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Proper 7C: 1 Kings 19:1-15a
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Understanding today's reading, or any reading, from 1 Kings requires some background.

The reigns of David and Solomon are often remembered
as a high point of ancient Israelite history.

Not only is the beloved first temple conceived of under David
and built under Solomon,
the twelve tribes of Israel are all united under their rule.

After Solomon's death,
the ten northern tribes break off into their own kingdom,
which is called Israel.

There are only two tribes in the southern kingdom,
called Judah— though Judah has Jerusalem.

These two kingdoms, once united, and now divided.

They are sometimes allies and friends,
and sometimes they squabble,
for almost two hundred years,
until the northern kingdom
is conquered.

In our first Kings reading, we are plopped down right in the middle of this time period.

King Ahab rules 100 years or so after Israel and Judah split,
100 years or so before Assyria conquers the northern kingdom of Israel.

King Ahab marries Jezebel in an attempt to gain more allies;

Jezebel is the daughter of the Phoenicians—
just northwest of the northernmost tip of the northern kingdom.

Jezebel successfully convinces many Israelites to worship Ba'al,
Another popular deity in this area at the time.

Honestly, Ba'al probably had more followers.

Long story short, 1 Kings is set in a time of political turmoil–
 a divided country that used to be united– **AND** religious turmoil–
 Whom to follow causes much strife, and bickering, and upheaval
 Not much seems stable or certain.
 Sound familiar?

Enter Elijah, the human protagonist in the 1 Kings reading today.
 Elijah is a prophet in the northern kingdom of Israel during King Ahab's rule.
 Just before the passage for today, Elijah is on top of the world.
 In 1 Kings 18, on Mt. Carmel, (show on map)
 Elijah gives this incredibly dramatic demonstration
 of YHWH's superiority over Ba'al,
 over 450 prophets of Ba'al, who all die.
 Elijah reads as incredibly confident,
 incredibly sure of God,
 and unshakable in his faith.

As one might imagine, so many of Ba'al's prophets being killed
 did not go over well with Jezebel at all.
 So Jezebel starts harassing, threatening, bullying Elijah.
 Elijah runs away– to Beersheeba– to try and evade her.
 At the end of his very long journey,
 Elijah finally collapses, saying,
 "It is enough; now, O LORD, take away my life"

Elijah finds himself in deep despair partially because he feels incredibly isolated–
 he says it several times in this passage I'm the only one left.
 He has lost hope, too, a dramatic 180 from how he felt not that long ago.
 Elijah is remembered as being one of the greats,
 arguably even THE greatest prophet in the Hebrew Bible.
 And yet here we have Elijah,
 in such despair so deep he thinks he wants to die.
 Feeling hopeless and alone feels awful
 No matter who you are.

Suicide, which let's be real, is what Elijah is on about here,
 let's call it what it is, Elijah wants to die,
 is currently a leading cause of death for all age groups in the United States.
 Suicidologists now posit that ½ of the people in any room in the US
 fall into one of four categories:
 ppl worried about someone they love dying by suicide,
 people who have a loved one who has,
 in fact, died by suicide,
 ppl who are at risk themselves
 & ppl with lived experience,
 meaning, someone who has been suicidal in the past
 and decided to live

I am saying all of this out loud because, as we know,
 and as Elijah reminds us, feeling alone stinks.
 Feeling alone when going through a particularly difficult time not only stinks;
 it can also be dangerous.

Let's look more closely how God responds to the struggling Elijah.
 First of all, God is not overtly critical of Elijah's attitude,
 Which is kind of amazing, given the fact that in the last chapter,
 Elijah seems to have no doubts whatsoever about his own purpose
 & about God.
 So no shaming, no how could you .
 What God does do is let Elijah know
 that he is not alone.

God does NOT make the imminent threat of Jezebel go away,
 for reasons that I don't understand, reemphasizing,
 yet again, that I'm not God.

