

“Called Out of the Cave”

A sermon based on 1 Kings 19:1-15
Delivered at the First Presbyterian Church, Urbana
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There he is, the mighty prophet Elijah; the one who made it stop raining for 3 ½ years, who then prayed, making the rains return; the one who raised the widow’s dead son back to life; the one who challenged the priests of Baal to a duel before a pile of wood on a mountaintop, and demonstrated who was the one, true God; and he would be the one taken to heaven in a fiery chariot pulled by flaming steeds.

There he is, the mighty prophet Elijah hiding out in a cave in the wilderness of Israel, lower than a flounder in the ocean. And he is singing this sad, sad song, there alone in the cave: “Gloom, despair, and agony on me, deep, dark depression, excessive misery, if it weren’t for bad luck, I’d have no luck at all, gloom, despair and agony on me.” Poor, poor Elijah.

Well, what are we to make of this? Why was the mighty prophet Elijah so depressed? Certainly he had good reason to be down, as we will see, but I want first to suggest something about his personality. Elijah was likely on of those types who, when they are hot, burn really hot, and when they are cold, are nearly frozen stiff. And he didn’t spend that much time in between hot and cold.

This may sound familiar to you. I bet that Elijah was what we would today call bi-polar. He was manic depressive. Such people know periods of great energy and enthusiasm. They can exhibit enormous energy and go for days with little sleep. But they also know tremendous lows and depressions. During the lows, it becomes difficult to even get out of bed. And perhaps the most difficult aspect of this condition is that the person can go from the great high to the deep low in a matter of hours. In our passage today, we find the mighty prophet Elijah down, down in despair.

II

Just a day or two before, Elijah was at one of his peaks. God and Elijah had grown weary of Israel’s idolatry. Even though the government was leading

the nation astray, that was no excuse for the people to abandon their God. So a meeting was called between the prophet and King Ahab.

Ahab said upon seeing Elijah, "So there you are, you scourge of Israel."

"Not I," Elijah answered, "I am not the scourge of Israel; you and your family are; because you have deserted God and followed Baal. Now give orders for all Israel to gather around me on Mt. Carmel, and also the 400 priests of Baal who eat at Jezebel's table." Jezebel, you will recall, was the queen, a foreign one at that.

So all Israel, the King, the 400 Baal priests, and Elijah gathered on top of the mountain around an altar of wood built by Elijah. Elijah asked the people how long they would continue limping between two opinions, sometimes serving Baal, sometimes serving God. But no one said a word in reply.

Hearing no answer, Elijah issued his challenge. He called for the priests of Baal to bring their sacrifice and place it on the wood and call on Baal to answer with fire, fire that would burn the wood and the sacrifice. He would do the same with his sacrifice and call on God to answer with fire. The one who answered with fire, Elijah challenged, is the true God. All the people agreed to the test.

The priests of Baal began to call on Baal. But nothing happened. They continued, even doing a hobbling dance around the altar. Still nothing. About midday, Elijah began to ridicule them. "Call louder, for Baal is a god; he is occupied, or he is busy, or he has gone on a trip; perhaps he is asleep and needs waking." So they shouted all the louder, and danced more vigorously, but still no voice, no answer, no sign of response.

Finally, Elijah called all the people over to him. He set up the old altar to God which had been broken down. He placed wood on it and then the sacrifice on the wood. Not only that, around the altar he dug a trench. He then instructed that water be poured over the altar and the wood and the sacrifice. The whole pile was soaked, through and through. Elijah commanded that water be poured a second time. Then a third time, until the water filled the trench.

Only then did Elijah step forward, and call on the God of Israel. And God answered with a fire that consumed everything, even licking up the water in the

trench. When the people saw this, they fell on their faces, and confessed that the Lord is God.

Elijah answered, "Yes, the Lord is God. Seize the priests of Baal."

When Jezebel found out what had happened to all her yes men, her lapdogs, she was not pleased. She promptly dictated a message to Elijah: "May the gods bring unnamable ills on me and worse ones, too, if by this time tomorrow I have not killed you, too."

The great prophet Elijah, who had just worked with God to restore Israel's faithfulness, was afraid and fled for his life. Which brings us to our passage for today, with Elijah hiding in the cave.

