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CASHMERE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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EXTREMITY AND PROVISION

It is already a few weeks past the beginning of the new year but early enough in the year for us to still feel the freshness of it. A couple of weeks ago the people with whom I worship on a Sunday had a picnic together and each person was asked beforehand to come with their name and what their name means, or something about the person they were named after. I referred to the verse in Rev 2:17 where God promises to give to those who overcome a white stone with a new name written on it, known only to the one who receives it. Then I posed the question, 'What new name do you want to live into this new year?'

A new name to live in to, a word, a phrase, a verse of Scripture can be a helpful thing to carry with us into a new year, and far more meaningful, I might say, than new year's resolutions, most of which have usually fallen by the wayside by around the 12th January.

An intentional question, or a word or a verse of Scripture can help us to focus us on an aspect of God's ongoing work in our lives. What might God have in store for you and for me in this year of 2019? I come today bringing two words that I want to offer to you as strong ropes to hold onto throughout this year, no matter what the year may bring. The words are - extremity and provision.

If I were to ask you to think of places of extremity in the world today, what would you come up with?

Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, Indonesia, Saudi Arabia ...

In NZ?

Crime in South Auckland

Random attacks in random streets on random people that shock and scare us

Epidemic of P and synthetic cannabis, not just in other places up north but in our own local communities as well

The road toll, police pursuits ...

Extremity, it seems, is everywhere. And not just outside of us, but often within us as well.

Introduction to message: A few years ago in the course of my Bible reading, the Lord stopped me at a particular chapter in the Old Testament - 1 Kings 17. Instead of reading it then moving on to the next chapter, I felt held in that chapter and every morning for about 3 weeks I read the same chapter over and over again. God had something important to say to me.

This chapter tells the story of extremity and provision. If I were an artist I would paint this chapter on three canvasses for it gives three snapshots in the life of the prophet Elijah - three incidents of his extremity and three examples of God's gracious provision, that somehow still speak to us today.

The land of Israel is in extremity, in crisis. The people have turned their backs on the living God, the God of covenant, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and are worshipping Baal who was considered to be the lord of the rain clouds, the god of fertility.

For many years a long line of kings of Israel have led and encouraged the people in this terrible idolatry, rather than calling the people back to the living God. Ruling at this time is Ahab who is

described in the previous chapter as a king who 'did even more open evil before God than anyone yet - a new champion in evil! He made the God of Israel angrier than all the previous kings of Israel put together.'

Onto this dark stage leaps the great prophet Elijah. He is a monumental figure, larger than life, unafraid, undaunted. No background details are given about him, no biographical notes to introduce him. Even the precise location of Tishbe, his hometown, is uncertain.

Only his name is given. His name Elijah means 'the Lord is my God' and his name sums up his message. He comes to take a stand against the worship of Baal and to lead the people of Israel back into their covenant relationship with the living God.

Author Frederich Buechner said, 'If a prophet was to a king what ants are to a picnic, Elijah was a swarm of bees.'

The first recorded words from Elijah are words of confrontation. To the king Elijah says, 'This land is about to suffer from a terrible, devastating drought that will last not just one season but for several years, and it will stop only when I, the representative of the living God, say so.'

Now Elijah is not just giving a long range weather forecast. Remember, Baal was considered to be, and was worshipped as the god of rain and fertility, the one who made things grow and supplied food to eat. When there was rain, resulting in a bountiful harvest, the people believed that Baal was alive, active and all-powerful and so they worshipped him. But when there was drought, it was believed that Baal had died.

So when Elijah marches into the presence of the Baal-worshipping king and announces a long, terrible drought, Ahab is shocked. When there is no rain, as Elijah predicts is about to happen, and the land suffers from drought and the people suffer from starvation, who will they see as responsible? Who will they blame? Baal of course.

Baal's impotence is about to be proven, not by just one dry season, but by several years of drought that are going to parch the land, stunt the growth of crops and make the people realise in the very pit of their stomachs, that Baal is no god at all.

Elijah delivers this unwelcome news to the king, then God tells the prophet to, 'Get out of here - go and hide on the other side of the Jordan River. There you will find a fresh-water stream and the ravens will come and bring you food.' And so it happens. The withdrawal of the prophet away from the land of Israel, is symbolic of the withdrawal of God's word from the people. With Elijah gone, God's presence and blessing are also gone from the land and the drought begins immediately, just as the prophet said it would happen.

In his lonely, isolated hiding place, Elijah is abundantly fed by ravens, morning and evening and he drinks fresh water from the brook. Ravens were considered to be unclean birds, yet, at the command of God, they miraculously feed Elijah twice a day. They bring him bread and meat in the morning and bread and meat in evening - every day. How?

