

Feeling Isolated

Texts: 1 Kings 19: 8-18; Lauren Winner, *Still* (see *Bulletin*); Romans 8: 31-39

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A few nights ago, our family watched the 2015 movie, *the Martian*, starring Matt Damon as an astronaut named Mark Watney. An accident during a dust storm makes the rest of the crew believe that Watney has been killed, and as the storm increases, they are forced to leave their base on Mars early for the return trip home to Earth.

But Watney was only injured by the communications array breaking free from its moorings in the storm. He awakes in the Martian dust to find that he is alone on Mars. His crewmates have left with the Mars Ascent Vehicle. The communications array has been destroyed, so he has no way to communicate with them, or with Earth. No one knows he's alive, and he has no way of telling them.

He is alone. The rest of the movie is about how he tries to stay alive, and figure out how to communicate with others, and somehow find a way to return to home and life as he knew it.

Sound familiar? I don't mean the movie, but the situation! Many of us feel trapped in our homes, trying to stay alive, trying to figure out how to communicate with others, trying to hold on until we can return to normal life after the pandemic.

We are suffering from isolation right now. We're worried about our kids social development, since they can't play with other kids at this crucial time in their lives. We're worried about our parents, whom we can't visit. We're worried about how we're going to communicate with others by technology, and how that communication isn't the same as a face to face visit.

Every time we are out, other people seem like a threat to us: are they keeping their distance, are they wearing a mask, are they unknowingly carrying the virus, spreading it to everyone else in the store?

For those who live alone, they may not have had a hug in 6 months. We love our church family, but we are separated from them. Even meeting in the parking lot has been too much because of the threat level in our county.

It's disorienting, disconcerting, and disturbing. Many of us are feeling profoundly sad, missing each other and the world of carefree wandering through life we once knew.

In our Old Testament text this morning, we heard about Elijah and the profound isolation that he went through. Following God for him meant confronting the prophets of Baal that Queen Jezebel had brought with her into Israel when she married King Ahab.

Elijah had constructed a great contest to see which god was really God, Jezebel's Phoenician Baal or Israel's Yahweh. He had had a great triumph for Israel's God, which I'll have to talk about sometime, but we don't have time for that right now.

Naturally, this ticked Queen Jezebel off, and he had to flee from Israel. From a moment of high to a moment of low, from a moment of crowds cheering him to a moment of complete isolation, running from his powerful enemy, unsure if he would ever be able to return home to Israel.

He heads for Mt. Horeb, which probably means nothing to you, but it's a mountain about 40 days' journey from Israel, and it's better known as Mt. Sinai. Elijah's all alone, and he's heading to a place he thinks he will find God, to Mt. Sinai where the Ten Commandments were given.

Elijah is hoping that he will be able to meet God as the people of Israel had during the Exodus: a great wind from God had helped the Israelites to cross the Red Sea to safety. They headed to Mt. Sinai to meet God. God was on the mountain, and the mountain glowed with fire at the top, and the mountain trembled with an earthquake because of the presence of God.

When Elijah gets to Sinai, the word of God comes to him, not with the words of comfort that he's looking for, but with a question: what are you doing here?

In this case, I don't think we're talking about God's voice speaking to Elijah when it says the word of God came to him. I think what the text means by the voice of God is that inner voice that we have, where sometimes questions or ideas pop into our heads without any build up in our thoughts beforehand.

Elijah gets to Sinai and looks around, and it's as if he says to himself, "What are you doing here? How did you get to this place in your life?" And it just feels like that's God asking him the question.

Elijah's answer speaks to his profound despair, and his profound feeling of being alone: "The Israelites have forsaken your covenant, torn down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they seek my life too!"

I alone am left, and they seek my life, too. You can hear his loneliness, his isolation, his confusion: I was doing what you asked. I was faithful, God, and now look where I am.

He feels abandoned by God. He wants to know God's presence in his loneliness.

He goes to stand in the mouth of a cave to see if God will answer him. A great wind comes, a wind like the wind that split the Red Sea for the Israelites to cross in the Exodus. But Elijah doesn't find God in the wind.

Then there is a great earthquake, like the earthquake that the Israelites felt when God was speaking to Moses on the mountain. But Elijah does not find God in the earthquake.

Then there is a fire, like the fire that engulfed the mountain when Israel was waiting for the Law to come down from God, but God was not in the fire.

All the signs of God's presence are there, but Elijah can't feel God's presence, can't find God. God isn't in the signs this time.

Sometimes we feel that way, too. We know we ought to be feeling God's presence. We have been working for God, trying to do the right thing, and here we are in a pandemic, trapped at home. It's tough.

But we weren't quite finished with Elijah yet, were we? Because he did find God on the mountain top. Traditionally it says that he found God in 'a still, small voice,' but more modern translations say that he found God in the sheer silence.

In other words, it was in the very absence of God speaking to him, in the quiet where he was longing to hear a voice, in the isolation itself, that Elijah finally found God again.

After the silence, God finally speaks to Elijah: Go back to where you were, go back to Israel, go back to life. You're not alone. I'm with you. There are others who are also with you, who still believe in me. They'll be there to help you face whatever is to come.

It turned out that the isolation, the disappointment, the looking for God and not finding God, the agony of what seemed like the profound silence of God, was exactly what Elijah needed to reconnect with God!

Only when he had done all he could to try to find God by looking in all the old places where God had been found before, only after God's profound silence in the old places, could Elijah realize that he had to go back to find God in new places, and that he wouldn't be alone in his search any more.

Lauren Winner talks about how to deal with times in our lives that we don't like, maybe like this pandemic time: She quotes the art critic Peter Schjeldahl, once said that if he was looking at a painting that he didn't like, that he would ask himself, 'What would I like about this painting if I liked it?'

I think that is a profound question to ask. We are in a time which we don't much like, this pandemic time. But what if we were to ask ourselves, *what would we like about this time, if we liked it?*

Perhaps we would find that we were spending more time with family. Perhaps we are reading more, or seeing the world differently, or are better able to appreciate how much other people mean to us.

Perhaps we are grateful for the freedom we normally have to just go out and do whatever we want, or maybe we recognize how hard it is for some disabled people, whose lives are always constrained in ways that only now we are recognizing.

Perhaps we have realized that we don't need to spend so much money on going out, or that our jobs going forward could be done from home more, to help save the environment by cutting down on commuting or flying across the country on business to look at PowerPoint slides that we could see just as well in our office here.

I know you don't like this pandemic situation, but if you were to like it, what would you like about it? That's a question I hope you will be asking yourself this week.

And while you do, I want you to remember, even if sometimes it feels like God is absent, and you aren't able to find God in all the old places, God is still with us, sometimes speaking with an inner voice, sometimes questioning us, sometimes waiting for us in something new.

As Paul said in his letter to the Romans, there's nothing that can separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ: not hardship or distress, or persecution, or famine or nakedness or peril or sword. No, nothing in all creation. Not even a pandemic. And thanks be to God for that!
Amen