

Sisters and brothers,

„Get up and eat!“. This is not a sentence for a winner. These are words for a loser. The one, who was a winner a minute ago, now has to flee.

Elijah is running, he runs for his life.

Flees from Samaria, flees through Juda, passing Jerusalem, down to the southern end of Juda, until he arrives in Beersheba. Only there he feels safe to some degree. Because in this place exists an old altar to God, his God.

But this place is not Elijah's destination. He wants to proceed, he has to proceed. On his own, he walks for a whole day into the wilderness, until he arrives at a broom tree. Elijah had been walking, running and now he is alone – he considers himself having arrived at his destination. He sits down in the shadow of the tree. He has no more energy. His reserves are used up. The physical and mental tanks are empty. He is worn out, broken, he is done with God and the world. Elijah is tired of life. God, take away my life, here and today, for I am no better than my ancestors. This is his prayer. This is the bitter truth and conclusion of his life. His dream of being better than his ancestors had gone, lost on the way.

Elijah – a prime example of a man? Creating big projects, performing heroic deeds, but in doing so losing the perspective. He is worn out, has no more energy and no more courage. Elijah – a modern man – ruined in the wilderness.

No more dreams, no more visions, no more energy. Elijah is washed out. According to his standard, there is only one solution: Death! He lies down and sleeps. No more awakening in the present age, only in the afterworld.

There is no concrete information about the feelings and thoughts of Elijah, when he was fleeing. But after his serious conflict with King Ahab and Ahab's wife Jezebel there surely were fear and feelings of guilt, - and questions: Does living according to God's will mean that life remains a never ending series of religious victories and defeats?

Would his life always be as those of his ancestors – always being involved in critical situations?

Would his faith and his self-confidence always depend on how dangerous or less dangerous other people would become to him?

Would that be a never-ending struggle and would sisters and brothers in faith primarily be companions in struggle?

A life full of victories, which already carry the seed of the next defeat, and a life together with fellows who are fellows only in the shared struggle?

Such perspectives can discourage people, and it is no longer Ahab or Jezebel who threaten Elijah. He is a danger to himself:

‘It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors.’

Elijah is in deepest despair and in extreme danger: he is doubtful of himself. Moreover, he is at the mercy of himself in the loneliness he himself had chosen. He did not fall into God’s trap; he fell into his own trap. That is the reason why he asks God to let him die.

He wants to be known by God only as a winner and not as someone who again and again is in fear, and who needs constant inspiration.

How close is Elijah to us? How often do we live under the dictates of victories and – even more – under the dictates of defeats, or imaginary successes? Today the despair may appear more serious, because we imagine the distance between us and God larger than people did in Elijah’s time.

“Who relieves me from myself?” – this may be the question that brings us very close to the despair of the prophet.

Even if we don’t want to admit to it, don’t we sometimes feel: God does not measure up to our expectations. Words about God’s nearness sound very empty and meaningless. I am waiting for God in vain and I depend only on myself; I am profoundly disappointed, I stop hoping, I run away, I bang my head against a wall; I give up on myself. I stop navigating the car; when crossing the street I refuse to look to the right and to the left before I walk...I stop thinking...

‘It is enough...’ - isn’t this Elijah in all of us?

Therefore, this is a story for all of those, who say: “You don’t have to tell me stories about disappointment; you don’t have to tell me stories about loneliness and depression, about resignation and about being tired of life.”

Sharing this story, we deeply hope that God shows up right in these desperate life-stories.

God, who becomes a companion in the wilderness, who touches people and promises new steps and opens the future to us.

And then everything changes. A messenger of God, an angel gets in touch with the sleeping prophet; he reaches him with the only sense organ that remains, when he is “sleeping towards death” – The angel touches Elijah gently. Then: No discussions, no debates, just food and the order to eat. Fed up with life, Elijah receives bread – and he eats, hungry as he was.

„Get up and eat!“

God's messengers seem to wipe away all agonizing thoughts and feelings from this moment. The mighty hand of God converts into a gentle human touch: "Get up and eat". God's blessings taste like sparkling water and freshly baked bread.

That is not the way victories or defeats start. It is a different story that sprouts. Fed up with life, Elijah receives food and hungry as he is he eats it. Having had enough he falls asleep again – but it is no longer a "sleep towards death". Then God's angel touches the sleeping prophet for a second time. Again, the order is to eat and to drink, and then start the journey that lies ahead. **'Get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you.'**

Strengthened by bread and water, Elijah walks for a long time. The Bible text talks about 40 days and 40 nights. 40 days reminds us of the 40 years Israel had spent in the wilderness – history becomes alive. The history between the slavery in Egypt and the entering of the Promised Land. By remembering this history hope becomes alive; knowing God's promise to share the journey of his people ensures Elijah that God would share his journey, too. Elijah starts walking his long way into the wilderness. His destination is Mount Sinai, Mount Horeb, where Moses received God's commandments.

It is the beginning of a new story.

The story of the one who got up and learned to walk again.

Isn't there such an Elijah experience in all of us? We learn to walk again, upright and free.

We learn to walk upright and free in a world, where sometimes standing firmly is difficult enough. In a world, where you have to duck your head, where you have to make yourself look small and where you have to creep in order to make progress.

'Get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you.'

To be able to get out of the wilderness, I need someone else. I need someone, who suspends the wordlessness of despair. I need someone, who brings back humanity and heartiness. I need someone, who does not lecture me nor express reservation. I need someone, who talks to me and breaks my desperate silence.

I need someone, who touches me, who brings me to his or her table, saying: "Eat and drink!" Sometimes this is the first step to bounce back.

There is a new destination for Elijah. After the deep valley of depression and his longing for death, after death has been so close, he walks on to the place, where God waits for him. There he meets God in a dream and a long conversation between God and Elijah begins.

He has to go through his long story of suffering again, twice.

His defeat becomes alive again; his trauma hurts again when he starts talking about his story face to face with God.

Elijah leaves the deep valley of depression, although he hides in a cave, in the womb of the earth. God answers Elijah's confession; he will show himself to Elijah. Elijah faces a storm as he faced one when he met Jezebel. Elijah faces an earthquake, enormous shocks, as he had given nasty shocks to Ahab and Jezebel. Elijah faces a firestorm as he had experienced one on Mount Carmel – but God is not in one of these phenomena.

God appears very different, unexpectedly, in the sound of complete silence. God meets Elijah in a way Elijah can bear and embrace without having to run away. God appears gentle and mild. A sound of sheer silence lovingly wraps Elijah – and us as well, if we want. Then hope can grow out of despair.

No storm, no earthquake, no fire - a sound of sheer silence of God's Spirit. "As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you"
Elijah got up, ate, drank, went, and encountered God, surprisingly and in a way, he was able to bear and embrace.

To avoid the risk, that we again might remain closed within ourselves, this is not the end of the story. What follows is a new call for Elijah.

A call to act politically.

He, who had been moved by a word, is called to create a movement, exactly at the place from where he had been fleeing. Back through the wilderness, another 40 days, encountering again all that had brought him to this point. Another 40 days, time to clarify things, relationships, conflicts...and start again at exactly the point, where he had resigned and given up.

As with Elijah, God's path leads us right from our hiding places into the midst of everyday life, into relationships, into conflicts and crucial tests, into political statements and social action. Upright – with our backs straight and our faces lifted up.

No matter where we are on our life journey there are times with long and rough patches ahead of us. They are often thorny, and it feels as if we are the loneliest people in the world..., - but we never walk alone.