"The word of God came to him saying, 'What are you doing here, Elijah?'

He replied, 'I am full of jealous zeal for the Lord, because the Israelites have abandoned your covenant, have torn down your altars, and put your prophets to the sword. I am the only one left, and now they want to kill me.'"

Here is this man, jealous for God, hiding in fear in a cave. And not only that, he thinks he is all alone. Certainly we have all felt like Elijah must have felt. No doubt he believed that the great victory over the priests of Baal would save the day. The people would return to God and acknowledge the great success of the prophet.

But the victory seemed to melt into no victory at all. Ahab and Jezebel did not repent. Indeed the powers of evil intensified. And no doubt a majority of the people failed to remain faithful, for those who depend on Mt. Carmel displays of power to believe do not keep the faith for very long.

We have some idea how Elijah must have felt. There have been times when we thought we had turned a corner only to find that the corner led to another difficult road. Elation quickly sinks into despondency.

Well, the mighty prophet Elijah needed a break. Having fallen into one of his lows, he needed time apart, to rest, to recover. And God provides it. As Psalm 27 reads, "God gives to his beloved sleep."

He is then awakened and told to eat. He does and he regains his strength. Yet there is still the despair. How will God take care of that?

Depression results when we feel our will won't work. We want to do something, but it seems we can't. When we can't, we become depressed. Despair results when we feel no one's will will work. Elijah seemed to believe that not even God could save the day. He is in despair.

So God needs to remind Elijah that God's will still works. "Go out and stand on the mountain before God." First thing, God got Elijah out of the gloom of his cave. God then passes before Elijah. "A mighty hurricane split the mountains and shattered the rocks before God. But God was not in the hurricane. And after the hurricane, there was an earthquake. But God was not in the earthquake. And after the earthquake, there was a fire. But God was not in the fire.

"And after the fire, there was a still small voice. And when Elijah heard this, he covered his face and went out and stood before the entrance of the cave. Again, the voice came to Elijah, asking, 'What are you doing here, Elijah?'"

Elijah gave the same sad answer as before. Elijah remains in despair. He does not yet understand. The storm and the earthquake and the fire were the traditional ways God's presence was made known. God was trying to make clear to Elijah that God is not in any of those things. Instead, God spoke to the prophet directly, intimately, in the still small voice.

I wonder if Elijah was not hoping for his own private display of God's power just as God had appeared on Mt. Carmel. But God was not in the fire. Perhaps Elijah was looking for God to come shake Israel and the monarchy like the earthquake that shook the mountain when Moses was on the mountain receiving the commandments. But God was not in the earthquake. Or maybe Elijah was looking for God to deliver him as the great wind that parted the Red Sea and made a way of escape for the people of Israel from Egypt. But God was not in the wind.

God was not in any of the traditional modes of revelation. All of the traditional displays of power and might were followed by silence and the still small voice. Only then did Elijah cover his face, for he knew that he was then in God's presence.

III

How is Elijah lifted from his despair? Was he lifted by spectacle, by some great display of power? Was he lifted by excitement or some enthusiastic activity? No. Elijah learned the truth the Psalmist knew: "Be still and know that I am God." That was how he was lifted, by being still and by experiencing again who God is. And it has worked for God's people through the ages.

But we are like Elijah aren't we, when we despair? We have all run back in spiritual desperation, to some place that is sacred to us, hoping that God will again act as it seemed God had acted that time long ago. We go back and we find that nothing happens. That moment of long ago is gone, and it cannot be recovered. God is not there. Not in the wind, not in the earthquake, not in the fire.

In the silence. When we are still. When we wait for the Lord. That is when we meet God. That is when we find our burdens lifted.

It is a truth Elijah learns before us today. With his soul lifted and his confidence in God restored, Elijah is now commissioned for new work. He's sent to go and crown new kings and begin training the prophet who will follow him.

It can be so with us as well. The fearful and despairing are called out of their caves to stand before God and hear the still small voice. We are then sent out for mission, to take care of the needs of our communities and to train up those who will follow us in ministry. Thanks be to God for all of God's good gifts. Amen.