

First Presbyterian Church
Bozeman, Montana
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June 20, 2010
12th Sunday in Ordinary Time
1 Kings 19:1-15

When Thin Faith Meets a Thin Place

In these trying-to-be-summer weeks, we are paying attention to the ways that God speaks to us in the stories of the prophets Elijah and Elisha. They lived nearly 3000 years ago, in a time and place vastly different from our time and place, Their life was very different from ours. It would be interesting to study these stories as cultural artifacts. Interesting—but that’s not what we’re here for. We are not here to be entertained, either, though the stories are entertaining. We are here, and we read and tell these stories, because we believe that they are part of God’s story. We are here because we believe that we also are invited to be part of God’s story. We are here, and we listen to these stories, because we want them to touch our lives and transform us. So listen to Elijah’s story, and listen for its bridges to our life today.

(Read 1 Kings 19:1-15)

He had just experienced the most stunning success of his entire career. On the summit of Mt. Carmel, Elijah, one lone prophet, had shown the power of his God, Yahweh, to the king, to his people, and to 450 impotent priests of the rival god, Ba’al. (By the way, if you want to hear more about this showdown, this “my God’s bigger than your God” story, come to Rockhaven tonight for the first of our “Fearless” series. 5:30 potluck, 7:00 vespers in the chapel.) Elijah had just overseen the slaughter of those 450 priests when he received a threat from Queen Jezebel. Elijah might have stood his ground, confident in God’s protective power over him. But instead, he ran. She was the Queen, after all. And she said she would have him killed.

He ran into hiding, in the wilderness. Now Elijah had experience in the wilderness, and in hiding. But this time it seems his mental health deteriorated quickly. His work was more than he could handle. He couldn’t deal with people. He wasn’t eating or drinking enough, all he wanted to do was sleep. And when he prayed, he asked that he might die. Elijah was suffering burnout. Elijah was depressed.

It took an angel of the Lord to keep him alive. “You need to eat something, Elijah. Here, drink this water. Small sips. You need to build up your strength.” He complied, but the depression was far from over. Further into the wilderness he traveled, to a place where God was said to dwell. Mt. Horeb, also known as Mt. Sinai, the place where Moses met God and received the law. Was Elijah seeking God, or seeking to hide from God? He didn’t know. He found a cave on the mountain, and withdrew into it.

And it was in that cave that God spoke to him. “What are you doing here, Elijah?”

What are you doing here? On this holy mountain, are you seeking me? asked God. In your cave, are you hiding from me? asked God. What are you doing here, miles from the place where I have called you to be my prophet? What are you doing here when back in Samaria, Jezebel is enticing the people of Israel to trust a god who is no god, to live a life that is no life, to abandon the covenant which I made with your people here on this holy mountain??? What are you doing here???

And Elijah’s only answer is to offer God a resume of what he has already done, and his excuse for no longer being on the job. *It’s too dangerous. I’ve done enough already. You don’t want me to get killed, do you?*

So God offers Elijah one of the most powerful religious experiences in the entire Bible. There are times in God's story when the best the Biblical writers can do to describe God's appearance is to call it a great wind. As in Genesis 1, when a "wind from God," or "a mighty wind" swept over the face of the waters and the creation of the earth began. Or in Acts 2, when "a sound like the rush of a violent wind" signals the new creation, the coming of the Holy Spirit. The wind that rushed over Mt. Horeb was like these winds, strong enough to split rocks, uproot trees, swirl the dust and scare the living daylights out of anyone in its way. But God was not in that wind that day.

And there are other times in God's story when God's presence is felt in an earthquake. Matthew's gospel describes an earthquake at the moment of Jesus' death, which tore the curtain of the Temple in two, split rocks, and opened tombs, as well as another earthquake which accompanied the rolling back of the stone from Jesus' tomb. Earthquakes are prophesied as signs of the coming of the Lord by Isaiah and Ezekiel, by Jesus, and many times in the Revelation to John. But for Elijah, the Lord was not in the earthquake.

There are still other times when God's appearance is in fire. Moses first encountered God as a fire which did not consume a bush. And when the Spirit descended on the apostles, the only way they could describe it was as "tongues of fire." On Mt. Carmel, that's how God bested Ba'al, as a fire which defied the gallons of water poured on the waiting firewood and the sacrificial bull. But on this day, for Elijah, God was not manifest in fire.

