

LONELINESS AND SOLITUDE

1 kings 19: 1-16

Loneliness... Have you ever felt lonely? Do you feel lonely at this time of your life, for periods of time if not much of the time?

So, what is loneliness? In a recent article in the magazine "Psychology Today" several different kinds of loneliness were identified. There is: 1) New-Situation Loneliness – where you have moved into a new city or town, a new school or job or a new residence and you don't know anybody. There is: 2) I'm-different loneliness – where you feel different from those around you because of your culture or identity in a way that makes you feel isolated or apart. There is: 3) No-sweetheart loneliness – where you feel you may have family and friends but no intimate partner attachment.

There is: 4) No-time-for-me loneliness – where even when you are surrounded by people you feel no one has real time to be present and attentive in listening to you as a person with your particular needs and concerns. There is 5) Untrustworthy-friends loneliness – where you begin to feel that whatever friends you do have, they lack good intentions, kindness or care for you. And finally, there is: 6) Quiet-Presence loneliness – where you feel that despite a social circle and friends at work and in community, you miss having someone to hang out with at home.

Have you ever felt any of these things? Most of us have at some point and in some way and maybe we feel one or more of these kinds of loneliness now.

In another article I was reading about the experience of loneliness in Canada, Toronto was identified as the loneliest city of all. Why? Well, Toronto is big and this can be isolating. Toronto is also expensive, which means people are working and commuting a lot more, making any extra time to socialize and build connections more difficult. Whether it's young people, seniors or those in their middling years, people feel isolated for all the hustle and bustle of people around. And the pandemic has only made matters worse that way.

There's a trend that has now become so popular it has a name: "flaking". Flaking is cancelling plans with others at the last minute for no truly good reason, just to stay at home. It's great to be able to be at home and even work from home. But this also makes it more tempting to isolate from others in a way that is meaningful and enriching. Did you know that even though Toronto is the largest city in Canada and growing in many ways, since the pandemic in 2020 it has been losing 10,000 residents a year, and in 2022-2023 the loss increased to 16,000. The biggest gains are in Alberta and the Atlantic provinces where the cost of living is lower and the lifestyle more sustainable.

To keep residents in Toronto and to deal with the challenge of loneliness and isolation, the city has been providing micro-grants to community groups for organizing various kinds of clubs and gathering spaces where people can meet people. Through our partnership with Mosaic, we've been engaged in such application for a grant as well. Providing opportunities for folks to come together, engage in meaningful learning and interaction, to connect and make friendships, it's all essential to mental, spiritual and physical well-being. We as church with our activities, and also through our partnerships, provide many such opportunities as well.

But let's also ask another question: is loneliness simply about a lack of meaningful interaction with others? Or is loneliness also something that has to do with us in ourselves? Is the feeling of loneliness a sign that we have to change something on the outside, or is it also a sign that we need to take some time to look within ourselves for change? And here, I'd like to explore the story we're given in our scripture reading in search of revelatory wisdom.

Elijah the prophet felt lonely. Why? Well, he felt isolated and alone, yes. But he also felt threatened and scared, with no one to share his struggle or stand with him in the face of the threat. What was happening? Well, the Hebrew king Ahab and his queen Jezebel had it out for Elijah. Even though they had aligned themselves with other prophets who simply blessed their cutthroat, corrupt and criminal behaviour at the expense and welfare of their own people, and even though they had scared off or killed off any opposition or protest against them, Elijah was the one person still standing speaking out against them and sabotaging them and the false prophets who backed them. But Elijah could sustain this no longer. It had all got to him, and he was breaking apart. And so, he runs. Can you blame him?

How long can you handle a situation, resist something, protect something, hold up something, and keep positive about something until you can do so no longer? We all have a limit, and we discover where that limit is when we hit it, and we can't hold it together any more. Who is going to be there for us and with us when that happens? Elijah feels alone. Yes he has God and yet he feels God has asked too much of him and has now abandoned him.

And so, Elijah runs. He runs for his life. He's given up. The game is over and even though he won some rounds, he has now lost. We need people the most when we're down and out, and that's when we can often feel the loneliest.

So where does Elijah run to? We're told he goes a day's journey into the wilderness. The wilderness is a solitary place, an arid and desolate place. Biblical story telling often describes what's going on within the heart and soul of a person by the external environment around them. The wilderness is a lonely place, but it is also a place where you can stop, rest and think things through. There is loneliness and there is solitude and the two are very different. Loneliness is a particular kind of suffering. Solitude, however, is an opportunity to take stock,

discern and reflect without distraction. But several things need to happen for Elijah so that the pain and suffering of loneliness turns into solitude as the medicine for healing and recovery.

