

The Great Resignation



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Have you heard the term “the great resignation” in the news over the last year? In the last half of 2021 and into the early part of this year, many countries around the world experienced what’s been described as a tidal wave of resignations: people resigning from their careers and jobs, especially those in the middle of their working years. This economic and social trend is COVID-prompted but not COVID-caused, since most of those resigning had either worked through the pandemic in some fashion, or had gone back to work after the restrictions were lifted. The Great Resignation has been likened to a general strike, in protest over wages that don’t reflect the rising cost of living, no possibilities for advancement or promotion, work that didn’t have meaning to them, limited or no benefits, and perhaps most damning of all, a feeling of being under-valued or not respected by their employers or those they interact with. Not everyone had the economic freedom to make the choice to resign if they wanted to; but those that did wanted a different life for themselves than the one they’d been living.

I have a lot of sympathy for people who made that choice; it’s one I made myself, for similar reasons, when I switched careers back in 2015. It’s one lots of people have made, at different times and for different reasons, not always to do with work: to just stop and make a change, hoping for a better future. The big difference, what made it “the great resignation,” is that so many people decided to do it, all at once.

During the pandemic, almost like Elijah retreating to his cave in the mountains, we were all sent home to our ‘caves,’ too. And we had time to think, to take stock of our lives, and to take stock of the world around us. Even those among us who have long since retired had, I think, a similar experience of being worn down by worry, but also having this pause, in which we suddenly had time to take stock of our own lives, to really think about what matters, and what we invested ourselves in or spent our time doing. Many people have been eagerly and happily abandoning their “caves,” picking up old well-loved activities and making new choices for themselves, like workers swapping careers. And some people have struggled to let go of the worry and stress of these difficult years, to look ahead with hope.

But retreating into a personal “cave” is not limited to the pandemic; we can find ourselves withdrawing from our lives during many difficult moments or seasons. The death of a loved one, physical or mental illness, losing a job unwillingly...going to ground to lick our wounds can be necessary, for a time. It is surprising, though, or maybe worrying, how comfortable those caves we retreat into can be; how easily we can talk ourselves into staying put and giving up, and like Elijah, feeling utterly abandoned by everyone and everything as we wait it out, or wait for it all to be over.

My memory is a little fuzzy, but I think I’ve probably preached on this particular part of the Bible before. It’s part of a really brilliant series of stories, culminating in this spectacular revelation of God’s power contrasted with the understated, still small voice speaking into the silence. It’s good stuff.

It’s easy to be dazzled by what God does here, and to find only a single meaning in this exchange between Elijah and God, a lesson about how God may chose to reveal himself to us.

It is never incorrect to focus on God. But here, in this small piece of the tale of the epic partnership between Elijah and God, God is focused on Elijah. And Elijah is in a dark place.

Modern cynical kinds of people would say that the cold, hard fact of human existence is that we find ourselves adrift in an indifferent universe, and it’s on us to summon up the strength to pick ourselves back up, to find light on our own, and keep going. Elijah would probably agree: “I have been very zealous for the Lord,” Elijah says, as he speaks to God; “[the rest of your people] 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.” Elijah is worn down and done with it all, ready for the challenges and turmoil to be over.

Let me share with you a little about what Elijah has been doing, the great things he and God have been doing together, that brought him to this point. Israel’s king and queen, Ahab and Jezebel, were awful leaders, abusive and exploitative; they worshipped a different god and lived and led by a different set of values. Where we find Elijah now comes after two spectacular demonstrations of God’s power at another mountain, Mount Carmel. The first instance was a dramatic contest between Elijah and four hundred and fifty prophets of this other god, Baal, during which God sends down fire to burn up a

sacrifice on an altar saturated with water, leading the watching Israelites - the people of God in name though not in belief or deeds - to kill all 450 prophets. The second instance reports the intentional ending of a drought that Elijah had earlier proclaimed into existence.

In that part of the story, we see a confident and fearless prophet, who openly confronts very powerful and amoral men and women, who depends on God for food and water and shelter, who brings a widow's dead son to life. And then Jezebel the Queen threatens to kill Elijah, which inexplicably scares this nerves-of-steel prophet of God into making a run for it.

The man we now see is gripped by such crushing despair that he wants to die. As he takes stock of his situation, Elijah does not think about the great works of God he has witnessed and participated in. Instead, he looks inwardly and can only imagine a bleak future; he is overwhelmed by defeat, disappointment and danger.

Even the way this story is written into the Bible, the way it's told, even that changes. During the mighty works and great deeds part of the tale, the writing is clear and straightforward, crisp and decisive. But now, in what we read together today, the words and the telling of the story fall apart, just like Elijah himself, taking a meandering course, causing us to experience uncertainty, aimlessness and discomfort, right along with Elijah. Most of all, though, this story raises a lot of questions: why did Jezebel only threaten to kill him, rather than dispatching her husband's warriors to actually do it? Why does Elijah flee to a mountaintop, of all places, effectively cornering himself? Does he really want out? Why has Elijah sunk so low, so suddenly?

Huddled in his cave, alone and lonely on the mountain, Elijah is convinced that he is the last man of faith alive in the world, and he believes that he has to go it alone, that everything, that the future, relies on him.

