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1 Kings 19:1-8
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The Prophetic Middle

Good Morning Church. Elijah is tired and so am I. So I invite you on my journey to try to figure out what the scriptures have to tell us today about faithfully living in community in the midst of conflict. This week I struggled with this passage and I am not sure if I have all the answers, so I invite you to struggle with me, telling me where I've been blind as we all seek to follow Jesus.

Please pray with me: may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be pleasing to you, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Welcome to the wilderness, a dangerous place of God's provision. Elijah is in the wilderness because he is stuck in the prophetic middle between the power of God and the royal family.

After I graduated from seminary, I had completed a goal that I had worked countless hours for. I felt on top of the world, but that was only because I was moving from the heights of the mountaintop into the valley below. I say this because, in those months between seminary and being here, I worried that no one would have me. That either because of my lack of experience, theological beliefs, or ADD there would be precious few churches who would have me be their pastor. And while, I am almost two years removed from that time, I do understand what it means to question one's spiritual call to be a minister. Especially being a minister to all people. And it may feel like I am about to go on a tangent, but I promise it connects to our verse with Elija. I have struggled with how to keep my Pastoral commitment to equip this church. How to keep my Christian commitment to be a midwife of the kingdom of God. I believe my pastoral call is not to divide, but to unite. To do the kingdom building work where there is no slave or free, jew or gentile, white or latino, queer or straight. My calling is to love people and let God sort out the rest.

Which brings us to Elijah. Elijah has the calling of the prophet. He is to see with the eyes of God and speak with the voice of God. Elijah is supposed to be the person who calls the people of God, back to God. The problem is that things don't work out very well for him. So Elijah has a competition with the prophets of Baal, a rival god for the hearts and the minds of the Isrealites. The competition is for each set of prophets to ask their own god to call down fire from heaven to burn a sacrificial offering, but only the God of Israel burns Elijah's offering. And so Elijah puts the prophets of Baal to the sword. This is brutal, but it also serves as an echo of the Golden Calf in Exodus. After Moses comes off Mount Sinai, he puts many people to the sword who built the Golden Calf. However, a wrench is thrown into this in the form of the royal family, who are showing more loyalty to the prophets of Baal than Elijah. And this difference tells us everything

that we need to know. Elijah may be in the wilderness like the Israelites in Exodus, but the ruling class has already metaphorically returned to Egypt. In the second half of this chapter, God is going to call Elijah to start a civil war to unseat King Ahab and Queen Jezebel from the throne. This is an uncomfortable story for us peace-loving Mennonites. We have gotten used to the peace-loving ways of Jesus who calls people to him rather than demanding obedience at the point of a sword.

However, I think we miss so much when we try to plaster our 21st century morals on an ancient source that still has things to teach us. Let us put aside the question of whether Elijah acted morally, and ask where the struggle in this story is between God and God's people.

The story of Elijah is a story of power. We have two sides of this debate, the followers of God and the followers of Baal. Both sides are at an entrenchment level of conflict, where they no longer see each other as humans. So they spare back and forth, committing atrocities against one another. The Royal family kills the prophets of God, so Elijah kills some prophets of Baal, the royal family seeks after Elijah's life so Elijah starts a civil war to earn his freedom. I hope that you can see how destructive conflict can become when it gets out of hand, when we do not speak to one another and see each other as truly human and beloved of God.

But regardless of if we are in the midst of healthy conflict or violent conflict, the story of Elijah tells us the toll that it takes on people. In the middle of the story lies our Bible passage, where Elijah is exhausted and does not see a way through the conflict. Elijah is in the middle, stuck between God and the Royal family. He needs to take a break, to rest, to recover his strength. So I hope that while we are in the midst of difficult conversations, both now and in the future, we will find some time to take a step back and rest. That we can hear the voice of God saying to us, you do not have the strength to keep working non-stop, you must take a few days to eat. And once you have eaten you must get up and continue the work. If there is anything that we can take away from this passage, it is that God wants people to take care of themselves.

When it comes down to it, my biggest problem with this text is that Elijah knows all the answers. Have you ever known all the answers? Have you ever been on the absolutely right side of history, no slip ups, missteps, or judgment? I have a wonderful counter story for those of us who think we are right all the time. Rabbi Eliezer and three other Rabbis are debating about whether a certain kind of oven is in accordance with Jewish law. Rabbi Eliezer thinks the oven is ritually pure, but cannot convince any of his colleagues, so he cries out if the law is in accordance with my opinion, this tree will prove it, so the tree leaps from the ground and moves far away. The other rabbis explain that a leaping tree is not evidence in a debate over law. So Rabbi Eliezer cries out if the law is in accordance with my opinion, this stream will prove it. So the stream flows backward. But again the other Rabbis say, this stream has nothing to do with our debate. So Rabbi Eliezer cries out, if the law is in accordance with my opinion, the walls of this building

will prove it, so the walls begin to fall, but Rabbi Joshua scolds the walls for interfering in a debate among scholars. So out of respect for Rabbi Joshua, they stop falling, but out of respect for Rabbi Eliezer they do not return to pristine condition. Then finally, Rabbi Eliezer cries out, if law is in accordance with my opinion, then heaven will prove it. Then a voice from heaven says, Rabbi Eliezer is right. But Rabbi Joshua responds by quoting Deuteronomy, the Law is not in heaven, but instead it is given to humans on mount Sinai as a source and guide, but humans must decide what it means.

Woe be to us if we decide that we know the mind of God and blessed be the interpreter of the law who debates.

It is okay to be wrong. It is especially okay for me to be wrong. This stance of standing in our truth, while knowing that we may be wrong can be a healthy starting point in any conflict. And once it is safe to do so, the willingness to be wrong can be a fertile place for us to take a step toward people we disagree with. With open arms and open hearts.

Jesus talks about how he is the bread of the world, a bread open to all and for anyone. And we can get hung up on asking the questions of if Jesus is requiring people to change or if Jesus was sent to the worshipers of Baal. However, all I can say today is that there is power in this invitation. We can get so caught up in our tribalistic desire for others to become like us, that we forget the power of Jesus's outstretched hand. That Jesus was the bread that comes down from heaven, which anyone may eat and not die. Jesus is the solution to the problem of the Golden Calf and Elijah's prophet competition, because Jesus's bread does not require anyone to die. That while we humans may not be able to agree very much, Jesus still will gather the diverse and disagreeing people of the world to him. That perhaps unity in Christ does not mean that we are unified together, but instead both in Christ. Christ sits in the prophetic middle between all of us. And I think we can miss the forest for the trees in our Elijah story, in the end, Elijah is also calling the nation of Israel back to God. The only difference is that Elijah has forgotten that we are all struggling to understand the divine.

Elijah's story reminds us that the powers of this world would like nothing more than for us to fight each other. That if we hate each other along the lines of racism, sexism, or homophobia, then we will never challenge their rule. Instead, if we bind together, then our love will be greater than any hate. Jesus being our center and our source, does not mean we will all agree, but it does mean we can all live.