

Elijah - Everybody Has an Angel **Sermon on 1 Kings 19: 5-13**

We are all angels with a broken wing,
if we want to fly,
we must hold each other...

I came across this sentence when I was a hospital chaplain, and haven't forgotten it ever since. I saw it on a poster on the wall in the office of one of my colleagues. And with the sentence was the photo of a beautiful baroque angel who'd lost one of its wings.

And I thought that there is something true about this. Somehow each and everyone of us is "broken" – worn out – wounded – marked by life... and so the more, the older we get. Angels with a broken wing...
And then this beautiful thought that, when I have only one wing left, and you have one broken off, too, we can still hug and hold each other – and then fly. If we want to live life in all its fullness – in spite of all the hardships and burdens we have to bear, we must support each other and stick together...
...if we want to fly,
we must hold each other...

But let me start, where it all began.

It was 15 years ago. We'd just moved to Munich. Our apartment was still new and all fresh. Not everything had found its place yet. And a friend from England sent me a card wishing us well and expressing the hope that the new place would soon be home.

The picture on the card was of one of those beautiful angels which the old Italian painters painted for The Annunciation to Mary. Remember? Gabriel coming to Mary announcing the child to be born? Often in these paintings Gabriel has his hand held up as if he was asking for special attention...

I took the card with the angel and stuck it in a slit in the door of our living room cupboard.

Did I already know how desperately I'd need angels in the weeks and months to come?

Just after we'd moved here, Nico was born – and my world turned dark. I suffered from depression – post-partum depression – and it took almost 3 years until I was my old "new" self again. And if there hadn't been the most wonderful people to support and sustain – angels all around me – I wouldn't have survived.

The picture of the angel of the annunciation is still hanging in my living room – together with many other angels.

I had started to collect angels.

I began being fascinated by these images of having wings and being able to fly... by their beauty, their lightness and the role they play between heaven and earth. I don't quite know how that came to me, because where I grew up, in a strictly protestant context, there were no angels... nor were there any Marys. Such things were considered catholic and were only accepted at Xmas time.

Many years of my life went by, until I understood that angels were good for more than to decorate Xmas trees and old churches, and that they were more than useful guardian angels – whether people believed it or not...

I discovered angels in a vast number of biblical stories. The readings today may have given you a foretaste...

There weren't many angels in the preaching I grew up with. They were always too quickly identified as God. And in many stories I hadn't really realised that it was the angels who met Hagar in the desert, who opened the heavens to Jacob, who prevented Abraham from sacrificing Isaac... that it was angels who were blessing, calling, commissioning, healing and encouraging... or breaking whichever chains held people in.

So today, I would like us to look at the story of Elijah in 1 Kings 19 as a story of an angel who awakens the prophet with its touch. And some very worth while impulses come from the book "Everybody has an angel" by the catholic monk Anselm Gruen, which we were just reading in our Thursday evening summer Bible studies.

When Anselm Gruen writes that everybody has an angel, he is taking the biblical tradition as his basis. He looks at biblical stories of angels who come to the support of people and show them the right way to go. In his book he's chosen 24 fascinating images of angels who intervene in hopeless situations, who watch over people and protect them, who open people's eyes and lead them to life. And each of us may be able to identify with one or the other of those stories, with one or the other person or angel. If it is not the Xmas angels heralding joyous news, it may be the surprising visitor to Mary announcing new life, or the deliverer of water & bread in Elijah's story.

My wish for us today is that you can gain something for your own life story by thinking about this angel who awakens the prophet with its touch.

Elijah, a man full of fire and perhaps the greatest prophet of the OT, is going through a crisis. In a mighty struggle he'd triumphed over the priests of Baal and wiped them all out. He seems to be at the highpoint of his success.

But then Queen Jezebel is after his blood. And Elijah, the fighter for God and his people, is suddenly full of fear.

He loses his will for life, his energy to carry on.

He flees to the desert to save his life. And there in the loneliness of the desert all the burdens and painful moments of his life catch up with him and paralyse him. He'd fled to the desert to save his life, but he no longer has got the will for or the joy of life.

He simply wants to die.

He has had enough of fighting. He cannot go on any longer. He had fought against the priests of Baal in the knowledge that he was fulfilling the will of God... But then he has the feeling that his sacrifice for God was all in vain. He sees no way out but death.

He lies under a broom tree and falls asleep.

Desperate, depressed, deep down and disappointed – with the world as well as with himself.

But:

5 Then he lay down under the broom tree and fell asleep. Suddenly an angel touched him and said to him, «Get up and eat.»

6 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.

7 The angel of the LORD came a second time, touched him, and said, «Get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you.»

8 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's whole concept of life has fallen apart, his ideals and all he'd believed in. In this hopeless situation he is unable to go any further. He has no path to follow. He has lost his strength and aim in life.

And at the moment when he is unable to help himself any longer, when he sees no way out, an angel comes to him and touches him. The angel wakes Elijah up, and shows him the water & bread he'd brought along.

It reveals to Elijah a power that doesn't come from within himself.

The bread is an image for all that we really need to live. It is an image for what truly nourishes us – even when our plans have failed and our dreams have died.