Elijah's extremity - God's provision - first canvas

Some time later - it could have been several years later - the brook dries up. This event is the moment for God to give Elijah his next instruction. 'Go at once to Zarephath in Sidon. I've instructed a woman there - a widow - to feed you.'

Pardon, God, did you say a widow? Widows in that society were destitute, the poorest of the poor. They had no widows' benefit, no life insurance paid out on their husband's death, no savings account. What is more, this woman is a foreigner, a Baal-worshipper. But if God can use birds to

feed a man for months, maybe years, then no doubt he can use a destitute pagan woman to do the same. So, the Scripture tells us, Elijah went.

At the entrance to the town he meets a woman gathering sticks. He calls to her, asks her for a drink of water. 'Oh, and while you're about it, bring me something to eat as well.'

At this moment the woman's extremity becomes clear. She pours out the sad story of her meagre supplies. She too has been affected by the deathly drought that has held the country in its grip. She has no bread. All she has is a handful of flour and some dregs of oil in a jug. That's why she is gathering firewood - so she can mix the last of her flour with the last of her oil to make one last meal for herself and her son. After that there will be nothing more to eat and death by starvation will not be long in coming.

But Elijah tells her to go home and do it anyway - make a small cake of bread for herself and her son and the prophet, and watch what God will do. With the request comes the promise. Don't be afraid ... go and do it ... God will provide.

So the woman goes, bakes the bread, feeds the three of them and from that moment on for as long as there is drought in the land, the jar of flour does not run out and the jug of oil does not run dry. There is no other explanation but that God, the living God, provides.

The widow's extremity - God's provision - second canvas

Again some time later, the son of the widow who offered her meagre supplies in hospitality to Elijah becomes ill and dies. This child, presumably her only son, would be the woman's insurance for her old age, his far too premature death an utter tragedy.

Distraught, she can come to no other conclusion but that the prophet's presence in her home has drawn God's attention to her and that the death of her son is God's punishment for her sin. 'Why did you ever show up here in the first place,' she rails at him. 'A holy man barging in, exposing my sins and killing my son.'

Elijah has no easy answer. Why has God who promised life to this woman and her son, allowed death to come instead.

Elijah enters into no debate with her but takes the boy from his mother, carries him upstairs and lays him on his bed. There he prays out his protest to God. 'My God, why have you brought this terrible thing on this woman who has so kindly opened her home to me? Why have you let her son die?'

Then he does what seems like a basic form of artificial respiration in an attempt to transfer his bodily warmth to the child. As he does so, Elijah prays, God hears his cry and restores the child. Elijah carries him downstairs and gives him back to his mother. 'Here's your son,' he says, 'he's alive.'

This incident, the first record in Scripture of a dead person being restored to life, convinces the Gentile widow that God's word is completely reliable. As she looks from her pink-cheeked boy to the flushed face of the prophet, she says, 'Now I know for sure that you are a holy man and that God speaks through you.'

The boy's extremity - God's provision - third canvas

What are we to make of these three snapshots of extremity and provision? Are they just three incidents from the prophet's life that happened hundreds of years ago, or do they have something to say to us today?

Listen carefully ...

The prophet Elijah is considered to be a forerunner of Jesus. What Elijah begins, as recorded in the OT, Jesus completes, as recorded in the NT. So let's look again at the three canvasses and see the links between Elijah and Jesus.

First canvas - Elijah is fed by unclean birds by the stream. Can you remember a time when Jesus is in a deserted, lonely place? We think of the 40 days and nights he spends in the wilderness after his temptations. During that time, Matthew's gospel says, the angels come and attend him.

Second canvas - Elijah receives God's miraculous provision of food through the poor widow. Can you remember a time when Jesus does something miraculous with food? We think of how he feeds a multitude of people with a meagre amount of food - just a few fish and some bread - then declares that he himself is the Bread of Life.

Third canvas - Elijah appeals to God to restore the widow's son. Can you think of a time when Jesus brings a dead person back to life? Yes, Lazarus, the brother of Mary and Martha, and on that occasion Jesus declares that he himself is the resurrection and the life.

So there are very close links between Elijah's story and what Jesus does. In the midst of his extremity and that of the widow and her son, Elijah trusts God for his provision. We as followers of Jesus are invited to do the same.

Which leads me to the question, what kind of extremity might you be experiencing today? What kind of extremity might you or I experience in this year of 2019 that spreads so fresh and untouched before us?

What canvas of your extremity and of God's provision might be painted for you in these coming months?

Our greatest extremity of course is our sin, our lostness and our need of forgiveness. But even before we call God has answered. Even before we began searching for him, God was out looking for us. Romans 5:8 says, 'While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.'

