

Living in the In-Between Times
I Kings 19:1-18

Dr. Don Flowers, Jr.
Millbrook Baptist Church, Raleigh, NC

Those who know me know that I have a huge fan crush on Kate Bowler. If you know her, and want to make an introduction, I will be your friend forever. If you don't know her you need to! She is a church history professor at Duke Divinity School with a specialty in the prosperity gospel, that idea that if you are good God will bless you. (Goodness usually means giving a lot to your local megachurch, though I am sure your Finance Committee will be happy to talk to you if you want to donate here!)

She is the author of a wonderful book, *Everything Happens for a Reason and Other Lies I Have Loved*, which tells her story of being diagnosed with stage 4 cancer shortly after getting her dream job at Duke and giving birth to an adorable son. Her TedTalk is incredible, and she also has a podcast where she interviews incredible people.

I mention her (in hopes that someone here is her BFF) but also because she has been expanding my vocabulary. She tosses words around that makes me think I ought to know them, think that I do, but secretly wonder.

Like the word liminal. Do you know the word? It means in-between time. Liminal is that time between graduation and whatever comes next. It is that time between a positive pregnancy test and the delivery. It is that time between leaving the doctor's office and the phone call with the test results. It is the time between the departure of one pastor and the arrival of the next.

We are always living in liminal time.

The other word that Kate likes to toss around is precarity. Not precarious, though it is closely aligned.

Precarity is that state of uncertainty, when you just don't know what will happen next. It is that moment when the trapeze artist lets go of one swing before the other one has arrived. They just hang there in the air, wondering, hoping.

I am coming to believe that we are all living in a liminal time of precarity! We just have to read the news:

- A war deja vu war in Ukraine that harkens back to a time when the Cold War wasn't that cold;
- Stock market reports that just make you avoid that part of the paper;
- Reports of our democracy hanging by a thread;
- The fear of going to the grocery store, to church, to sending our children to school in a time of increasing gun violence.

We do find ourselves living in a time of liminal precarity!

But this isn't a recent event. Life has always been spent in the 'in-between time,' and in between times are always precarious.

Even when we don't expect it.

Even for those for whom we don't expect it.

If there was ever a person that we would expect to escape such a fate it would be Elijah. Elijah was the quintessential prophet, the one by which all other prophets was judged. Even today an empty seat is reserved for him at every family's Passover meal in hopes that he might show up. He was the prophet who joined Moses to meet Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration.

His list of accomplishments firmly reserved his place in the Prophet's Hall of Fame! During a famine he fed the widow of Zaraphath's family; he raised a boy from the dead; God kept him alive by having ravens deliver him bread; he brought an end to a seven year drought; he was such a prophet that he didn't

die, but was carried up into heaven in a chariot of fire.

You may not know any of those stories, but if you have been in church very long you can't escape the story that occurred just before our reading today. It is one of those epic stories that should be made into a movie because it would be wonderful!

Ahab was the king of the northern kingdom. History has not treated him kindly, to put it mildly. I Kings says that he was *"more evil than all the kings before him."*¹ A lot of that reputation comes from his marriage to Jezebel, a foreigner who could have been the inspiration for Maleficent! She brought foreign gods into the land especially the Baals, gods of storms and fertility. Anything that worked! She reportedly had hundreds of Yahweh's prophets killed, and fostered a huge division in the land.

At last Elijah had had enough and issued a challenge to all the prophets of Baal. Come to Mt Carmel for a showdown, me versus all of you. We will offer a sacrifice to our god and whichever sends fire from heaven will win!

You know the story. Elijah was not a good sport. As the day went on he mocked the prophets mercilessly! "Shout louder, maybe he has gone out! Scream louder, maybe he is in the bathroom!" Not the kind of things you are supposed to say at a worship service. Maybe at a Cameron Basketball game, but not at worship!

When it was his turn he just heaped it on! He doused his offering with water, then just prayed and fire came down from heaven in an amazing display and burned up the sacrifice. He had won, and to the victor goes the spoils, so he had all the prophets of Baal killed! Worship wars can be brutal!

So Elijah, you just won the Battle of the Prophets. What are you going to do now?

I'm going to run into the wilderness and hope to die!

Not what we would expect, but it is exactly what he does. Elijah, this great prophet shows us how to live in liminal precarious times.

¹ I Kings 16:30

First, we need to be honest about how we are feeling. *"It is enough Lord. Take away my life!"*

How often have we felt that way?

How often have you just wanted to throw yourself on the floor and have a temper tantrum, kicking and screaming because you are so exhausted by all the good stuff you have been doing? ENOUGH GOD! I QUIT!

