

God's gentle pastoral care

Sermon on 1. Kings 19:1-13

by Pastor Alexander Mielke on February 24, 2008

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Dear Congregation,

The sermon text today from 1. Kings 19 takes us to the 9th century before Christ. There is a very tough dispute in Israel. King Ahab has married the Phoenician princess Jezebel, and with the foreign queen also come foreign gods, who turn many people away from the God of the Bible. One person has the courage to resist this: Elijah.

Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done, and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword. 2Then Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah, saying, "So may the gods do to me, and more also, if I do not make your life like the life of one of them by this time tomorrow." 3Then he was afraid; he got up and fled for his life, and came to Beer-sheba, which belongs to Judah; he left his servant there. 4But he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a solitary broom tree. He asked that he might die: "It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors." 5Then he lay down under the broom tree and fell asleep. Suddenly an angel touched him and said to him, "Get up and eat." 6He looked, and there at his head was a cake baked on hot stones, and a jar of water. He ate and drank, and lay down again. 7The angel of the Lord came a second time, touched him, and said, "Get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you." 8He got up, and ate and drank; then he went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights to Horeb the mount of God. 9At that place he came to a cave, and spent the night there. Then the word of the Lord came to him, saying, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" 10He answered, "I have been very zealous for the Lord, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away." 11He said, "Go out and stand on the mountain before the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by." Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake; 12and after the

earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence. 13When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. Then there came a voice to him that said, "What are you doing here, Elijah?"

Elijah hears this question: "What are you doing here?" He comes from a world of violence and fighting. He experiences God's presence in a great stillness, which surrounds him with its peace. And then this question, which may also disturb us, when we come into God's presence: "What are you doing? Are you doing the right thing? What value has what you do?"

Elijah is an outstanding figure of the Old Testament. When we enter a synagogue, we can discover an empty chair in the front near the Torah Shrine, on which no one will ever sit. It is being kept for Elijah, who will – according to Jewish belief - come back one day, at the dawn of time, when the messianic age begins. Elijah is the first great prophet figure in the Bible, and he is **the prophet of the First Commandment**. Jezebel brings along many Gods from Phoenicia, foremost Baal and Aschera; many people in Israel are spellbound by their colourful and glittering festivities. Isebel is not squeamish. Wherever there is resistance to the new religion, she uses violence. In chapter 18 we hear that she can exterminate almost all who held fast to the God of the Bible. But Elijah is not intimidated. On the Mount Carmel the decision is made. Elijah speaks against ecstasy and trance, with which the Baal priests want to impress people; and he speaks a quiet, trusting prayer. And when the deception of the false Baal priests is exposed, there is a bloodbath; the disappointed people slaughter the Baal priests. Elijah is the hero, he has helped the First Commandment to be victorious: "You shall have no other gods before me."

But shortly after, Elijah breaks down. Isebel rages with fury, and Elijah is full of fear. He runs away, as far as it is at all possible, to the most southern region of the Judah desert. He was able to save himself, but he is tormented by the feeling of having failed completely. Weakened, he falls down under a broom tree and only wishes to die. And what follows now, I find to be one of the most helpful and most important scenes of the entire Bible. Here, we experience **God's gentle pastoral care**. God's messenger approaches carefully, gives to Elijah what helps him and grants him time. Elijah is allowed to sleep, is allowed to simply rest. The angel puts toasted bread and water beside him, something that can strengthen him. But the angel understands how tired Elijah is, and lets him still sleep.

If we only had this, too! Have someone by our side who supports us and has time for us, when we lack courage and strength at times. Who says the words to us that help: „Get up and eat. – Take nourishment again, be open to what helps you. Feel new strength, have confidence in yourself, get up and risk taking new steps!“ It is fascinating. There are toasted bread and a pitcher of water before Elijah, and he feels that angel hands have put it there for him. These are everyday, ordinary things, and yet, he senses God’s gentle care through them. The story may open our eyes, how God takes care of us, too, how well God hides his gentle pastoral care in small, insignificant things of everyday life, his friendly and persistent accompaniment and guidance.

Then, however, Elijah still experiences something exciting. Suddenly, he feels immense strength within himself, and suddenly he knows where he must go. To Mount Sinai, situated still further south, to the famous mountain of God’s revelation, here it is called Horeb. Here, God has something special in mind with Elijah. On this mountain, where Moses has received the Ten Commandments, he wants to show Elijah who he really is. “Go out and stand on the mountain before the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by”, Elijah hears. First a powerful storm comes up, the mountains tremble, the rocks brake to pieces.” - “But the Lord was not in the wind”, it then, however, says. Then the ground shakes beneath Elijah’s feet, Elijah is in danger of losing his footing, because everything around him collapses. “But the Lord was not in the earthquake“, it says again. And finally, lightning flashes, a thunderstorm unleashes its fury above him; we can imagine how he, because of these forces, again fears for his life. “But the Lord was not in the fire.“ And after the fire there was a still, small voice. When Elijah heard this, he covered his face with his mantle, he went out and stood by the entrance of the cave. And behold, there came a voice to him and said: "What are you doing here, Elijah?"

