Walking in the wilderness – 1 Kings 19: 4-13

You can find hope, even in the most unexpected of places. You can find a reason to smile in the most commonplace situation.

A friend recently told me about her mum shopping in Marks & Spencers. Ahead of her in the queue was a woman with a big trolley filled to overflowing with milk. Nothing else but milk. When her turn came to put her groceries through the check out she couldn’t help but remark on the previous customers shopping order. Why would anyone need so much milk?

The cashier replied ‘that’s what I wondered too so I asked her’. The answer – I work at Belfast Zoo and this milk is for the giraffes. And then as if that was the most normal thing in the world she continued to pack her shopping, recounting this tale as if it was a run of the mill occurrence – shopping for giraffes in the supermarket.

It really made me laugh and I still giggle when I think about it – this isn’t ordinary milk this is Belfast Giraffe milk – could become the next advertising campaign for Marks and Spencers.

A monotonous, boring, but essential task became something unique and uplifting and perceptive changing.
And then I read the Old Testament reading from 1 Kings for this week. There didn’t seem to be much joy or laughter to be found in this situation.

Elijah has truly been through the mill. He had survived the experience with the prophets of Baal, been tested by their evil ways, had remained faithful to God and His call on his life and in so doing had brought about the end of the drought which would bring life to his people. And after all this he had been told that queen Jezebel was out for his blood. She wanted revenge on what he had done to her prophets and Elijah had no alternative but to flee for his life – physical and mental. And that is where we find him.

Burnt out, feeling alone and betrayed. Physically exhausted and seeing no way that things will ever improve. He is weary and leaving his servant behind he walks alone into the wilderness and finding a solitary tree pours his heart out to God. It’s too much. I’ve had enough. I can’t do anymore. I might as well be dead. Take my life. Such utter desperation and despondency. A weary broken man crying out for one last respite. And in that weariness he falls asleep.
After a while he is awoken, we are told by an angel and bread and water appear near at hand. He eats and drinks and then falls asleep once more.

Again he is awoken and told to eat and drink but this time with a purpose – strength is needed for the journey he is about to undertake. He eats the bread he drinks the water and his spirits revived he begins the 40 day walk to Mount Sinai – the holy mountain.

Anne Lamott – the American writer – summarises this by saying most things can be fixed if you just have a snack and take a nap. Ask any parents of a newborn baby, what lack of sleep can do to their normal sensible selves and you will soon be told the pressure that amounts and we all know we are better able to cope with little stresses in life when we are fully rested and have eaten enough.

Such was the change in Elijah that he goes from wishing his life to be over to be able to undertake a 40 day trek in the desert. Rather than God saying you’ve had a difficult time, take a break. Time for a holiday, instead God gives Elijah more work to do. Arriving at Sinai, Elijah decides to hunker down in a cave. No escape though – God finds him and asks what are you doing here? And Elijah replies he is broken, he is tired, he is done. No-one else cares, no-one else believes, there is no-one left only him and his enemies are too powerful. None of that was
actually true of course – there were thousands in Israel who believed and had hope but again in Elijah’s weariness and despair he cannot see that.

God calls him out of the cave and he won’t go. Next comes a violent wind that shatters rocks – but Elijah did not find God in the wind. An earthquake shook the foundations but again Elijah does not find God in the earthquake. Then comes a fire but even in the flames Elijah does not see God. Only after the disruption and the destruction and the cleansing of the fire is Elijah able to recognise God’s presence in his life, hear him speaking to him, not in big dramatic events but in a quiet whisper. Gentle, reassuring, familiar, trustworthy and only then does Elijah leave the cave.

God never tries to talk Elijah out of his depression and gloom. God does not argue with the prophet’s ridiculous notion that he is the only one left that is faithful to God. Instead, God provides Elijah with the one thing that sometimes does help when we have lost our way, and that is a new purpose. By giving Elijah a new assignment, one that will affect the course of history, Elijah has a reason to go on, to take the focus off of his own woes and to starting looking out for others.

There is no getting away from the context in which we now find ourselves within. Post-pandemic church has to look and feel and work
much differently than that which has gone before. Every church is struggling with the limitations and restrictions which Covid forced upon us. We did the right thing in keeping everyone as safe as we possibly could but it has taken its toll on our congregation and community.

We may be able to identify with Elijah – tired, burned out, hopeless, wanting to walk away. We may be tempted to find a cave in which to hunker down until things are easier. But if we are tempted to go down that route we may find God will still find ways of speaking to us in that gentle quiet voice. And we will find God telling us to come out, to continue the journey and to complete the work he has given us to do.

What will that work look like? Well it may feel like starting over. It may be work that causes us to take risks – reach out to those who we have never noticed before. It may be ministry that asks for greater sacrifices, enduring discomfort, rejecting things that are divisive and embracing things that unite. It may mean speaking out against injustice and unfairness – always looking to do the next right thing. It will mean looking to work towards the good of the whole rather than the comfort of self.

And what Elijah was given for his work is still available to us – bread and water. Only now we have been promised the Bread of heaven and
the living water as Jesus Christ himself. In John 6 we read these words: I am the bread of life, whoever comes to me will never be hungry; whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.

It is time to come out of the cave and when we hear God asking us, What are you doing here? May our response be – we are serving and through that serving we will find meaning and purpose and even the strength we need for whatever comes next.