

“Expect the Unexpected”
Based on I Kings 19: 1-19
by Rev. Meghan Davis
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When I visited my nephew last month, I took a copy of the new Disney movie *The Princess and the Frog* to give him but before I had the chance to give it to him, I discovered that he already had a copy, so I didn't. Later, he saw the DVD sitting in my suitcase and he got very excited. I told him that I had brought it for him but then I found out that he already had a copy. Clutching the movie close to him he declared, “But I was expecting two!”

We all have expectations. We like to know what to expect and we like our expectations to be met. Whether or not we admit it, most of us have expectations of God: how God should be, what God should do, how God should reward us for good behavior and punish others for bad. It would be nice if God would get on board and let us know exactly what to expect and then follow through but unfortunately, meeting our expectations doesn't seem to be a motivating factor for God. And our expectations probably don't make much more sense to God than Rowan's expectation of two copies of *The Princess and the Frog* made to me.

A little backstory to today's scripture: King Ahab made a political alliance with the Phoenicians by marrying Jezebel, the daughter of their king and allowing worship of Baal, their god. The prophet Elijah sets up a contest between himself and the priest of Baal to prove that YHWH, the God of Israel, is the true God. They each prepare a sacrifice for their god and whichever god consumes the sacrifice, is the true God of Israel. As expected, YHWH wins and then Elijah and all those present, now convinced that YHWH is the true God of Israel, kill the 450 priests of Baal. (Really, it's a wonder this hasn't been made into an action movie! It's got pyrotechnics, intrigue, violence, villains...) Which brings us to today's scripture.

1 Kings 19:1-19 *Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done, and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword. ² Then 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." [in other words, she's going to have Elijah killed] ³ Then 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.*

Perhaps Elijah had not realized what he had done and had no regrets. Perhaps he was feeling pretty good about his accomplishment—with Elijah as the conduit, YHWH had conquered Baal. Or maybe he was in a state of shock after the massacre of Baal's priests. But whatever his state of mind before hearing Jezebel's threat, he definitely snapped out of it when he heard that she had it in for him. Brought to his senses, he acts. Though he'd just taken on 450 priests, the wrath of Jezebel was more than he could take. So he runs away.

⁴ *But 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." ⁵ Then he lay down under the broom tree and fell asleep. Suddenly an angel touched him and said to him, "Get up and eat." ⁶ He 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.*

This is not the first time God has provided for Elijah. Remember a couple weeks ago we read about Elijah and the widow being provided for out of a never-ending supply of meal and oil

and before that Elijah had been fed by ravens. God has compassion for Elijah and provides for him.

This reminds me of a scene from a movie¹ in which the main character is left at the altar on her wedding day. Her friends join her on her honeymoon trip to Mexico (it was non-refundable and they figured she needed some time away). But as soon as they get to the hotel, she closes the curtains on the beautiful view and goes straight to bed where she stays for several days and nights. One by one her concerned friends try to coax her out of bed. Finally, the least maternal friend brings her some food and is able to convince her to eat a little, then she can go back to sleep. Shortly after being fed, she ventures out, braving reality and returning to the land of the living.

As Elijah discovered, sometimes life gets really, really hard. Elijah didn't expect to find himself in this position. After the success of YHWH against Baal, Elijah expected it to be smooth going. Sometimes just when we think everything is going right, things get so hard that we just don't want to deal with it anymore, or can't deal with it anymore. Like Elijah, we might dive into self-pity and self-loathing and just want to die. Often, when we expect—or even want—it all to be over, God lets us know that that's not God's plan for us. Sometimes God lets us know by sending us angels—the Hebrew word for angel means “messenger”—God sends us messengers to feed us, nourish us and encourage us to get us through those times. Sometimes God exceeds our expectations and meets our needs in ways we cannot possibly anticipate.

⁷ The 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." ⁸ He 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. [Horeb is another name for Sinai, where Moses met God] ⁹ At that place he came to a cave, and spent the night there.

That was some mighty powerful food to sustain him forty days and nights! Elijah probably wasn't expecting such sustenance, but then, I guess food sent by God would be beyond expectations. The sustenance God gives us is more powerful than ordinary food. It sustains us for the long haul. Forty days and nights or more...

Then the word of the LORD came to him, saying, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" ¹⁰ He 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."

God doesn't seem particularly happy that Elijah is here. Now it seems God's expectations are not being met. God isn't asking “What are you doing here, Elijah” for informational purposes. God's prodding Elijah to get back to where he's supposed to be and what he's supposed to be doing. He's supposed to be out doing God's work, not hiding in a cave. But Elijah seems a little burned out and isn't going without defending himself. He's lost his prophetic gumption. He tells God that he's YHWH's only remaining prophet and they're looking to kill him, too. He's all alone and he's done. But God, isn't interested in humoring Elijah's self-pity any more.

¹ *Sex and the City*

¹¹ He 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; ¹² and after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence.

