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Under the Broom Tree
1 Kings 19:4-8

You know, it isn't even a tree at all, really, the broom tree under which Elijah sat.
At least, not as we picture trees.

It's a scrubby, pokey bit of brush,
a desert-dwelling bundle of twigs;
with barely enough growth on the branches to shade Elijah's head in this sandy wilderness.

And you know he went there to die. This great prophet of God: Elijah!
Under a solitary broom tree. Asking for death.
It's a desolate scene.

You may remember the backstory to this particular episode in the life of Israel.
Elijah, the prophet of YHWH, God of Israel,
has just faced down the king and queen with their 450 prophets of Baal.
And YHWH wins.
YHWH's 1 prophet, Elijah,
beats out Baal's 450 prophets –
the king and queen's greatest supporters.

Which, of course, leaves *Elijah* in a bit of a situation.
The royalty are publicly shamed,
revealed to be worshipping the wrong god,
their prophets are all destroyed,
and their people are in revolt.
Elijah has won! But the powerful are mad – and they're coming for Elijah.

The text states, "Then he was afraid".
Up until now Elijah was just doing his job, doing what he was called to do, and doing it well.
He believed in it wholeheartedly.
Now, for doing what he knew was right, he must flee for his life, leave the country.

Finally, when he's gotten a good distance from the excitement of it all,
he leaves his servant in the town they'd run to,
"and he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a
solitary broom tree".
This is where we find Elijah today.

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Some of you may also recall where he's going. The very next part of this story is a familiar favorite:  
Elijah comes to the mountain of YHWH, Mount Horeb, and "the word of YHWH came to him,  
saying, 'What are you doing here, Elijah?' He answered, 'I have been very zealous for you, the God  
of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant....I alone am left, and they are seeking my  
life, to take it away.'"  
[And] "God said, 'Go out and stand on the mountain before me, for I am about to pass by'.

Now there was a great wind,  
 so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the Lord,  
 but the Lord was not in the wind;  
     and after the wind an earthquake,  
     but the Lord was not in the earthquake;  
         and after the earthquake a fire,  
         but the Lord was not in the fire;  
             and after the fire  
             a sound of sheer silence.

When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle  
 and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave”.

The King James Version of the Bible interprets that sheer silence as “a still small voice”,  
 the voice of God, heard within sheer silence.

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I was speaking with someone this week who asked me,
 “how can a seeker learn to hear the guiding voice of our still-speaking God?
 How can we hear God leading us,
 loving us,
 encouraging us
 on the next steps of where we need to go?”

Many of us have these same questions –
 particularly when there has been a big event,
 or when the threads of life seem to be unraveling,
 or when something familiar or solid has drastically changed,
 or when we feel, like Elijah, that all our hard work
 (for family or community or nation – for God!)
 that all of that hard work is just a tiny drop in a vast ocean, impossible to change –
 that God’s reign is nothing when compared to the reign of the rich or powerful,
 and the powers of evil continue to pursue us, unending;
 we wonder how we can hear God’s still, small voice
 leading us forward,
 giving us strength...

I was asked this question, and then I read the passage for today.
 Not the “still, small voice” passage,
 but what comes before it –
 the *middle* part of the story.
 Today’s reading is Elijah under the broom tree,
 not Elijah on the mountainside.

Elijah: taking refuge under a bush barely able to offer
 some shady relief.

Elijah: exhausted, weary of the fight and ready
 to die for all the good he thinks he’s accomplished.

Elijah: laying down to sleep,
 praying to God his soul to take.

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This is a hard place to be, for some of us.  
 We don't want to dwell on this piece of the story,  
     not when there is so clearly something *more* to get to.  
 Like in our own lives, we know there is a "what comes next" –  
     and we want to get on with it,  
     hear what God has to say and move on.

Yet here Elijah is, under the broom tree,  
 in an experience of what author Alice Walker has called "the pause".

Walker describes "the pause" as

"The moment when something major is accomplished and we are so relieved to finally be done with it that we are already rushing, at least mentally, into The Future. Wisdom, however, requests a pause....And we find ourselves required to stop, to sit down, to reflect. This is the time of 'the pause,' the universal place of stopping. The universal moment of reflection"<sup>i</sup>.

After a graduation. Pause.  
 After a job change, whether promotion or lay-off. Pause.  
 After a presidential election. Pause.  
 After a capital campaign or  
     a building project or  
     multiple staff transitions.

Pause. Pause. Pause.

Without a doubt, there is still more to do,  
     more to take care of,  
     more to accomplish.

Sometimes we worry that to *take* time – to pause – is to *waste* time.  
 God is still calling us, after all, to keep going!

But before the encounter with God's voice on the mountain  
 comes the pause under the broom tree.

Elijah has just experienced the greatest triumph of his ministry for God –  
     *what a coup to reveal YHWH's presence to the powerful, to the world!*  
 And yet he is pursued by the world's powers;  
 powers that threaten to deny all that is sacred to him;  
 powers that refuse the shalom of God.

He has hit a high and a low – and he knows that God has still more work for him to do.  
 Yet he has come to the pause,  
 "the universal moment of reflection",  
 and he can do no more.

"It is enough", he says to God.

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So often in this culture we try to push ourselves too quickly to the next step, pass from an experience or undertaking right to the mountain of YHWH for instruction on "where to now".

Sometimes I wonder if, perhaps, we are not quite ready to hear God's still, small voice speaking –
 if we rush from one task to the next
 we might get caught up in the
 wind or the earthquake or the fire
 and mistake them for God's message
 rather than waiting for the sheer silence?

Which reminds us that there is more to the pause than NOT acting, NOT moving on.

Elijah's sojourn under the broom tree, as sparse as its shelter seems, gives him strength to continue:

"Then he lay down under the broom tree and fell asleep. Suddenly an angel touched him and said to him, 'Get up and eat'. He looked, and there at his head was a cake baked on hot stones, and a jar of water. He ate and drank and lay down again. The angel of YHWH came a second time, touched him and said, 'Get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you. He got up, and ate and drank; then he went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights to Horeb the mount of God".

Elijah prays.

He sleeps.

An angel touches him.

He eats.

He drinks.

He sleeps again.

His actions are as sparse as the broom tree's cover.

Sleep.

Touch.

Bread.

Water.

Sustenance.

"[And] he went on the strength of that"
 to the mount of God,
 where he *then* could hear God's still, small voice.

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Before the sheer silence,  
 before the fire or earthquake or wind,  
 before the journey in search of YHWH's mountain,  
 there is the broom tree.

Whether we find ourselves under a big, leafy, cool-shady branch  
 or if all we have is a scrubby, pokey bundle of twigs –  
 may we, all of us,  
 offer ourselves and others  
 the grace of the pause.

And when we have slept, eaten, drank – *refreshed* – seek *then* to hear God's voice calling us onward.

<sup>i</sup> Alice Walker "All Praises to the Pause; The Universal Moment of Reflection", in *We Are the Ones We Have Been Waiting For: Inner Light in a Time of Darkness* (New York: The New Press, 2006), 48-49.