

## **God's People in Wilderness: Elijah in the Cave**

**Psalm 55:1-8, 16-17    1Kings 19:1-15**

Our series for Lent: God's people in wilderness (literal, and figurative).

Goal is to learn from them about their wilderness experiences, as we experience our various wilderness times, and especially as we prepare to emerge from this covid wilderness, when that time comes. This morning we turn to the Old Testament, and a wilderness experience in the life of the prophet Elijah, who is considered Israel's greatest prophet.

Many of the Old Testament Narratives play out like a Hollywood drama. This morning's text is no exception. Some background information is in order so we understand and appreciate our text, and Elijah's experience.

It's the 9<sup>th</sup> century BC and Israel has had a series of bad kings. Some of them were simply ineffective leaders. Some of them were immoral. Some of them were downright evil, and selfish. And we have one of those kings in our reading this morning, whose name is Ahab. One of the bad things that Ahab did was form an alliance with the Phoenicians, a regional powerhouse. And as part of that alliance Ahab married the Phoenician king's daughter, whose name was... Jezebel. Just the name conjures up images of a terrible person, doesn't it? And a

terrible person she was. For example, she had dozens of God's prophets and priests killed because she didn't like their proclamation of Yahweh being the one true God, and because the prophets called the people to justice and righteousness and caring for the poor. She, and Ahab, didn't like that. And under their influence the people of Israel came to dislike that as well, and they approved of the killing of the prophets.

One of the things that Jezebel brought with her into this marriage with king Ahab, and therefore into the life of Israel, was the god of her people, Baal. This was really bad because any foreign god was expressly forbidden in Israel's life and worship. The first two commandments make that pretty clear, "You shall have no other gods before me" and "You shall not make any idols or graven images." Well, all of that went out the window, and the people of God were led astray and worshiped Baal alongside Yahweh, as equals.

And it's into this context that God raises up the prophet Elijah. God always raised up prophets to speak truth into the life of Israel; that was their role. To be the conscience of the people, especially to the king. For example, remember the prophet Nathan, who spoke the word of truth and conviction to king David after his abuse of power over Bathsheba and arranging for her husband to be killed. It

was God's way of saying that no one is above the law; not even the king. So the prophets were essential voices in the life of Israel. However, as often happened, the prophets were ostracized, marginalized, and frequently killed.

Btw, Jesus spoke to this in his famous "woe to you" tirade to the scribes and pharisees, when he said, "you build tombs for the prophets *whom your ancestors killed*, and you yourselves murder God's messengers." Because people with power, who abuse it, don't usually like to hear that they're being abusive and that God wants them to change their ways. So, they silence the voices of truth conscience by marginalizing them, and sometimes killing them.

This is the cast of characters. Now the setting. In 1Kings chapter 18, we are told there is a great drought which has caused famine in the land. The people of Israel want to summon the god Baal to rescue them, and Elijah confronts them, and king Ahab, and says, "Ok, let's see which God is the true God who can bring rain and restore crops." And Elijah arranges for a showdown, a WWE-type smackdown, between Baal and Yahweh. He makes the arrangements, invites everyone to attend and witness it, and it appears a one-sided contest because 450 of Baal's priests and prophets show up on one side, and on the other side is Elijah, by himself.

The prophets and priests of Baal try every incantation they know to get Baal to act, and when that doesn't work there is this hilarious scene where they embarrass themselves with loud ranting and raving and gyrating. When that doesn't work they begin to cut themselves to see if their blood will invoke Baal to act. But nothing happens. All the while, Elijah is talking smack, taunting them like Richard Sherman. Here is an example (18:27): "At noon, Elijah mocked them, saying, "Yell a little louder. Surely he is a god; maybe he is meditating somewhere, or he has wandered away, or he on a journey, or perhaps he is asleep and needs to be awakened." Right on, Elijah! This really was like a modern sport spectacle!