When Elijah does not want to go on, God shows up.

God shows up first in a snack,
 that which we get on planes, which we eat after school,
 which we grab to tide us over to dinner.
 For Elijah, in this particular moment,
 the nap and food do help.

And when Elijah doesn't completely snap out of it after the snack and nap,
 Of course he doesn't, right—
 sometimes sleep and food helps,
 but it generally does not make intense suffering just disappear
 God, instead of being miffed
 that Elijah is still frustrated and despairing,
 God shows up again .

God shows up in the sound of sheer silence
 What I really want to emphasize here is how subtle this would have been.
 There are some very clear parallels being drawn
 between Elijah and Moses in this passage,
 particularly in terms of location.
 Mt. Horeb and Sinai are thought to be the same place.

And Exodus, Exodus 19, in which Moses is the main human character,
 God **IS** in the earthquake, wind, and fire.
 During the giving of the law, the Lord descended upon Mt. Sinai (aka Horeb)
 in fire, smoke went up like the smoke of a kiln—
 aka wind— and the whole mountain quaked greatly....
 And then God answered Moses in thunder.

The Mosaic covenant with Israel, the gift of the law,
 Was given in the earthquake, wind, and fire.
 God's presence is symbolized as a pillar of fire
 And God was in it then – but not now
 God's presence is symbolized as a pillar of fire
 through the wilderness with Moses and company.

God being in the sound of sheer silence
 Is basically a 180 of some of the ways
 Elijah's ancestors in faith had reported experiencing God.
 God is showing up
 AND also God is showing up differently in a different generation.

It is only after coming to Elijah in **more than one way,**
both of which were probably rather puzzling to him,
 that God then asks Elijah to go back toward Damascus.
 And when God asks him to go to Damascus,
 Elijah is not all better. He is not "fixed."
 After the snack, after the sound of sheer silence,

Elijah remains captive to his own destructive thought pattern.
 He repeats, after the snack, after the sound of sheer silence,
 Elijah repeats, "I'm the only one left who loves you, God! I alone am left."

God does not ask Elijah to stop being frustrated, to stop despairing.
 God does ask Elijah not to completely give into his frustration and despair.
 God demonstrates, in unprecedented, subtle ways,
 God's presence and commitment.
 And when Elijah is able to do something again,
 Aka go to Damascus
 he finds out that he is not as alone
 as he thought he was.

When Elijah goes to Damascus, in this very same chapter
 Elijah meets his protege, who is named, confusingly, Elisha.
 Elisha too loves God,
 and Elijah finds meaning in mentoring Elisha for years.
 Elijah finds hope and purpose in his relationship with Elisha.
 But wait– that's not all.

In addition to Elisha,

The text says that there are also 7,000 folks who remain loyal to YHWH,
which is mentioned in this chapter in verse 18.

That's a lot of folks now and even more then,
percentage of the population wise.

And even if we love God,
God can occasionally feel
a little abstract for some people sometimes.

Elijah was not alone— and it was not only God accompanying him.

Elijah does still have community, even when he doesn't know it
and is completely convinced he was all alone.

Elijah is not as alone as he felt
In his loneliest moments.

I don't know that any of us
are as alone as we feel in our loneliest moments.

Suicide is often talked about solely in terms of mental illness,
and there is definitely an undeniable component to that.

And I love medicine and therapists and all of the everything. I mean, yay.

And people with lived experience have also said that

Losing hope and feeling very alone exacerbated their suffering,
& if the church can't offer some hope & some community,
we should sell this building tomorrow
& start going to brunch on Sundays instead.

Just like in Elijah's time, turmoil seems to be the name of the game.

Chaos is our constant companion. For many, varying levels of despair are, too.

And so is God. God is also our constant companion,
even when we feel isolated,

Not judging us if we can't believe it but just being present
when it's hard

Maybe none of us are as alone
as we feel in our loneliest moments. Amen.