We might be suffering from the extremity of wrong choices, terrible mistakes, bad judgments we have made recently or many years ago. 1 John 1:9 says, 'If we confess our sins God is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purge us of all wrongdoing.'

Someone here this morning might be feeling the extremity of loneliness, to which God says, 'I'll never let you down, never walk off and leave you.' (Hebrews 13:5)

When we suffer from the extremity of a low self-esteem God says, 'I've searched you and I know you. I know what lifts you up and what trips you up. I created you, I formed you fearfully and wonderfully, and even when you are asleep I am always thinking of you with love.' (Psalm 139)

When confusion and aimlessness make up our extremity, God says, 'I know the plans I have for you, good plans to prosper you, not terrible plans to hurt or harm you.' (Jeremiah 29:11)

When we are in the extremity of a struggle or a time of testing God says he will make a way for us, a way to bear it and a way out of it. (1 Cor 10:13)

No matter what the extremity of our circumstances or our suffering may be, God says, 'Nothing, nothing living or dead, angelic or demonic, today or tomorrow, high or low, thinkable or unthinkable - absolutely nothing can get between us and God's love because of the way that Jesus our Master has embraced us.' (Romans 8:38).

Whatever your extremity today, or whatever extremity you may face during this year of 2019, God has an answer, a way through, a way out, a way to live again.

Some years ago when John Campbell was on Campbell Live on TV3 I saw a picture of him on the back of a bus. 'Trust him to ask.' Clever play on words. 'Trust **him** to ask - no one else would be so bold, or so foolish.' Also, '**Trust** him to ask - he will. Other people may dodge around the issue but this man will ask the hard questions.'

I'd like to see a poster with the face of Jesus on it and the words, 'Trust him to answer.' He will. We can trust him to do it, count on him to answer. God may not answer when or how we expect or want, but he will answer. God may change our attitude to our sickness before he actually heals our body. He may let death rather than healing be his ultimate answer for someone's release.

In this year of 2019 God may take us through a deep, dark place rather than rescuing us from it, for he knows there are things in that deep dark place that will form and shape us and make us more like Jesus.

We may find ourselves at some moment this year in a courtroom, a hospital waiting room, a funeral parlour, or a host of other unimaginable places. No matter where, we need to remember that God is with us in that very place. We do not face the situation alone.

No matter what extremity we experience this year, we can trust God to answer and to make a way. Trust him boldly, trust him unswervingly, trust him with the same faith that Elijah showed when he was in hiding by the stream, when he was confronted with the widow's extremity, and then when her son died.

We can trust God for he is a wonderful merciful Saviour. Look at the words as this song is played. Look at all the names given to God that remind us no matter what our extremity, he is a God who hears and who will answer.

Wonderful Merciful Saviour

Do you have an extremity that you need to bring to this wonderful merciful Saviour? Do you have an anxiety that you need to bring to the place of prayer this morning? Do you need to ask God to give you a bold Elijah faith, a radical Elijah trust, to serve the living God right where you live or work or study and have your being?

This place of prayer, this place where God's provision meets our extremity, is open to each one of us this morning. An old Salvation Army chorus says:

All your anxiety, all your care
Bring to the mercy seat, leave it there
Never a burden he cannot bear
Never a friend like Jesus

All your extremity, all your fear
Bring to the place of prayer, leave it there
Never a burden he cannot bear
Never a friend like Jesus

1st chorus words by Edward Joy

If you would like someone to pray for you in your extremity this morning, then come and stand here as we sing and someone will come and pray with you.

Prayer

He gives us more grace when our burdens grow greater,
He sends us more strength when our labours increase,
To added affliction He adds His mercy,
To multiplied trials, He multiplies peace.

His love has no limit, His grace has no measure,
His power no boundary known unto men,
For out of His infinite riches in Jesus,
He gives and gives and gives again.

When we have exhausted our store of endurance,
When our strength has failed ere the day is half-done,
When we reach the end of our hoarded resources,
Our Father's full giving is only begun.

Words: Annie Johnson Flint

Benediction

The Lord Bless Thee and Keep Thee

Numbers 6:24

Amen

Wonderful merciful Saviour
Precious Redeemer and Friend
Who would have thought that a Lamb
Could rescue the souls of men
Oh you rescue the souls of men

Counsellor, Comforter, Keeper
Spirit we long to embrace
You offer hope when our hearts
Have hopelessly lost our way
Oh we've hopelessly lost the way

You are the One that we praise
You are the One we adore
You give the healing and grace
Our hearts always hunger for
Oh our hearts always hunger for

Almighty infinite Father
Faithfully loving your own
Here in our weakness you find us
Falling before your throne
Oh we're falling before your throne