

*Nevertheless at thy word I will let down the net.*

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This week's Old Testament reading comes at the end of a much larger story; one of the greatest stories in all Holy Scripture. Perhaps you are familiar with the details.

The prophet Elijah has just come from having done battle with the 450 false prophets of Baal. And in his victory over those purveyors of darkness and fear, he has not only shown the power and glory of God; a power and glory that the prophets of the god Baal cannot even hope to match; he has also earned the abiding hatred and enmity of Queen Jezebel, who has sworn that she will see him dead.

So Elijah, as any sensible person would, flees for his life. He flees to the wilderness; and when he finally sits down to rest, he asks God that he might die; that he might die peacefully at God's hand rather than violently as Jezebel has sworn.

But God has other plans for him. God sends an angel to feed him for the journey which he is about to make; a journey of 40 days and 40 nights; a journey to the mountain of the Lord; a journey to Mount Sinai. And when Elijah gets to Mount Sinai he finds shelter in a cave, where the voice of the Lord asks what it is that he is seeking.

And in that moment of great sadness and desperation and even fear, Elijah lays out his heart before God:

*I have been very jealous for the Lord, the God of hosts. For the people of Israel have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword, and I, even I only, am left, and they seek my life, to take it away.*

And having listened to Elijah's sad, desperate, lament, all of which flow from his conviction that there is no hope, God commands Elijah to come out of the cave; to stand before him on the mountain; much as Moses, many years before, had once stood before the Lord on that mountain, marking the start of a whole new relationship between God and his people; when he had received the two tables of stone, the Law; as the People of Israel stood far off at the base of the mountain in trembling and fear.

So at God's command Elijah comes out of the cave to stand before the Lord.

And as Elijah stands at the mouth of the cave, suddenly a great and mighty wind arises; a wind so strong that it tears stones from the mountain. But, as Elijah discovers, the Lord is not to be found in the wind. And after the wind, there is a great earthquake; a great and violent shaking of the ground upon which he stands. But, as Elijah discovers, the Lord is not to be found in the earthquake. And after that, there is a great fire. But, as Elijah discovers, the Lord is not to be found in the fire. And after the wind and the earthquake and the fire, there is the sound of a gently blowing breeze; the sound of a quiet whisper; the peaceful sound of a still small voice.

And in that still small voice, the Prophet Elijah hears the Word of God; a Word that tells him not to despair of his life; not to imagine that there is no hope; a word that tells him that he is not alone; that God has a plan. So, in obedience to God's Word, in obedience to hope, Elijah rushes off to find Elisha. To take the very first step in God's plan to rescue his people.

It's been a hard night. They're good at what they do. It puts a roof over their heads and food on the table. They know every corner of this lake; and where to find the fish.

But this time it has not gone well. And, in addition to the fact that they have nothing to show for a night of hard work, with no income to count on that day, they have to bear the public shame of failure, washing the nets and stowing their gear as this huge crowd gathers on the shore to listen to Jesus.

And perhaps we hear Simon's resentment about all of this when this guy suddenly climbs into his boat and tells him to push out from the shore; that he might use the boat as a kind of pulpit from which to speak; a resentment which only gets worse afterwards when he tells Simon to push out into deeper water; and to let down the nets.

Perhaps we can hear the deep resentment that a fisherman from Capernaum would bear to a carpenter from Nazareth telling him how to fish. Especially after a hard night when they'd caught nothing at all.

And yet, we also hear that Simon does as he is told:

*Nevertheless at thy word I will let down the net.*

In so many different ways these two stories speak so clearly about the world in which we live: a world filled with anxiety and worry; where so many of the things that we once thought we could count on have proven to be all too unreliable; where economic and social uncertainties have driven so many to despair and hopeless and resentment. And fear.

The world has always been an uncertain place, but COVID, and all the social and political and economic challenges that flow from it, has made so many things much less certain.

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But these stories also speak of where hope is going to be found for us in the midst of all this uncertainty. Not in the things of our own imagining. Not just in positive thoughts and warm feelings. Not in the thousand and one things that we use to dull our senses to reality. Not in any of these things but only in the Word. The Word spoken to the prophet Elijah; that still small voice that speaks more powerfully right now than all the yelling and screaming of our social media filled lives. And the Word spoken to a fisherman named Simon on the waters of the Sea of Galilee; a Word that speaks of those immense possibilities that lie beyond our own strength and ingenuity; those immense possibilities that lie only within God's power.

All of which reminds us of where we will find hope as we try to navigate a deeply uncertain world. Not in the violent, disruptive, power that so many are tempted to follow; not in meanness or pettiness or impatience or division. And not in the bitterness of those who have worked hard and still failed; or of those who feel undervalued or disrespected or rejected. But only in the Word. The Word that God continues to speak into our hearts and minds.

But hopefully we are also reminded that if Christ is, as we believe, the Word of God made flesh; and if we are, as we believe, the Body of the Risen and Ascended Christ; then we are all, by Grace, this Word that God speaks to the world.

We are called to be, as the Body of Christ, the still small voice that God speaks into the darkness and despair and hopelessness of the world.

And we are called to be the patient, forgiving, Word that God speaks into the failure and disappointment of human hearts.

So if, by virtue of our Baptism, [if] we are the Body of the Risen and Ascended Christ; the Body of the Word of God made flesh, then we must ask ourselves these questions every day.

When we speak, whenever we speak, wherever we speak, do we always offer words of encouragement; words that build up rather than tear down?

When we come face-to-face with the impatience of an increasingly impatient society; when we come face-to-face with a polarised and divided world; do we always speak words that bring together those things which are broken; words that heal rather than tear apart?

If hope is to be found in the Word, and only in the Word, what words are we speaking to offer God's hope?