It is tempting once more to be distracted by the flash and thunder of God's revelation of himself in this story, roaring in like storm, charging in to save the day and to re-connect with Elijah. It's tempting to charge in ourselves, with judgment in one hand and solutions in the other, to fix Elijah's problem. I wonder how many of us, with every good intention, have done that very thing when we've discovered a friend or family member or stranger huddled in a cave of their own, brought low by a hard situation.

We might think that Elijah needs to stop pitying himself and pull himself together and work harder, or that he just needs to remember what God has done for and with him in the past; we might try to put a silver-lining on Elijah's dark cloud for him, whether he's ready for it or not.

But God does none of those things.

God does something that is very like what Henri Nouwen called the ministry of presence: spending time with someone, getting to know them, listening to their story and telling your own, letting them know that they are not just liked or tolerated, but loved.

God asks Elijah a question: what are you doing here? That question is an expression of concern and love, it's an invitation to take stock and reflect, and God is there, with Elijah in his cave, while he does it. What a powerful thing for the God of all creation to come and enter into Elijah's cave full of despair and fear, and be present with him, listening and loving. It's God's voice and God's quiet, listening presence that re-centre Elijah, not the big, spectacular manifestations of God's power with which Elijah is so familiar, experiencing them so recently on another mountain-top. God turns Elijah back toward God, back to the steady, quiet, unspectacular rhythms of every-day life with God, as the journey continues.

And then, God sends Elijah back out into the desert. We don't know what Elijah thought or felt about this, but we do what he did: he went. And Elijah discovered that he was not the last man of faith in all of Israel, that there were thousands more. He discovered that he did not have to do it alone, that there were people - one person, especially, his soon-to-be protegee Elisha - who would do this work with him. And Elijah discovered that his success or failure as he did God's work did not fall solely on his own shoulders; God would send people to help him and God himself, powerful and present and active, was always already there.

It's easy for us to connect with Elijah's worn-down exhaustion; with his belief that he is alone and abandoned by those he expected to support him; even with his sense of aimlessness, of there not being a point or purpose to his life. Elijah's mental and emotional state, while in his cave, resonates with us because we are worn down by an interminable pandemic, by political polarization, by conspiracy-theory madness and whispers of more civil unrest, by economic hardship and a looming recession, by the months-long spectre of global war.

Many of us may also remember times when we felt exhausted or alone or without direction because of a personal situation, when memories of past successes, satisfaction or happiness give way to inertia and a desert outlook on the future.

Trying to live wisely and well and as people of faith in an era that inspired the Great Resignation can leave us taking stock, and wondering where to go or what to do next.

By joining God in this story, as God focuses on Elijah, we can think about it, not as a story that's only about revealing God's power, but as a story about Elijah's faith. So let's talk about faith in God, and why it matters when we're stuck - voluntarily or not - in a cave of exhaustion or grief or hopelessness, a place we all end up, whether we want to admit it or not, at some point in our lives.

Elijah, hunkered down in his cave, was convinced that he was the last faithful man of God on earth, that he had to go it alone, that the success or failure of his life, his work for God, all rested on Elijah's own ability and strength. This illusion can very easily take over when our concept of reality doesn't include an active, powerful, present God. Not a god who exists out there somewhere, in some floaty heavenly place, answering a prayer every once in a while on a whim, but mostly disengaged from life here on earth...but a God who will hunker down with us in our darkest moments, when we are afraid, alone, bone-tired and ready to quit, and just be with us, as a listening, loving, empowering presence. Now that's a God to have faith in.

Elijah was certain that there was no future for him or for God's people outside that cave. To the best of his knowledge, there was only him left, God's person, not people, and he was going to be hunted down and killed. By all good sense and judgement, God's dream of a people as numerous as the stars and faithful in worship and action was over, ending in a cave on a desert mountain. But when God sent Elijah back into the desert, Elijah went. Faith in God allows our understanding of our life and where our life might be going to surpass the limits of what we can see and know and expect. Faith in God means that we don't need to have strength to get back up or hope to light our own way, because those are the things that God can give us, can bring into our life, even when it seems impossible that God could or would.

The catalyst for faith must come from somewhere other than inside us or from our situation; the inspiration, the igniting fire of our faith, must come from God.

Elijah was used to working hard and doing spectacular things with God, but the catalyst for his faith, that got him out of his cave and heading back out into the desert, was God's personal, gentle presence. For you and I, the catalyst for our faith may be that same gentle presence or something spectacular; it might be a matter of remembering God's actions in the past and using that to find hope for the future; it might be prayer, or it might be God acting through others. What fires a Christian's faith is unique to every one of us.

If you are feeling stuck in cave today, or adrift in an indifferent world alone, know that human beings have had times like that for thousands of years, because that is how old Elijah's story is. Elijah's story reminds us that our situations and our perspectives can turn on a dime, and that if we are looking for God, he is already there, doing the impossible, present in unexpected ways. Elijah's story assures us that God provides food for the journey as we wander through desert stretches, not knowing where we will end up. Elijah's story removes the burden of pursuing the spectacular and re-centres our focus on the presence of God, speaking and listening, and there, right with us all along. Elijah's story tells us that neither we nor God are finished, and that there is more yet to do and more to be discovered, in new and unfamiliar deserts. Thanks be to God. Amen.