

I want my life back – Pentecost 4

1 Kings 19:1–15a; Psalm 42, 43; Galatians 3:10–14, 23–29; Luke 8:26–39

A few weeks ago, you might have seen Tony Hayward on the news. He is the CEO of BP. It was in the midst of BP's many unsuccessful attempts to stem the flow from the *Deepwater Horizon* oil spill. Tony Hayward said, amongst other things, "I want my life back." It was a true reflection of how he was feeling, if an unwelcome statement to those who were suffering from the current and future losses caused by that spill, and especially those who had lost loved ones in the initial explosion. They also would have liked their lives to be back the way things were before the explosion.

In our readings today, Elijah and the demon-possessed man were both in difficult places and, even more than Tony Hayward, wanted their lives back. Have you ever asked yourself, "What am I doing here?" or had someone else ask you, as God asked Elijah, "What are you doing here?"

The question doesn't say anything about whether you are in the right place or the wrong place, doing the right thing or the wrong thing, but somehow there is a feeling of unease about where you are and what you are doing.

Somehow there is an implication that perhaps where you are or what you are doing might not be ideal. At the very least it may be worth thinking about and looking for an answer.

When Elijah fled into the desert he was not looking for answers. He was at the end of his tether. "I have had enough," he said. "Just kill me."

In the previous chapter Elijah had had spectacular success in besting the prophet of Baal. Elijah was a strong, articulate, action-oriented prophet of God. But things didn't always go well for him. His courage and his outspoken stance had brought him threats and persecution before, but now he was in no doubt that his very life was in the greatest possible danger.

Elijah has given up, but God has not.

Elijah goes alone into the desert and prays for death. He does not receive death but strength to go a little further. After sleeping, eating and drinking, he goes to Horeb, or Mount Sinai, the mountain of God, the mountain where the book of Deuteronomy says that the Ten Commandments were given to Moses. Elijah is drawn to a holy place, a place where God has spoken to Moses and will speak to him.

Imagine yourself alone, afraid and desperate, and heading for a place where you might perhaps be safe or receive help. “What are you doing here?” is perhaps not what you would expect to hear.

But Elijah answers truthfully with all that is in his heart. He has done his best but it has all gone wrong and now he is in danger and despair.

The Lord does not reply by telling him how to preserve his life or how to overcome his enemies. Instead Elijah is told to spend some time in the presence of God.

Perhaps Elijah hoped that God’s power and might would become evident and help him, but no, God came in a quiet whisper. Elijah received not power and an avenging sword, but God’s quiet presence.

And again the Lord asks, “What are you doing here?” Elijah gives the same answer, telling all that is in his heart, and this time he is sent back and told what to do.

Why wasn’t he told this in the first place? Somehow in between the times of conflict and action, Elijah, for all his strength and zeal, needed that quiet time in the presence of God. Strength and action alone were not enough.

When we are in dark places, we want to know what to do. We live in a problem-solving culture. Something is wrong, so what should we do to fix it? Well, sometimes it is better not to do but to be – to seek the presence of God,

to take our darkness to the light of God's presence and simply say to God, like Elijah, "this is why I am here."

What about the man possessed by demons? This gospel reading is an action-packed story, but one we may perhaps find even more difficult than those who originally heard it. A man is homeless, unclothed, living where no one else would want to be. He shouts and is violent. His life is one of total loss. He has no home, no family life, no resources, no respect, no peace of mind, no security, and no acceptance. His unacceptability is compounded by unclean associations. He is living in proximity to pigs, gentiles and tombs, all unclean and not to be touched or associated with. In the eyes of his family and friends, he is literally living in no-man's land.

Like Elijah he is in a place of desperation and despair. And like Elijah, he finds his way to the presence of God. Only God can give him what he needs. Jesus takes away all the pain and despair. He is released from his demons, his uncleanness and his despair. He moves into a new life - clothed, coherent and sitting at the feet of Jesus.

It is tempting to get caught up in side issues like the debate about how we relate to the description of the man as demon-possessed, and whether this is a spiritual health or mental health problem or both. However, I am reminded of Jesus' healing of the man who was blind from birth. When he was quizzed about Jesus' healing he simply said, "One thing I do know. I was blind but now I see!" One thing the demon-possessed man knew, he had lost his life and now it was found. He had regained that which he had lost, finding new life through Jesus.

In response, he wanted to follow Jesus, but the gospel says "Jesus sent him away, saying, *Return home and tell how much God has done for you.* So the man went away and told all over town how much Jesus had done for him."

“Tell how much God has done for you,” so he tells how much Jesus has done for him. In meeting Jesus he has met with God. Luke ensures that this point is not missed.

This reminds me of our current study groups with their focus on getting out more and telling our story when the opportunity arises. I wonder how many people said to this man, “Aren’t you the man who used to live amongst the tombs?” and I wonder how he answered them. Telling his story would arise naturally from his thankfulness.

Like Elijah and like the demon-possessed man, we can sometimes find ourselves in places of darkness or despair, not knowing why we are in that place or how to regain our lives. Like Elijah, we can simply tell God how things are with us. We can put our trust in the One who can help us find our way back, or even find our way to a life we had not even imagined.

Perhaps our experiences are not quite so dramatic but may be a gradual flowering of faith and a growing thankfulness and desire to share with others all that God has done for us. Let us quietly reflect just for a moment on all that God has done for us, whether it is change and transformation or simply God’s loving presence in times of need.