

What are you doing here?

"I would love to live like a river flows, carried by the surprise of its own unfolding" John O'Donohue

Wow. I'm enthralled by a vision of living and being from a place of deep restedness in God. This is a life of unfettered openness to God's wonder and invisible fecundity, as Merton calls it – of willing to not know what is next. This is a life where the easing whispers of *"Lord Jesus Christ,.....have mercy upon me"* gently rise and fall on our breath to pace daily affairs. And this is very much a leading, not lagging



life – one where we spontaneously move in the center of God's will, directives and workings. What a blessing to find more of life unveiling itself this way. Instead of our souls forever 'catching up' with overcommitted-selves and with God (on the precipice of overwhelm), we are a divine step ahead and the world has to catch up to our days and sacred rhythms.

The great irony is that such an endearing vision - born out of silence - comes while I'm feeling quite weary to be honest. Its as if rather than a light floating feather, I'm more of that rough stone thinking I can skip across the river surface to the other side - clearly in vain. Yet as always, God's persistent grace and impeccable timing meets me, and us, where we are. And so the invitation to enter into Elijah's experience in 1 Kings 19 becomes all the more precious.

Amid many contemplations, I'm drawn to Elijah's inner movements from chaos to calm, and from confusion to clarity. Finding myself transfixed with feet planted in a crevice, I look on as Elijah encounters our Almighty God in a cave at Mount Horeb.

And the word of the Lord came to him: "What are you doing here, Elijah?" He replied, "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"...

[Enter the rock-shattering wind, earthquake, and fire which the Lord were not in. Then the gentle whisper (NIV); still, small voice (KJV); sheer silence (NRSV)]

...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?". He replied, "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 Kings 19:9-10; 13-14

This and the whole journey through 1 Kings 19 is utterly rich beyond familiar terrains. Much, much more than the preceding display of God's fiery magnificence at Mt. Carmel (1 Kings 18) or the divine preference for silent revelation (wind-earthquake-fire-still, small voice).

What I've resonated with instead is Elijah's:

- Desolation and wilderness wandering after coming off a spiritual high;
- Emotional upheavals, depression and being consumed by sheer fatigue; and
- Sense of purposelessness yet gravitating towards God with a 40-day trek to Mount Horeb. Also known as Mount Sinai, this was a place of revelation - cue Moses and the 10 commandments - where Israelites of past commonly sought an audience with God.

Questioned not once, but twice in the cave of my heart

"What are you doing here?" seems rather direct, crude even. Yet this was hardly the case. As the scene plays out and Elijah's response proves, God's intent was to create sacred space for unloading pent-up emotional and spiritual meanderings. Having gone through this ourselves, we can offer a great deal of empathy for Elijah's sincere desire for clarity, amid confusions too profound to articulate.

And then an invitation, lesson and experience of God's glory.

As the dramatic fades, we pick up from when Elijah hears God's soft whispers and senses the gentle, Divine presence. I absolutely love the natural flow and manifest reaction - when Elijah pulls his cloak over his face and walks towards and into God's presence. Immediately my spirit comes alive and desires to emulate such embodiment of reverence, largely missing from nonchalant tendencies these days when approaching the throne of grace.



Another mystery unveils itself as the same question arises - "What are you doing here, Elijah?" - and is met with the exact response. Or is it really the same, could we wonder?

I've been sitting with the Lord about the many interpretations of why this repetition. Is it a case of our being hard of hearing, and in need of God's patient reminders, as seen in many other portions of scripture? Could it be God allowing Elijah's and our inner chaos time to settle, even as God was ultimately found in 'sheer silence' after all the drama?

Pre- and post-COVID-19: transformed by a mind renewed, ready to test and approve God's good, pleasing and perfect will (Romans 12:2)

Today, I was struck by another meditation of the two questions which spoke deeply to me. A question, first - of the past and then again - of the future.

I could see clear parallels of Elijah's experience to my pre-COVID-19 way of life dominated by bouts of frustration, exhaustion, self-disappointment and compulsiveness - all while thinking I was quite zealous for and walking in God's pathway of ministry and unique calling.

And I was, and still am drawn to seek God's affirmation in the unfreedom of externals. Finding myself eager to measure what I've done to bless others and if such actions would be 'enough' to meet God's expectations of bearing fruit as a faithful Christ-follower. When such acts of devotions go unrecognised, this breeds further disillusionment.

As a prophet, Elijah experienced many miracles in the ordinary course of discharging his role. To name a few - raising the widow's son from the dead (1 Kings 17:23); the great battle at Mount Carmel; and some speedster gifts - "the power of the LORD came upon Elijah, and tucking his cloak into his belt, he ran ahead of Ahab all the way to Jezreel" (1 Kings 18:46). Could it be God's absence from that the wind that tore through the mountains and shattered rocks, the earthquake, and the fire were a way of revealing newness to and reforming Elijah in the context of stillness? In other words, God chose to draw the prophet closer through an unusual and intriguing approach.

And then the second question arrives. But now - like Elijah - my inner man emerges to stand in reverence and awe at the mouth of the cave. An honest response of confusion, frustration and unclear future direction remains. At the same time, I also sense everything around me has changed. God knows and re-affirms this through distinct instructions for Elijah to execute strategic and tactical responses. Elijah was to travel north through the desert of Damascus to anoint new kings, all while being exposed to Jezebel's constant threats (King Jehu ended up eradicating Baal worship in Israel - 2 Kings 10:28). God's other responses - for Elijah to appoint a successor in Elisha, and reserving 7,000 faithful followers - seems to comfort and address the crux of Elijah's emotional trauma, bias and blindspots.

Caught up in the mystery of it all

In times when a prolonged COVID-19 season is plausible - with multiple waves and distant vaccines - Elijah's experience offers us much-needed hope that there is a place for quiet, transformative direction from God. Yet here, mystery is very much part of the deal. And mystery is the door to living a life of wonder for God and His enigmatic ways.

"Remember, mystery isn't something that you cannot understand - it is something that you can endlessly understand! There is no point at which you can say, "I've got it". Always and forever, mystery gets you!" Father Richard Rohr

What is needed from us perhaps is the ability to maintain an open posture in our spirits while receiving and holding unanswered tensions that continue to grow. Like Elijah, this could be our own version of a 40-day wilderness journey toward Mount Horeb, toward God's heart and His revelation for us.

And so in this season, could God be inviting you to a deeper, uninhibited response - "What are you doing here?"



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