find you get what you need." The people following Jesus may not have wanted him to die for them, but they needed him to do so. Jonah didn't want to be swallowed by a whale, but he needed to be brought to that turning point where God could use him. Elijah didn't want to run out into the wilderness, but that's where he was refreshed, restored, and redirected.

We, too, are given much from God; not always what we want, but what we need. We, too, are given strength, purpose, and community. God gives us strength as He nourishes us with His

Word and Sacraments. A splash of water, a wafer and a plastic cup may seem as insufficient as bread and water did to Elijah, but God comes to us through Baptism and Communion. Still today, the Lord hides in the little, the lowly, the quiet of his Word, his baptism, his meal. The great God still conceals himself in the “still, small voice” of Christ crucified and risen for you. We are given purpose as we live out our vocations, doing God’s work in our careers, in our families, and in the world. God gives us community, the family of believers created in Baptism and sustained in Holy Communion. The community that is bound together in Christian love, that cares for us when we are weary and worn, tired and tried, that lifts us up in prayer when we can’t form the words ourselves.

The Christian life is full of mountains and valleys, of good times and bad times. Through it all, Jesus comes along beside us to feed us and nourish us and charge us up again. God gives us strength to make it through the hard times in life. God gives us purpose for our lives. God gives us community with our fellow believers. God provides, and in God we’re never alone.

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