

Prophets Series #2
1 Kings 19:1-18

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Elijah on Mt. Horeb

After the contest with the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel, Elijah killed all the prophets of Baal in accordance with the Law. This is what happened next.

Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done, and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword. ²Then Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah, saying, "So may the gods do to me, and more also, if I do not make your life like the life of one of them by this time tomorrow." ³Then he was afraid; he got up and fled for his life, and came to Beer-sheba, which belongs to Judah; he left his servant there.

⁴But he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a solitary broom tree. He asked that he might die: "It is enough; now, O LORD, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors." ⁵Then he lay down under the broom tree and fell asleep. Suddenly an angel touched him and said to him, "Get up and eat." ⁶He 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. ⁷The 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." ⁸He 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. ⁹At 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?" ¹⁰He 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."

¹¹He 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; ¹²and after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence. ¹³When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. Then there came a voice to him that said, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" ¹⁴He 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." ¹⁵Then the LORD said to him, "Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus; when you arrive, you shall anoint Hazael as king over Aram. ¹⁶Also you shall anoint Jehu son of Nimshi as king over Israel; and you shall anoint Elisha son of Shaphat of Abel-meholah as prophet in your place. ¹⁷Whoever escapes from the sword of Hazael, Jehu shall kill; and whoever escapes from the sword of Jehu, Elisha shall kill. ¹⁸Yet I will leave seven thousand in Israel, all the knees that have not bowed to Baal, and every mouth that has not kissed him."

Perhaps many of you have seen the movie “The Pirates of the Caribbean.” It stars Johnny Depp as Captain Jack Sparrow, the ill-fated skipper whose mutinous crew cast him from his beloved ship and left him stranded on a deserted island with no hope of rescue. Well, Jack has managed a seemingly miraculous escape and through a series of near-misses and misadventures, he finds himself stranded back on the same island with the lovely Elizabeth Swan, the daughter of the provincial governor. Only then does he reveal the truth of his first escape...the island was a staging ground for rum-runners who gave him a very comfortable lift back to civilization. But this time it appears that the rum runners have long since abandoned the island and won't be back. While Jack is sleeping off a hearty share of rum, Miss Swan uses the rest of the rum supply to light a signal fire, as she puts it: “a thousand feet high;” essentially guaranteeing their rescue. When Jack awakes his only question of her is: “Is the ALL rum gone?” He doesn't seem to care that she has secured an otherwise impossible rescue for them. All he notices is that his precious rum is gone up in flames. “Did you have to use ALL the rum?”

Ahab seems to have a similarly narrow view of the miraculous occurrences on Mt. Carmel. There had been a three year drought on the land. The priests of Ba'al, the Canaanite god of rain, have just gone head-to-head with Elijah and the Lord. The Lord prevailed mightily, raining fire from the sky while the priests of Ba'al looked mournfully on. The people bowed down before this mighty display and proclaimed that the Lord is indeed God. And then the Lord, the God of Israel, brought rain, ending the drought and bringing relief to suffering.

But all Ahab can say to Jezebel is that Elijah has killed all the priests! Ahab does not seem concerned with the fact that the God of Elijah and Israel is present and powerful. Ahab does not seem concerned with the fact that three long years of parched earth, failing crops and widespread hunger have been brought mercifully to an end. All Ahab can see is that all the prophets of Ba'al, gathered that day on Mount Carmel, are gone! And Jezebel responds as we might expect...she set her sights to kill Elijah.

Now, I for one would love to see a real bona fine miracle: fire raining from heaven and all that. And I would like to hope that in seeing such a miracle I would be transformed. That my faith would be sturdier, my heart lifted, my trust strengthened. But, I guess we needn't be all that surprised at the way Ahab and Jezebel reacted. They have gone so far down the Ba'al road that perhaps their vision is too clouded with the smoke of a thousand sacrifices to see the Lord in action. But Elijah? Of him I would have expected more.

