

Dear LAUMC: Letters to a Church in (Re)formation
You Are Rooted in a Bigger Story
1 Kings 19:1-20

The word ‘despair’ is one of those words that ought not enter our mouths too often. It’s a big word; it holds hopelessness, a complete absence of resilience; and that’s rare in our can-do, pull-yourself-up-with-a-little-more-hard-work culture. You can see despair in places that are ravaged by year after year of famine, and in people ground down by demoralizing cycles of poverty or injustice, but not here. Not the way we live.

This week I heard, and I felt myself, and I wonder if you did too: despair.

The mass shootings in Buffalo, New York and Uvalde, Texas—one an act of sheer racial hatred and the other for apparently no reason at all--shocked and saddened all of us. There is probably no one who isn’t heavy-hearted about the deaths of those elementary school children, those ordinary people who were just doing their Saturday grocery shopping. If they’d been killed by a tornado or hurricane, that would be tragic too.

But gun violence is not a natural disaster. Just because we hear this news with frightening regularity—that someone who is mentally anguished or who has hate in their heart has used a technologically-advanced weapon to make war on their neighbors—doesn’t mean it’s inevitable human behavior. Mass shootings do not come automatically with living in a diverse society, or with the mental stresses of modern life. There are dozens of other countries that prove that point, where this kind of violence does not happen, where it is not allowed to happen.

It happens in this country because of our collective unwillingness to make it stop. It’s a failure of our American values. In more than two hundred years of this hopeful experiment in democracy, we have not yet learned how to hold together freedom and what it takes to care for one another.

So many times before we have said, ‘Now we see. This time, something has to change,’ and it hasn’t. It feels like it won’t. No wonder we feel despair. There is good reason for it.

Despair is where the story we read this morning begins too. You may not know much about the prophet Elijah. But I think you’ll remember that when Jesus took his disciples up the mountain and they saw him transfigured, it was the ghostly figures of Moses and Elijah who gathered around him, a signal of Jesus’ status in the universe. It’s the prophet Elijah that Passover dinners leave an empty seat for. Elijah was one of the major prophets in the story of God’s people, but his zeal for ‘the work of the Lord’ makes him a little hard for us moderns to take. He didn’t leave us with beautiful words like Isaiah or Jeremiah. He was always doing battle to prove that the Israelites’ God was more powerful than everybody else’s God. Sometimes the stories end with Elijah slaughtering the opposition just to drive the point home. Not our tradition’s best moment.

When this story begins, Elijah has hit the wall that can come for activists who set out to fight the status quo. The faithless King Ahab and Queen Jezebel had had enough of Elijah’s meddling in

the business of running the government; finally, Jezebel vowed to have his head in the next 24 hours. Elijah fled—not only afraid for his own life but burned out, feeling like nothing he'd been working for was going to make one bit of difference in the long run. He just wanted to get away—anywhere the queen and the news cycle couldn't reach him. Elijah is not the first or will he be the last biblical character to find himself in the wilderness when his identity has gotten misplaced.

'I can't do it any more,' he says when no one is listening but God. 'I give up. Take me now.' And then Elijah does that really good human escape thing: he takes a long nap. After a while God's messenger comes and wakes him up. 'Have a snack,' the messenger says. 'You'll feel better.' And Elijah does feel better; but he's not done with his lamenting. He goes out even further into the wilderness. He has to know what he's being called to now. He has to hear the voice of God again, because somewhere along the way, he's lost the sound of it. He cannot locate the passion that had lived inside of him, driven him, before.

Again Elijah does what we do when we're not sure we want to be found. He climbs into a cave. He hides there, nursing his misery. Again God comes and finds him, pesters him out of his escape sleep. 'Why are you here, Elijah?' God asks.

'Well,' Elijah begins his I've-had-enough speech. 'As you know, I've been very passionate about your work. All the rest of the Israelites have abandoned you. They've torn down your altars; they've murdered you prophets. I'm the only one left, and now they want to kill me too. I'm done.'