We're told Elijah finally stops and comes to a tree in the middle of the wilderness. He sits down exhausted, hungry and demolished. Here's what he prays out to God: "It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors." In other words, Elijah has not succeeded where they have failed, to inspire the people and their rulers to turn to God, to justice and to moral integrity. And so, he just wants to end it all.

But here's what happens to Elijah to change his perspective from loneliness and hopelessness, to solitude. First of all, he needs to attend to his bodily needs: rest, sleep, food and hydration. Our bodies, minds and spirits are all intertwined. Without healthy self-care and healthy practices, we cannot rewire our brain so that we see possibility where we previously saw impossibility. We're told Elijah slept, got up, ate and drank, slept again, then got up, ate and drank and so forth until he was fully replenished.

But second, who cared for him with the food, drink and encouragement to rest? We're told it was an angel. Who are the angels in our lives? What kind of support and care do we need to find in our time of fear and loneliness to help us find our footing again? Elijah got the support and care he needed to fulfill his bodily needs, and he also got the time and space in solitude to figure out what he would do next. And so, we're told, he makes another even longer journey.

And this brings us to our third point, reflected by the fact that we're told Elijah journeyed for 40 days and nights and came to a particular mountain called Horeb. OK, let's think about this. The people of Israel journeyed in that very same wilderness for 40 years to find themselves as a people. Great leaders of the faith – Moses and Jesus took their 40 years or days in the wilderness to discern next steps for their life directions.

And Mount Horeb, or another name for it: Sinai, is where Moses encountered God in the burning bush and later where he received the 10 commandments. This is a mountain associated with God's special presence. From having all but given up, exhausted, traumatized and feeling totally abandoned and alone, Elijah is discerning a positive way forward and coming to a place where he can talk to God face to face, so to speak, to experience intimacy and re-connection. What will happen there? What will he hear? How will his loneliness become solitude and solitude replenish Elijah's purpose, confidence and direction again?

Elijah finally reaches the mountain. He finds a cave where he can get some shelter and sleep. The next day, we're told, he has this honest heart-felt prayerful dialogue with God. Let me quote it: "Then the word of the Lord came to Elijah, saying, 'What are you doing here Elijah?' 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.”

So how does God respond? How do we hear God respond perhaps in ways we have not heard God speak to us before? Elijah hears God tell him to go and stand at the opening of the cave where he looks out over a great expanse. “For the Lord is about to pass by” he’s told. Elijah is looking out and listening for God. In his solitude he’s desperate to hear God speak to him, to give him some direction, some hope, some possibility beyond the impossibility he’s feeling. He hasn’t given up. That’s why he’s come to this mountain. It’s a holy place, and he is preparing himself to hear something. Even though he’s expressed a giving up, his actions speak of some other possibility. So where is that holy place for you, that place where, regardless of people around, is a place of inner solitude where you can hear God speak?

So, what does Elijah hear God say? Once again, external manifestations in nature speak of inner stirrings of the spirit. Let me quote what happens: “Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks into 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, and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire, and after the fire a sound of sheer silence. When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle...” What was it that Elijah heard in the silence? What does the sound of sheer silence sound like? Whereas Moses heard God speak in lightning, thunder and volcanic like fire on the mountain, Elijah hears God speak in the silence... Elijah needed solitude to listen within himself to what God was saying... Not the loud bold glory, but the inner quiet silence.

There’s a lot of noise in our world, and everyone is looking for the glory, the spectacle, the recognition, the glitz and glitter of success, the large circle of friends, admirers and supporters... But what about creating that space of solitude not as loneliness but as sacred space for listening, replenishing and building up perspective, gratitude, acceptance, love and peace in ourselves before God?

Elijah not only feels God’s presence in the silence. He also receives direction. He is to return and seek out those who will lead a counter movement to overcome the corrupt rule and morally bankrupt state of his people. And not only will he locate God-faithful leaders. Elijah is told there are at least seven thousand Israelites, a small minority and yet a genuine community of those who have not bowed down to the corruption and wickedness that has befallen the nation. Elijah may have felt alone, but he is not alone. Beginning with God above, beside and within him, he will also find those with whom he can commune and work to build a better future and a better world beginning with his own people.

What about you and me? Most of us if not all of us have experienced bouts of loneliness if not long periods of our lives where loneliness has been and may now be a painful reality. There are

practical things we can do externally and with our personal practices to help with this, yes. But there is also the importance of sacred space and solitude, to replenish, rebuild and rethink our lives before God.

And this can help us reimagine what kind of togetherness we need with the people and the world around us. Like Elijah, we may have come to the brink at times. Like Jesus on the cross we may have come to the place of crying out even: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me". But in this season of Easter, we are reminded that resurrection is always possible, and as followers of Jesus resurrection is our destiny, each and every one of us here. May you be given the faith, the hope and the love you need to build a life beyond the scourge of loneliness. Amen.