

“What Is Saving Your Life Right Now? Getting Lost”
1 Kings 19:1-12

One of my most vivid childhood memories was when I got separated from my family in a very busy store in Damascus. All I could see were legs and had no way of finding my parents. The experience only lasted a few minutes, but it was terrifying. Getting lost is not a pleasant experience. We avoid it as much as possible. We have tools to help us find our way: maps, GPS, and signs. To look at getting lost as a spiritual practice seems like an odd way to save our lives and to align us with God’s love. How does something that seems so threatening to our safety bring us wholeness and growth? This practice is about letting go of the safety of what we know to open ourselves to the mystery of God. Spiritual practices are always about helping us to stay alert, open, and in love. Our primal instinct for survival often hinders our ability to keep growing. We try to stay with what seems to be safe and predictable. That is why this practice has the potential for us to grow and to gain new wisdom because when we let go of the old maps, we are able to continue to go where God is leading us. In her book, *An Altar in the World*, Barbara Brown Taylor uses the metaphor of leaving the cow path to talk about the value of leaving the familiar territories of our ruts. She writes, “Once you leave the cow path, the unpredictable territory is full of life. True you cannot always see where you are putting your feet. This means you can no longer afford to stay unconscious...You...become aware of each step you take, tuning all of your sense to exactly where you are and exactly what you are doing.”

Most of the biblical stories are about people who learned to let go of the safety of the familiar to follow where God was leading them:

- Abraham and Sarah had to leave the familiar land they knew so well for the sake of the dream God put on their hearts.
- Joseph was forced into leaving his father’s home but then found a new way to live his mission.
- Moses and the people of ancient Israel had to leave Egypt to find their freedom.
- The Exodus happened and the people learned new ways of faith because of it.

And so today we look at a biblical story where the main character had to learn to rely on God’s leading in his life in new ways. This is the story of the prophet Elijah. He was running for his life. He didn’t choose to get lost but during his time of being lost, he learned powerful spiritual lessons that helped him and his whole people to find new meaning in life. Elijah was at the end of his rope. The winds of change were blowing in the kingdom of ancient Israel. The new king and his wife Jezebel were power hungry and were trying to prove that the ways of the gods of Baal were better than the ways of the God of Israel. The ways of Baal were the ways of greed and violence and that is how Ahab saw as the way to rule and run the land. Elijah and other prophets like him had spoken words that challenged the dominant truth which Ahab and Jezebel were promoting and proclaiming. Elijah was being hunted down by the king because he dared to speak God’s truth of love and justice to the powers of his day. The king and the

queen had stolen land from a man by the name of Naboth by killing him. The prophet challenged that action and dared to speak truth to power. But that landed him in hot water. In fact, in our scripture for today, we know that Elijah was facing certain death as he was being hunted down by the king's men.

Sitting under the broom tree, he uttered this prayer, "It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors." In other words, "I've had enough, O God, this is way too painful. I can't take it anymore. I'd rather die than live like this. A fugitive's life is no way to live. Please make this pain go away!" Elijah was completely lost with no way forward. But that is when his senses were finally heightened to the point of being able to hear God's voice in the silence! Elijah, who was most likely trained and certainly very experienced in listening to God, was trying to listen to God in the normal ways he had heard God's voice before. At first, he thought he would find God's presence and hear God's voice in the great wind, but God was not in the great wind. Wind is usually associated with the power of God. The word in Hebrew for wind in this text is "*ruah*" which is the same word for the Spirit of God which hovered over the watery chaos in Genesis 1. So, this is a great surprise for the Hebrew speakers to hear that God was not present in the great wind. The second element where Elijah looked for God's presence was the earthquake. Divine activity and revelation was often associated in the Bible with the earth shaking. One famous incident is the time when the mountain shook when God gave the Law to Moses and the people of Israel on Mt. Horeb, which was the same exact location where Elijah was standing. But again, surprisingly enough, God was not in the earthquake, which would have been the assumption of the Hebrew people upon hearing this story. Then of course, there was the fire. This was another unmistakable sign of God's presence. Think of the story of Moses and the burning bush (Exodus 3) and the "pillar of fire" which led the people during the night as they wandered in the desert on their way to the Promised Land (Number 14:14). So, in all these typical elements where people would normally look for God, Elijah did not experience or hear God. What finally connected was the sound of sheer silence or the small still voice. What a surprise! God is not present for Elijah in all the big signs that he knew before. Instead God is present in silence. Because of this experience of being lost in the wilderness, Elijah learned to be attentive to God in a new way which he went on to teach to others.