The Lord not only displayed the Lord's might and power on Mount Carmel, but the Lord made Elijah a hero as well. What Elijah had promised came true. Elijah had bidden the Lord to answer him and the Lord did. And all the people bowed down before God. Then Elijah watched from the mountainside as the storm clouds gathered and the rain finally fell. But as soon as Jezebel issues her threat, Elijah is on the first stagecoach outta Dodge. Now, I believe that if Jezebel wanted Elijah dead that she probably had the influence to make that happen. But it is still striking to me that after all that the Lord has done to prove the Lord's faithfulness, Elijah does not first call upon the Lord to protect him. Instead he runs away. Far away.

Elijah heads for the wilderness south of Judah, about as far from Ahab and Jezebel as his imagination can take him. The Lord did not drive Elijah into the wilderness. He went all on his own. And the Lord, faithful and unbidden, provides food and water in abundance. All that he needs to survive a backwards journey to Mt. Sinai. Forty days to where Moses first received the covenant of the Lord. The Lord is taking Elijah back to the beginning. To the roots of his faith, to the very mountain where Moses met with the Lord, the God of Israel; to the beginning of a 40-year journey throughout which God continued to faithfully provide.

Once Elijah has arrived at Mt. Sinai, the Lord asks him, "What are you doing here?" And Elijah lists his complaints: "I have been very zealous! But the people have rejected God in spite of all my hard work, your prophets have all been killed, and there is only one prophet left...and I am just not up to this task! Please take my life, let it all end now."

Instead of answering him directly, the Lord sends him out on the mountain to await the Lord who is about to pass by. And so Elijah waits. There is a tremendous wind that sends avalanches tumbling down the mountainside. But not the Lord. There is an earthquake. But not the Lord. There is fire. But not the Lord. And then there is the still, small voice, a thin, calm sound. And in that near silence, is the Lord.

The Lord listens patiently to Elijah's lament and the Lord responds to each concern. There will be a new prophet to pick up Elijah's work and he will slay Elijah's enemies. And there will be thousands of faithful left in Israel that have not bowed to Ba'al.

Last week, as Pastor Wayne began this story, we heard again the first commandment. "I am the Lord your God. You shall have no other Gods." This week we hear perhaps God's assertion that God will be God and that while God will not be fit into a narrow set of definitions, God is ever present and faithful.

Certainly on Mt. Carmel there is artistry and grandeur, the fire that rained from heaven would be special effect worth seeing. And often we tremble at the mighty power of creation in the face of wind, earthquake and fire. And we feel awe and a sense of God's transcendence. But God is not just in the splash. God is also present in the emptiness.

Imagine Elijah's frustration. Calling upon God to create an irrefutable display of God's power and might; and still hearts are hard and the king and queen are unrepentant. Many have already died at their hands and now Elijah lives under threat. What should have been a day of triumph is followed by a day of disappointment, of unrealized expectations, of emptiness. The sense that perhaps nothing has made a real difference after all. Elijah tumbles from the highest of highs to the lowest of lows.

Many of you have experienced the let down that comes after a long-anticipated goal has been achieved or a long-planned-for event has been completed. Sometimes the big moments in life shape us so profoundly in their making that we lose perspective. Our lives are so shaped by the anticipation and realization of the one big thing: a wedding, a promotion, that last 15 pounds, even the arrival of a baby...that we are caught off guard in the stillness that follows. When something has happened that seems like it should cast the world in a new light and yet when we wake up the next day many surprised by the silence. It can be easy to hear the voice of God in the triumph of the delivery room...but what about during the wakeful, colicky nights. To feel God's blessing in promotion but what about when a success goes un-remarked upon. To feel surrounded by God's love on our wedding day, but what about in the emptiness of a broken family? As a congregation we are used to basking in God's glory on and Easter Sunday, but what about on an ordinary, sunny summer Sunday morning.

When we get too caught up in emotion, we learn that feelings are an unhelpful gauge of faithfulness. Emotions are mercurial and unpredictable and subject to change whenever the tides turn. When we listen too long to our own voice, our mind can swirl endlessly with unhelpful thoughts that discourage and undo us. In this story we are reminded that God will be God, in the roar and in the silence. God is in the fire rained down from heaven and God is in the cake and water when we are hungry in the midst of a wilderness of our own making.

How often do we doubt God's presence, God's power and God's love? But God is faithful even when we are not. God promises to be present in the fireworks and in the silence. And in the silence God listens to the laments of our hearts and answers.

Amen.