Elijah experiences a different God than what he had imagined him to be up to now, and this God questions what he had done to this point. In a world filled with violence, Elijah has answered with counter-violence. On Mount Carmel he has shown the people that the God of the Bible is stronger than the foreign gods, and that has ended in a bloodbath. But now he experiences a gentle God, who speaks to him in the stillness. Johannes Tauler, a mystic of the Middle Ages and important teacher of Luther, says: “God can thunder and storm, but he bends down tenderly to the person who waits for him in the desert.” Gertrud Fussenegger, an Austrian author, has written: “A God, who renounces to show himself in thunder, lightning and force. A God who deigns to live in a quiet wind, in a gentle breeze. He wants to be recognized in insignificance or remain unrecognized – in this way, he delivers himself to people.” Gertrud Fussenegger writes this in her book “They were Contemporaries - Sie waren

Zeitgenossen", which is about how people experienced Jesus. And indeed, something of the new God-image of Jesus lights up here in the cave of Elijah.

Jesus says: "And in praying do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do. For your Father knows what you need before you ask him" (Matthew 6:7). Elijah experienced this attentive care-taking of God. Jesus says: "You have heard that it was said 'You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven" (Matthew 5:43-45). And when Elijah hears the question "What are you doing here?", then all his brutal behaviour is put into question by God, whose stillness and peace he experiences here.

This God, who is not in the storm, not in the earthquake, not in the thunderstorm, has shown his mercy in all clarity in Jesus. And in the strongest disputes, Jesus' road is not determined by violence and counter-violence, but by stillness and suffering, by praying and hoping, by **the quiet force of suffering, which wins the other person for the mercy of God.**

To experience God's presence in the stillness. To receive new strength from God for the road. To experience God's gentle pastoral care and pass it on. These were the most important experiences for me at the Bishop's Retreat at the beginning of the week. Michael Pryse, the Bishop of our Eastern Synod, had invited to the Retreat Centre Mount Carmel in Niagara Falls. 40 Lutheran and 32 Anglican Pastors gathered, among them also 4 Bishops. For me it was a very good opportunity to get to know colleagues and work areas of our church, also to learn more about the Anglican Church. It was good for me that prayer and church service took up a great deal of our time together. Four times a day we congregated in the chapel, celebrated Communion daily and together we renewed our ordination vows. And prayers included both, times of silence, when the individual could become quiet before God. But a few times, exuberant joy could be experienced, when for example during the song "I am the bread of life" the promise of God was sung "I will raise you up" and it went like a jolt through us.

During the concluding church service, the Anglican Bishop of the Niagara Diocese, Ralph Spence, preached. He related an experience in London, which I want to pass on to you here at this point. This is what he said: "Last week I was in London for the General Synod of our Anglican World Community. It was 10 o'clock in the morning, and I had half an hour to travel from one meeting near Westminster Abbey across to Lambeth Palace. I was angry at the tight time schedule; I had found the first meeting very unproductive, and somehow I was also sad, because I thought about the fact that I would go into retirement in just a few weeks. It was a

hole of frustration in which I fell at that moment. To travel from Westminster to Lambeth in the morning is like wanting to drive through downtown Toronto at 5:00 o'clock in the afternoon. With grim foreboding I got into a taxi. The taxi driver was an older, grumpy man. He looked me up and down and asked: „Are you a man of God?“ In view of my clerical clothing I admired his astuteness, however, decided to enquire back out of politeness: „And you, son, to which church do you go?“ He said grumpily: „To none. When I got divorced from my wife, they did not want me any more.“ After the impression which this unfriendly man made on me, I could truly understand the woman who had left him. We struggled through London streets when his cell phone rang. He had a prolonged conversation which made me uneasy in view of the heavy traffic; I also had the impression that it wasn't good news that he had heard. When I asked, he told me that his mother had been in the hospital for weeks and had been prepared for a difficult operation. But just now, she had suffered a stroke; the important operation to save her life had to be postponed and now the worst could be feared. I said: **„Son, I can pray for you.“** After some hesitation, he nodded quietly. Somehow I hoped he would steer to the side and stop the car. But he had no intention to do that. Therefore, I sat down on the small jump-seat, so that he could hear me through the plastic shield, and I said a prayer for his mother and his family, while he steered the car unmoved through London's narrow streets. Finally, we arrived. I paid my fare through the small slit and wanted to get out. Then the unexpected happened. The old, grumpy taxi driver jumped out, ran around the taxi and opened the door – have you ever seen a London Taxi driver do something like that? Then he reached for the taxi cashbox and gave me the money back. „Reverend, put it in the box in the church!“, he said And when he waved back as he drove away in his taxi, I went into the next meeting, which would also be strenuous and unproductive, however, I felt comforted. I knew again, why I had once become a Reverend, to what kind of service Jesus had called me.

I pass this story on to you, because this old Bishop, who will turn over his office to a younger man in a few days, has been able to experience God's presence and guidance in an insignificant place in the midst of everyday life.

I think this is encouraging for us too. We often want to experience only great things. But small things in our every day life can be so important, can be so helpful for us and others. Let us be encouraged by Elijah who discovered God not in thunder, lightning or force, but in a quiet wind, in a gentle breeze. Let us be open for God's gentle pastoral care, let us pass it on to others in our every day life! Amen.