Here's the part of the story you may have heard before. God says, 'Get out of the cave, Elijah.' So Elijah goes outside, and he listens for God's voice. A big wind comes—strong, angry even. But God wasn't in the wind. After the wind, there was an earthquake. God wasn't in the earthquake either. After the earthquake, a fire. Not God. After the fire, there was one more sound. 'Thin. Quiet,' the story reads in English; but the original Hebrew word is not even a small voice. It means 'the sound of sheer silence.' Why is it we always expect God's voice to boom?

Silence is how God speaks to the despairing Elijah.

Was that supposed to be comforting?

Maybe, but I wonder if what Elijah thought he heard in God's silence wasn't something more like 'I can't help you.'

Again Elijah tries to coax God into lending him more power. 'I'm the only one left on your side,' Elijah protests; 'I'm the only ally you've got. You have to make me younger, stronger. Bring my passion back.'

And here's the part of the story you may not have heard before, because we usually stop at the 'God is in the silence' part. God says to Elijah, 'You know, you're *not* the only person working on my behalf. I've got lots of friends. Seven thousand of them, right there in Israel. Go find them. You don't have to do this alone.'

There's a small movement, started by a TED talk, now a book, called *The Power of Onlyness*. Nilofer Merchant is about empowering people who don't have easy access to traditional positions of power. Now that we have the Internet, she says, everyone can have a voice in making change. Your power comes not from holding a particular position, but from your 'onlyness'. There is a spot in the world only you stand in, she says. It's made out of your unique history and experiences, your vision, your hopes. 'Dent by dent,' Merchant says, 'the world can be reshaped to include you and what you believe in.'

Good stuff, but that *onlyness* idea can also mislead you. Like Elijah, you can drop into self-pity and isolation when your point of view isn't appreciated. You can feel like you're the only one who 'gets it'.

Justice comes from a vision that is larger than yours. The purposes of goodness do not depend on my energy level. The work does not end because any one of us feels overwhelmed or powerless. None of us—not this church or *the Church* or 'our people'—are the only ones who get it. And sometimes, God's voice comes from the last place we think to listen for it.

One of the things I have loved about the work we have done together here is our partnerships with other organizations that serve this community, whether they use religious language or not. The Day Workers Center, House of Grace, CHAC's work on mental health services, Ashoka. All of these organizations are doing the work of trying to bring more flourishing to the world. God's work. Sometimes they do it more effectively than we do, often with people the Church could never reach. God has lots of friends.

I learned this once when I was on a Volunteers in Mission trip to Guatemala, working at a medical clinic with a team from my church. My job on the last day was to go to a pharmacy in town and spend all the money we had left on medications that we could leave behind, medicine the Guatemalans needed on an ongoing basis. High blood pressure is a big issue in Guatemala and other developing countries, and medication for high blood pressure is far more expensive there than it is in the U.S. The pharmacist answered my questions and I realized that all I could buy with the quetzals I held in my hand was a one-month supply for one person. What good would that do when this was a medication whose prescription was 'Take every day for the rest of your life'?

Standing there at the pharmacy counter I realized something I've had to learn over and over again in my life—because it seems to be true that the most important lessons come more than once. It wasn't my work, or my team's work, to solve the blood pressure problem in Guatemala, even for one person. We were there for one week. The success of our mission depended on another team coming behind us, and then another after that. We could only hope that others would come with more medicine, more time and money and passion to help. If we didn't trust that, we might do nothing; every effort could seem meaningless, inadequate to make any difference at all.

And then God would find another way. God has lots of friends.

In the Talmud—the book of Hebrew stories that bring the Torah to life—the Rabbis say: *Do not be daunted by the enormity of the world's grief. You are not obligated to complete the work, but neither are you free to abandon it.*

It's a paradox, isn't it? We say 'We are the hands and feet of God in the world. God needs us to accomplish good things.' *And* if we, or I, or the Church, will not be part of God's good purposes, God will find another way. God always does. In the end, love and justice will always win.

Your despair about the things that are not yet right—even our collective despair—is not God's. When you're tired and overwhelmed, sit down for a while. Let the angels bring you a little snack. Listen for God's voice, even when it comes only in silence. Find the rest of God's friends. *Be* God's friend, which means being more interested in God's opinion than you are in your own. Even with all that has gone wrong, God has not given up on this world. We must not either.