

## Commentary 2: Connecting the Reading with the World

You are not alone. I care for you. Now get back to it. Perhaps not the most poetic summary of God's responses to the laments of a refugee prophet and an exiled people, but the passages before us contain this seemingly straightforward sentiment even as they invite reflection on rich themes of faithful relationship, divine sustenance, and persistent mission. Both the prophet and the people are alienated, exiled, and exhausted, and—in different ways—struggling with what will be their next faith chapter. In the midst of their wrestling, God brings different forms of assured care alongside a missional realism that reminds them of their shared strength and the endurance of God's revolutionary covenant.

Although in dissimilar contexts, Elijah and the Israelites are both enduring a season of struggle that seems to have no final victories or respite. In 1 Kings 19, Elijah, the great prophet and thorn in King Ahab and Queen Jezebel's side, has just been a conduit of Yahweh's decisive victory over the imperial cult and prophets of Ba'al by bringing rains to the parched land. But Elijah's faithfulness does not bring him solace and, in fact, puts him under even greater threat. With a death warrant on his head, he flees into the wilderness. He is exhausted physically, emotional, and spiritually; he is so overwhelmed that his singular hope is death. And then he sleeps. The lack of Yahweh's obvious presence, on the other hand, motivates the exiled Israelites' lament in Isaiah 65. In response to Yahweh's seeming absence and the loss of Jerusalem and the Temple, they almost passive-aggressively ask God to return and stop delivering them into the "hand of our iniquity."

It is fitting that these passages appear during Ordinary Time, a period during which there are no grand liturgical events (e.g., Advent, Christmas, Easter) but when we instead are plunged into stories of communal formation and discipleship. Ordinary time actually refers to the ordinal numbering of the Sundays after Pentecost, but for our purposes here the more common meaning may help us think about what follows after big events for a community. Whether it be victory or exile, where is God

when the community is exhausted and has a desperate need for reassurance? Ecclesially, these passages speak particularly to the struggle of faithfulness when final victory seems exceedingly elusive and time is infused with the brutal reality of unrelenting everyday politics and suffering. These scriptures invite us to reflect on how we embody God when we are not in power and even lack certainty about how the future will unfold. How do we look for the presence of God when we are in despair about our missional future?

Elijah's refuge is sleep and emphatic declarations before God. One could imagine him struggling with why his status as the great righteous prophet of the one true God does not protect him. He's fought the good fight—and yet a death warrant is his reward. How many contemporary Christian activists and/or leaders share this Sisyphusian despair? Perhaps it is more disheartening that after a great victory, a seeming break in the oppressive system, the system endures rather than imploding. Ahab is still in power and Ahab's typical insecure complaint (or perhaps verbal attack on Jezebel's impotent gods—one wonders what their domestic argument entailed) produces a death warrant rather than a resignation to Yahweh's reign. Elijah seems to have nothing else to give to his prophetic call.

God does not dismiss Elijah's pain and exhaustion. In fact, the angel of God tenderly touches Elijah and physically rouses him twice to eat and drink. With this renewal, Elijah continues a journey towards a theophany that echoes Moses' forty days and nights. Yet while the storm, earthquake, and fire harken back to Moses' meeting of God, for Elijah God is not present in those natural forces. Instead, God is found in the sheer silence that follows the tumult. The Stillpoint of the universe, who anchors the centripetal energy of all creation, announces Divine presence through an awesome hush. This contrast between Moses and Elijah challenges us to think about how we expect God to appear in our lives; does our experience of God's self-revelation need to be parallel another person's or even an iconic religious

leader's? God may choose particular moments and manifestations precisely to remind us of a dimension of God we have forgotten and yet desperately need to sustain our call.

But even after all that, Elijah repeats his lament to God. To this, God says simply: go back. Go back into the fray and pronounce with revolutionary certainty that the oppressive powers will fall. With a voice of missional realism, God asserts that Elijah is ready to return, in a verse not included at all in the Revised Common Lectionary (v. 18), adds that he was *never actually alone* in this mission . . . there are *seven thousand* faithful who will be with him. In other words, you may think you are the last righteous one standing—but you have missed an entire faithful remnant already journeying on this mission. We can almost hear varied stages of pastoral care in God's acts: physical sustenance, enveloping centering Presence, relational reconnection, and decisive sending forth. At some point, your healing will be found again in your mission, alongside others who are walking your collective journey.

In Isaiah 65, we see another temptation that arises in the face of missional despair: taking a shortcut to proximate power. We hear of God's great anger at those who abandon the path of Yahweh to secure their future through idols, arcane rituals, and even a false sense of holiness. As the religio-political power structure shifts around them, the Israelites set aside God's formative demands and the real Divine center to try to secure their own vision of the future. In our contemporary context, what do we

embrace, and perhaps even worship, to secure the power we need in a society beyond our control (e.g. the invisible hand of the market, natural social ordering, rugged individualism)? Yet, these shortcuts to ephemeral power eventually turn us away from the outstretched hand of God, even as God promises to walk with us to a new heaven and new earth and a new kind of social, economic, and religious reality. God's rebuke and judgment in Isaiah 65 is searing and clear, but notice: there is still a pronouncement of mercy and salvation. There remain good clusters on the weak vine, and that faithful remnant will inherit and inhabit the land again. God's mission abides and so does God's presence with those who truly seek God's heart.

This conclusion assures us, again, that we are not isolated from God or from a faithful community, even if we cannot yet recognize them. Faithful relationships (with God and others) are part of the divine sustenance that enables us to persist in our missional calling. God assures us that Care will present itself. But we must say yes to it, sometimes walking towards it in a literal physical manner. We must also know that divine care and revelation will not look, sound, or feel the same for everyone, but rather will meet us in our particular need. Yet neither of these passages offers a simple, warm fuzzy kind of care...for extended licking of wounds sometimes means they never heal. Instead, it is our challenge to embrace the steady care and faith in us that God offers: You are not alone. I care for you. Now get back to it.

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