And the water is not only there to quench the thirst of the desperate; but it contains a promise that in Elijah life will flow again, that his paralyses will break and his inner dryness will be filled with new life.

Bread & water in this story are the signs of the transformation that takes place in Elijah, when the angel touches him in his hopelessness and wakes him up.

However, sisters and brothers, this is not the happy ending yet.

Although Elijah understands the message of the angel, - he eats and drinks – he still lies down and goes back to sleep again. Obviously in such a crisis as this it is not enough that the angel only touches us once...

I am sure, many of us can recognize ourselves in Elijah under the broom tree. We all have experienced times when we were sick and tired of everything, when we reached our limit, came to a dead end and faced times of darkness from which we did not find a way out through our own power.

Life stories destroyed. Families fallen apart. Children go their own way. Partners leave.

We have exhausted our energies and are now left alone... and clutch at thin air.

I think, somehow we all know this.

And we know only too well, how it can then be high time for an angel to come and wake us up.

Sometimes it is a person who stirs us up and opens our eyes. A person who gives us what we really need to recover and recuperate.

It can be the attention given, the friendship, the understanding, the mere interest in us, that is the bread to nourish us. And still it often happens to us as it did to Elijah: one time of smiling, touching, comforting, encouraging is not enough...

We need the angel again. And again.

And believe me: there are angels who come once, and twice – some as often as we need them... for weeks and months!

They touch us and raise us up. They open our eyes to resources that we may already have in our lives. It's just that we have lost touch with them... They do this as long as we need it, until we really see again, what we are living for, what life holds in store for us, who we are meant to be, and where God wants us to go. This all doesn't come easily...

The path that lies ahead of Elijah is long.

In our story it leads through the desert for 40 days and 40 nights.

40 is a big number & a long time: remember, after 40 days a new world appears after the flood. After 40 years Israel reaches the promised land...

But back to the angels...

The angel that wakes me up, can actually also come in the form of an inner sense of peace that all of a sudden surrounds me, or my re-gained joy for life, my sense of beauty... and the angel can be inside me: possibilities that we discover deep within, wisdom and clarity which we find. And all of a sudden the world is all right and as good as it is, and we can get up and set off.

If I look at my life, past and present, against the background of the Elijah story, I discover all over again angels who have touched and awakened me, who have rescued me and helped many wounds to heal!

Angels have opened my eyes to see what nourishes my body and soul. Angels have brought about a passion for people, great interest in the world, and the discovery of what holds me in life, what sustains me and keeps me.

Ever since I left home and went out into the world, there were angels in times of desert, where everything was barren and empty, who brought along bread, love, attention, friendship and support!

And this is really something that made me free.

It frees me from the constant fear that nobody likes me... or from the bitter complaint that my life had to be so hard at times... or the ongoing question why some things had to happen to me – just to me, and not to others...

Angels can make us free. Angels can love. Angels do care. Angels bring us into contact with the place where we like ourselves – just as we are. With all we've gone through, and all that is still to come.

This is somehow, where we could come to an end?

So far, so good?!

But the school of the angel is not finished for Elijah when he stands up and sets off on his way.

8 ... he went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights to Horeb the mount of God.

9 At that place he came to a cave, and spent the night there.

Then the word of the LORD came to him, saying, «What are you doing here, Elijah?»

10 He answered, «I have been very zealous for the LORD, the God of hosts; for the Israelites 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.»

11 He said, «Go out and stand on the mountain before the LORD, for the LORD is 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;

12 and after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence.

13 When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out...

After 40 days Elijah reaches the mountain of God: Horeb. There he goes into a cave to spend the night. The cave offers protection and shelter. After all the fleeing and running away, finally a place to stay for Elijah, a place in which he hopes to meet God.

But God is not where Elijah finds it cosy and good. God calls Elijah out of the just entered security... up on the mountain, where the wind blows roughly in his face.

And then Elijah discovers that God is so different from all that he'd ever imagined.

God is not in the storm that breaks the rock from the mountains. God is not in the earthquake that leaves no stone unturned, nor in the fire that erases everything...

No.

God is in the "quiet gentle murmur", as Martin Luther translates, or much more poetically in the translation of the Jewish scholar Martin Buber: "God is in the voice of drifting stillness", the "voice of soft silence".

Almost too beautiful to understand!?

Silence is not enough for God. It must be a soft silence.

And what is the message to me?

After all this reflecting on angels and being touched by them?

I understand once more in my life that God comes to me in a gentle way, softly and quietly. God as a soft stillness, a gentle living breath... sometimes hard to sense.

Elijah's angel, from the beginning of our story all the way through to the soft and tender experience of God, would also like to lead me to the God whom I can above all meet in silence.

Every crisis I go through will also shake my image of God. Some images break away. New ones come.

And then I need an angel to accompany me and introduce me to the secret of the totally different God. This God who I can only sense, when I listen to the quiet and soft sounds within me, when I, like Elijah, go deep into myself and sometimes even cover my face with my cloak.

Thus shielded, touched and awakened I can then find God who approaches me in silence, - and who is silently waiting for you, too.

...*silence*...

I wish you angels and friends.

Amen.