I love the King James translation: a still small voice. When Elijah is told that God is going to be passing by, he expects something big and spectacular, in fact, he's already seen the big and spectacular side of God when YHWH won the battle against Baal the god of thunder and storm. But because God is bigger than Baal, bigger than thunder and storm, bigger than the strongest wind, the strongest earthquake, the strongest fire, God does not need those things in order to prove Himself. Sometimes God's message for us is most pronounced in the silence. This is not to say that we can expect God to be found *only* in the silence or that God *always* is found in the silence. But sometimes, when we seek God and all we hear is silence, we worry or even assume that God is not there, or God is not answering our prayers. But God *is* in the sheer silence and can be found there, if sought.

¹³ When 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?" ¹⁴ He 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." ¹⁵ Then the LORD said to him, "Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus; when you arrive, you shall anoint Hazael as king over Aram.

Elijah responds in the exact same way he did before but God is not interested in Elijah's tired, old worn out excuses and complaints. God says, "Get out of here and do what you're supposed to be doing." Elijah hasn't gotten the point so far but God isn't letting him off the hook. There's no use in coming up with excuses and rationalizing for not doing that which you know should be done because God's not gonna accept those excuses.

¹⁶ Also you shall anoint Jehu son of Nimshi as king over Israel; and you shall anoint Elisha son of Shaphat of Abel-meholah as prophet in your place. ¹⁷ Whoever escapes from the sword of Hazael, Jehu shall kill; and whoever escapes from the sword of Jehu, Elisha shall kill. ¹⁸ Yet I will leave seven thousand in Israel, all the knees that have not bowed to Baal, and every mouth that has not kissed him." ¹⁹ So he set out from there, and found Elisha son of Shaphat, who was plowing. There were twelve yoke of oxen ahead of him, and he was with the twelfth. Elijah passed by him and threw his mantle over him.

God re-commissions Elijah to go out and work on God's behalf. But it turns out Elijah isn't alone as he thought. Not only is God with him, but apparently there are still seven thousand who have remained loyal to YHWH and have not worshiped Baal.

This week I had an opportunity to hear Rev. Bruce Reyes-Chow speak. Bruce is the moderator of General Assembly, the national governing body of the Presbyterian Church (USA). His topic was the future of the church. As we all know, Christian churches, particularly mainline denominations have been in steady decline for the last fifty or so years. In Bruce's words, we've

been living holding onto our 50s and 60s delusions of grandeur for too long and the nostalgia isn't going to do us a service. God isn't any more interested in our self-pity than in Elijah's.

Now I don't know that this is a particular problem of this congregation which wasn't even around in the 50s and 60s. Since we've always been a small congregation, we don't have the existential angst induced by bitter-sweet memories of a time when our congregation was much bigger and more active. But we, too, are subject to these larger trends. As a small congregation, we are acutely aware of the impact that every member has on our community; every member who joins and every member who moves away. We, too, struggle with how we can be more welcoming, how we can bring more people into our doors and into relationship with God and us. We, too, wonder how long we will remain sustainable.

Fifty years ago, we expected the churches in the US to thrive forever but across the board, denominations are finding that it's becoming clear that church as we know it is on the way out. But that's the key: church *as we know it*. The Church isn't going to die. As long as there are faithful Christians there will be Church. It's just going to look different. What's it going to look like? That's the question. That's the question we need to be discerning with God and with each other. But whatever it is, we're not there yet. Like God prodding Elijah, God is prodding us, telling us that we're not done yet. We might rather just curl up in a corner of a cave, but God called Elijah back to his job as a prophet and God is calling us, reminding us to be faithful and if we're faithful to what God's calling us to do, whatever that is, we will be the size God wants us to be. And it's understanding that sense of call that is so important to the church right now. All our churches don't have to be the same. Rather than trying to find a cookie cutter that will make the perfect church for us all, we need to be discerning what God is calling this particular church—Longview Presbyterian Church—to be and follow that call faithfully.

As with any era, there won't be a big dramatic end to the old church and beginning of the new church. They didn't wake up one day and say, "today is the first day of the Bronze Age" or, "OK, now we're in the Renaissance" or "today the last day of Great Depression, tomorrow it will be over." Likewise, the changes in the church will be gradual and a downside is, Bruce thinks most of us will be Moses—we're not going to see the Promised Land. But we all have an opportunity to be a part of the transition. We all have the opportunity to help discern what it means to be Presbyterian in the next ten to twenty years and most importantly, we all have the opportunity to discern what it means to be Longview Presbyterian Church today, tomorrow and into the future. Is there a possibility that the PC(USA) will grow? Is there a possibility that LPC will grow? Sure, but that can't be the main focus. The main focus must be to be faithful to where God is calling us and who God is calling us to be. God asked "what are you doing here, Elijah?" God didn't call Elijah to stay put in the cave and I'm pretty sure God isn't calling us to stay the same. "What are you doing here?" But just as God had compassion for Elijah and provided for him, God will have compassion for us and provide for us.

Unexpectedly, God provided nourishment for Elijah. Unexpectedly, God provided encouragement for Elijah and God provided backup in the form of seven thousand other faithful servants. Unexpectedly, Elijah found his prophetic gumption, and his faith, which once were lost. But they weren't found within himself and they weren't found within the cave. They came from God—in the still, small voice—in the sheer silence. Expect the unexpected. What are you doing here?