

SERMON I Kings 19 Elijah and the Still Small Voice

We've been learning from the life of the prophet Elijah. We learned lessons on faith beside a dry brook, we watched a poor starving widow share her last meal with Elijah in the middle of a severe drought and found Elijah's God faithful to meet all her needs. Last Sunday we watched Elijah courageously stand-alone against the prophets of Baal and saw the LORD dramatically prove he alone is God. When the people turned back to God, God brought the rain everyone had been waiting for. The drought and the famine were over. Elijah's adrenaline must have been flowing nonstop! He ran for miles! There was nothing he and God could not do! After all, one person and God make a majority!

Yet in today's scripture reading, we find Elijah scared for his life, running away, hiding in a cave energyless, depressed, and so hopeless he begged to die. What happened to courageous Elijah?

When Queen Jezebel heard all that had happened on Mount Carmel, she was furious and ordered Elijah to be killed within the day. After all, she had lost her beloved prophets of Baal. With 24 hours left to live, Elijah lost his courage and ran for his life to Mount Horeb, another name for Mount Sinai, the mountain where Moses had met with God. Elijah hid in a cave, burned out.

Burnout is defined as the point when "the demands being placed on you exceed the resources you have available to deal with the stressors." In burnout, you don't have anything to give because you've given it all for too long without being replenished. Your health suffers, your emotions and spirit suffer. That was where Elijah was. He was exhausted with nothing left to give, emotionally unstable, and hopeless. "O Lord, take away my life, for I am no better than my fathers." He wanted to die because he wasn't as powerful as he thought he was. Perhaps Elijah dreamed of being the one who could change Ahab and Jezebel with his brilliant abilities as a prophet. Or maybe, after all he'd done, he expected to be the one prophet who was welcomed rather than just be killed like

all the others before him. The adrenaline was gone and he had nothing left to face Jezebel's threat.

Ever face burnout? It may have been on the job after a particularly grueling season with constant deadlines and expectations of your time and energy. Or maybe you feel burnout in the face of the never-ending care needs of young children or an elderly family member. Or a ministry you have taken on has worn you out and the enjoyment is gone. Welcome to Elijah's shoes.

But hope was on the way. First Elijah's physical needs were met- an angel made sure he got rest and adequate food. Because burnout is not just mental; it's physical. When he had rested God had a question for him, "Elijah, what are you doing here?" In other words, "What are you hiding from in this cave?" And Elijah began to complain. *"Your people have forsaken your ways, they have killed your other prophets, and I am the only person left who is faithful, and now they want to kill me too."* The situation had become more than he could handle. Even the angel told him, "The journey is too much for you." I hear it bandied about regularly that "God never gives us more than we can handle." It's usually said to encourage someone going through a tough time. "Chin up, you can do it, God won't give you more than you can handle." But that statement assumes that everything that happens in our lives comes directly from God. Got cancer? God sent it- handle it. Is your spouse developing dementia? God sent it, so you can handle it. And we are left with an odd choice- buck up and try harder or feel defeated in our faith.

But this idea of God never giving us more than we can handle is not found in scripture. It's actually a paraphrase of a humorous quote from Mother Teresa "I know God won't give me anything I can't handle. I just wish he didn't trust me so much." Some people add I Corinthians 10:13 to give it bible backing: "God is faithful and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with each temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it." But Paul was not writing about the trials of life. Paul was writing about the temptation to

give in to sin. God will provide a way of escape from giving in to temptation. There are times in this life when the journey is too much for us. Just like for Elijah.

And God met Elijah in his spirit's need. First came a strong rushing wind. Then a mighty earthquake. Then a raging fire. God had used them before with Moses on Mount Sinai and God used them now to get Elijah's attention. But God didn't speak in the fire or the earthquake or the wind; God spoke in a still, small voice, or gentle whisper. It could also be translated sheer silence. Sometimes a deep silence can speak volumes. Most sermons on this text end here with the encouragement that when we are ready to give up to be still and listen for the still small voice. But seldom do we ever hear what God said in that quiet whisper. And we miss the point of the story.

Into that silence, God asked Elijah that question again: "What are you doing here, Elijah?" Elijah just repeated his previous complaints. "I'm the only faithful person left. Poor little me." What we don't hear God saying next is, "You know, Elijah, I never give you more than you can handle, so get off your butt and get back to work." Instead, God gave Elijah a new role, anointing kings and beginning to use his experience and wisdom to mentor young Elisha as the next generation prophet to take his place. Instead of berating Elijah for not having enough faith or energy, God gave Elijah a new ministry he could handle and a legacy to live on after him.

Sometimes we Christians find it difficult to admit we're in over our heads, that we're weary beyond belief, and we're barely surviving under the load. After all, if we have enough faith, we should be able to climb any mountain, face any trial with a smile. Right? Isn't one plus God a majority? And if we find that quiet place to listen for God's voice, we wonder why he doesn't speak powerful words that invigorate us to get back on our feet and work harder. When all the time God may be whispering, "It's time for a change." Maybe pride gets in our way-believing we're the only one who can do what's needed. Maybe we're

afraid of looking like we're weak or a failure. Or we're afraid if we accept something new, we'll lose something important. And we hang on. If Elijah had hung on, he would have prevented or delayed the new thing God wanted to do. But Elijah let go, and helped the ministry of Elisha begin.

Let's be silent a moment and let God's questions speak to us today: "What are you doing here, my people?" "What are you hiding from in this cave?" Maybe it's a personal decision or change we're afraid of facing and we're hiding out hoping it goes away. Maybe we're discouraged and feel alone. Or we know we need help, but help feels like failure. Maybe we're just plain tired from the work. God understands. What is God's gentle whisper saying to you today?

Churches can hide out too. Afraid as they see the numbers decline. Losing the young people who are looking for something fresher than just continuing a past that's not theirs. Churches can treat their buildings like a cave and hide out there, comfortable doing the same things with the same people. Except not now during coronavirus when it is not safe to gather together and may not be for several more months. And not as you let go of this rental space at the end of the month. God called Elijah out of his cave into a new ministry. What is God's still, small voice saying now about your future ministry?

COMMUNION REFLECTION

The Lord be with you: and also with you.

Paul wrote in I Corinthians 11: ²³ For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, ²⁴ and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me."