In this time of pandemic when the old maps don't work anymore and the new maps keep changing and shifting, there is a great opportunity for us to not try to cling onto what is comfortable, but to dare listen to God in new ways. Embracing the feeling of being lost has the potential for us to learn new ways. This time of disorientation is giving us new ways forward. The same is true of our struggle against racism. We know that the old maps are no longer good and that it is scary to let go of the certainties of the past. But the way forward cannot be found until we learn to consent to being lost and that we need to allow a new awareness to emerge in us.

Barbara Brown Taylor writes, "The advanced practice of getting lost consists of consenting to be lost, since you have no other choice. The consenting itself becomes

your choice as you explore the possibility that life is for you and not against you, in spite of all the evidence to the contrary.”

During this time there are many things that are throwing us off balance and out of the “normal” paths we have taken before. Our work is to stay alert, open, and in love. Pay attention to what is emerging in and around you to help you connect with life, with others, and with God in new ways.

Here is an outline of the process of letting go according to Vinita Hampton Wright in her article, “The Inner Process of Letting Go.”

Frustration: We begin to feel the effects of the unhealthy attachment. We feel the need to escape it, at least part of the time. We become more impatient with the relationship or the habit or the possession.

Sadness: When it comes time to let go, there is some sort of grieving involved. Even if you truly want to let go of something, it has been your companion for a while, and you may experience the sadness of parting.

Anger: After an unhealthy attachment has wounded you repeatedly, the pain may very well give way to sheer anger. This isn’t necessarily a bad thing, especially if it gives you the energy you need to make the break with whatever you’re clinging to.

Vision: How do you let go of your need to control the details of your life? You catch a glimpse of how it would be to be free of your obsession. You might experience an afternoon of giving up control -and discover that it was a pretty nice afternoon! If your unhealthy attachment is a bad diet, you may develop a different vision of your life by eating healthier for a few days and discovering how much better you feel.

Relief: One day, it occurs to you that you really don’t have to hang on to that dream, or social status, or a younger woman’s dress size. And you are flooded with this wonderful sensation -it’s called relief. After you’ve experienced relief-or, it may be a deeper thing, such as God forgiving you for not being perfect-why go back?”

This practice of getting lost is about embracing the potential for change in our lives and how to allow God to guide our path to new experiences with greater potential for love. We will end with a prayer from Joyce Rupp that is called, “Prayer of One Who Feels Lost.” The invitation as we pray this is to hold or imagine a map as a symbol of the lost-ness that you feel within yourself.

Dear God,
 why do I keep fighting you off?
 One part of me wants you desperately,
 another part of me unknowingly
 pushes you back and runs away.
 What is there in me that
 so contradicts my desire for you?
 These transition days, these passage ways,
 are calling me to let go of old securities,
 to give myself over into your hands.

Like Jesus who struggled with the pain
I, too, fight the "let it all be done."
Loneliness, lostness, non-belonging,
all these hurts strike out at me,
leaving me pained with this present goodbye.
I want to be more but I fight the growing.
I want to be new but I hang unto the old.
I want to live but I won't face the dying.
I want to be whole but cannot bear
to gather up the pieces into one.
Is it that I refuse to be out of control,
to let the tears take their humbling journey,
to allow my spirit to feel its depression,
to stay with the insecurity of "no home"?
Now is the time. You call to me,
begging me to let you have my life,
inviting me to taste the darkness
so I can be filled with the light,
allowing me to lose my direction
so that I will find my way home to you. Amen.