It was in the calm after the storm that Elijah sensed God's powerful presence. It was in the silence, the stillness, the void that he knew that God was really there, so near that he must cover his face before venturing out of the cave. It was in that quiet that Elijah heard God calling him, asking again, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" And it was in that moment that he knew that God had more work for him to do, that his story wasn't over yet, that to be in God's story he must leave his cave, go down the mountain, and go back to where life was risky and uncomfortable and scary but where God's work was to be done. The question, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" began his return to the life to which God had called and equipped him, the life which was not easy nor safe but was his life, his story, in God's story. The wind and the earthquake and the fire did not heal Elijah of his depression—no, it was God's presence in the silence which ended the drought of his parched soul.

So where are the bridges between Elijah's story and your story, my story, our story?

Perhaps you felt kinship with Elijah when he was running away from Jezebel, running into the desert, wanting to escape from a life that had become too much for him. The description of his depression seems remarkable to me. Depression is common in our world, and particularly high in Montana. We try to find reasons for that, but this ancient story shows us that it's not just that our hectic, fast-paced, pressurized life today can make us a little crazy. The human condition, life in the world, seems inclined to make this happen to us, to stretch us to our limits and cause physical symptoms of a worn-out spirit. Mind and body and soul are interwoven and can't be pulled apart from one another. Elijah's faith was not gone, but it surely had worn thin. Elijah, who is considered second only to Moses in the Old Testament as a man of God. Maybe you are touched by having something in common with a great man of God of nearly 3000 years ago. Maybe his

weakness is also a weakness you have experienced, the weakness of depression or thinning faith. There are no invincible heroes in the Bible; in God's story, every one has flaws.

Or maybe you heard your story touching Elijah's in another way. When things get rough, many of us choose a retreat in the wilderness as a way to restore our souls. Elijah did; Moses did; Jesus did. It's not that God is found only in wilderness, and it's not that God lives on the mountaintop. That was an ancient belief, and I daresay that many Bozeman recreation enthusiasts secretly believe it today. No, God lives in the whole created world and beyond. But there is something in wildness, in wilderness, in the desert and on the mountaintops that makes God's reality more clear to us. There is something in getting away from it all that makes us more aware of divine presence, more in touch with divine power, more in tune with divine purpose. So we set apart special places to allow rest and spiritual renewal, and we designate times and seasons when we withdraw from the usual setting and routine, and we allow ourselves to be refreshed by those angels who minister to needy souls in the wilderness. Some have called those places where it seems as if heaven and earth are so close that they are separated only by a veil "thin places." I'm thinking of Rockhaven, our retreat space, which is not for us alone. I'm thinking of our congregation, and our Rockhaven staff, as angels in the wilderness who can provide what sojourners need for the journeys which lie before them. I'm thinking of the gift of wilderness with which we have been entrusted.

Or maybe you heard your story connect with Elijah's in his encounter with God in the mountain. Some of us have experienced God in dramatic moments, and lived to tell the story. Others, and I suspect more others than the first category, have experienced God in smaller ways, with less drama. Was that really God? we might wonder afterwards. That was really God, we know in our hearts. We can't prove it to anyone but ourselves. We can't show anyone tangible evidence. But we know God was real, and God was there, and God was personally addressing us. *What are you doing here? What is your life about? Where are you going next?* And again, the value of a set-apart time and place come to mind. It's probably our willingness to hear that is different, the removal of distractions that makes us more open to God's voice. But study after study shows that it is at camps and conferences that a high percentage of young people accept faith as their way of life. God speaks to us, and we hear God more clearly, at camp. In the stillness, in the quiet, in the silence, we hear a sound that is of God.

Or maybe, just maybe, you hear your story connecting with Elijah's in his renewed call to his life's work, the conversation which followed the silence. *What are you doing here, Elijah?* was the beginning of his call to return to his ministry, his work in the world which would be his part in God's story of new life and reconciliation and justice and righteousness. Maybe, just maybe, you hear God asking you, *What are you doing here?* and you are starting to see that the answer is something like "Here I am, Lord. If you want me to go and do and be somewhere, something, somehow different, I'm yours."

God is telling a story. Through twists and turns, ups and downs, Elijah joined the story. Through thick and thin, through hard times and good times, the story has gone on, and will go on. Jesus invites us, every one of us, into this story.

What are you doing here? It's time for ministry in Jesus' name.