We want to, but we don't, we can't. We can't because we have been taught at church that we "aren't supposed to feel that way!" We can't say those things to God!

Yet here is the greatest of all prophets saying exactly that! He is crying out his despair, his exhaustion, his enoughness!

Friends we so need to get over our messiah complex, that feeling that we always have to have it all together. We need to be honest with ourselves. Even more we need to be honest with God. There are times when it is OK not to have it all together, to just fall apart. In fact, to not fall apart at times is the most unhealthy thing we can do.

We need to be honest, and rest. We live such frantic lives that we fear that if we ever stop we might never move again. That is exactly what Elijah did. He stopped. For 40 days! Can you imagine taking a 40 day vacation?

If 40 sounds familiar it is because that number shows up over and over in the Bible. It is a number that signifies wholeness, completion. Elijah just needed to stop and rest.

Wendell Berry, that wonderful farmer prophet poet reminds us that there are times we need to just stop. He writes:

*When despair for the world grows in me
and I wake in the night at the least sound
in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be,
I go and lie down where the wood drake
rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.
I come into the peace of wild things
who do not tax their lives with forethought
of grief. I come into the presence of still water.
And I feel above me the day-blind stars
waiting with their light. For a time
I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.²*

We need to be honest. We need to rest. And we need to lean on our friends. The text says that Elijah was visited by some friends who brought him a pound cake. OK, to be honest it says angels, but how many times are our friends the very angels we need. And it doesn't say loud cake, but that's what I would want, especially if they brought some fresh strawberries to go on top!

² Wendell Berry. *The Peace of Wild Things*. <https://www.scottishpoetrylibrary.org.uk/poem/peace-wild-things-0/>

Long ago the Beatles reminded us that we get by with a little help from our friends. Without them??

On one of Kate Bowler's podcasts she interviewed Vivek Murthy who is serving his second stint as the US Surgeon General. They didn't talk about Covid, or cancer, but rather about loneliness. Murthy commented that we are experiencing an epidemic of loneliness. More than 20% of Americans report struggling with loneliness—more than those who have diabetes, more than those who smoke, and it is having serious implications for our physical health. It is worse than being obese, or smoking 15 cigarettes a day!³

Robin Dunbar recently wrote a book about friendship in which he said that loneliness is an evolutionary sign that something is wrong, a prompt that you need to do something about your life and fast! We need other people!

As I read his book I wondered if the best thing churches could do is to help others make friends. Provide opportunities for relationships to form and grow. To be an incubator for building community.

We need to have those whom we can depend on for support—as individuals, as churches. We need to be willing to draw on the resources of others who care about us, about our well being, our future.

We also need to be willing to allow ourselves to be surprised by God. Too often we have our notions of how God can act, only in prescribed ways. We have heard the stories of tumors disappearing just before surgery, services full of emotional outpouring, conversion stories that make Paul's experience on the Damascus Road look rather mundane!

We have seen the stories, haven't we? The way God parted the waters in *The Ten Commandments*, how Morgan Freeman takes some time off and gives all the responsibility to Jim Carrey, to teach him a lesson. We know all about God! We know how God sounds—a deep rounding voice; how God acts—with special effects that would make George Lucas envious; we know!

And many times our knowledge, our prejudices, limit our experience of God. It did for Elijah. This man who had watched God send fire from heaven expected more, but God wasn't in it. Nor was God in an earthquake, or any other out of the ordinary events. But rather in the sound of sheer silence.

Several years ago Anita and I had the opportunity to visit Sodoma, AZ in February. When Anita mentioned to an elderly park ranger that we wanted to visit the Grand Canyon he got animated and said, *"what you are going to do is leave here at 4:00am, and drive to the South entrance so you will be there at sunrise. It is the only place where you can see the length of the canyon."*

We missed our departure time by a bit and so we were a little late for the sunrise, but...

³ <https://katebowler.com/podcasts/vivek-murthy-the-loneliness-epidemic/>

That morning there were only about 5 other people at that outpost. What I remember is walking up a path a bit, sitting down and hearing.....absolutely nothing! The silence was deafening!

We have so little of that in our world. I wonder if we surround ourselves with all the noise so that we won't hear, ourselves, God. For if we did...

Elijah found himself in an in-between time, filled with precarity. He used the time to be honest with himself, to rest, to rely on friends, and to listen for God. In the end he heard God send him forward, to remind him that there was still a host of other prophets, that his work was not finished.

Oh might we learn from him in these in between times? Be honest. Rest. Be with others. Listen.

What might God have to say to you this day?