The prophets of Baal kept trying, and after nothing happened Elijah said, "Enough. My turn." So he set up a ridiculously expansive altar, with all kinds of sacrifices on it according to the Jewish law, had wood brought so that a fire could be made to consume the sacrifices, according to their custom, and then he said, "One more thing. Douse all this with water; jars and jars of water so it's completely soaked."

Now, water was scarce. There was a drought. So this was a risky move, and bold act of faith. Yet it was all drenched with water. And then Elijah called

upon Yahweh, the God of Israel, and fire came down and consumed the sacrifices and everything else; burnt to a crisp. And the priests and prophets of Baal were disposed of. And eventually the rains return to the land and their crops can grow. People acknowledge that Yahweh is Lord, and Elijah is now their hero. He just won the Super Bowl for his team when the odds were stacked against him.

In response to this, all of the people were in awe and amazed and their hearts turned toward God. Except Jezebel. Instead of humbling herself, she doubles down, and here is where we pick up the story.

## **1 Kings 19:1-15**

**19** Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done, and how he had killed all the prophets of Baal. <sup>2</sup>Then 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.' <sup>3</sup>Then he was afraid; he got up and fled for his life.

<sup>4</sup> He 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.' <sup>5</sup>Then he lay down under the broom tree and fell asleep. Suddenly an angel touched him and said to him, 'Get up and eat.' <sup>6</sup>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. <sup>7</sup>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.' <sup>8</sup>He got up, and ate and drank; then he went in the strength of that food for forty days and forty nights to Horeb the

mount of God. <sup>9</sup>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?' <sup>10</sup>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.'

<sup>11</sup> 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; <sup>12</sup>and after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence. <sup>13</sup>When Elijah heard it (the sound of silence), 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?' <sup>14</sup>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.' <sup>15</sup>Then the LORD said to him, 'Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus...'"

To summarize the rest of the story, God gives him instructions to anoint some leaders, and encourages Elijah with word that he is not alone; there are faithful people whom God has kept, that he can join with. And then God gives Elijah a young apprentice to work with, and to train up, whose name is Elisha.

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God!

So I'm half way through the sermon already! This will be a short reflection on what you just heard, and the theme I want to work with is how God works with a person who is in a wilderness of despair, or depression. We might even use the cave imagery here, which is a common metaphor that is used for times of despair or depression or just isolation (I'm going into my cave).

It's often risky to try to psychologize Biblical characters, when we aren't told exactly what's going on with them internally. We can make educated guesses, based on their behavior and their words. But in this case, with Elijah, it's clear, he is depressed. He wants to die. He feels alone. He thinks he is a bad person, as bad as his ancestors. He doesn't want to go back to any place, any people, or any work.

It could be that he is exhausted physically and emotionally after major showdown with the prophets of Baal and the exhilaration of that victory and the adrenaline rush it brought. You may know what that feels like, to fulfill a grand undertaking, something bigger than you, and more than you thought you could do, and you see God do something exceedingly abundantly, more that you could ask or imagine, but then be completely depleted when it's over. You feel wrung

out. I've been there after things like youth group retreats, conferences I've planned and led, and sometimes even after an Easter Sunday.

So, Elijah could be experiencing that. Or, he might be in despair because he knows that Jezebel wants to kill him and he's in dread fear and perhaps feels like there is no escaping Jezebel and her minions. He is a wanted man being hunted down by horrible people, he is all alone, and he figures that he may as well die anyway, on his own terms. After all, he fulfilled his work on the mountain by defeating Baal, figures it's game over and now he can join his fellow servants in the great hall of victory in heaven.

Whatever the reason, what this text tells us is: it happens to everyone, even the best of us. Even the strongest, most capable, successful people. We're going to see, when we get to Holy Week, that it even happened to Jesus. Human Jesus. It happens to everyone: going into the wilderness, the cave of despair.

Elijah is a towering figure in Jewish history and imagination. Considered the greatest of the prophets, so much so that Elijah plays a prominent role in the traditional Jewish Passover/Seder: the 5<sup>th</sup> cup of wine is called Elijah's cup, and is left untouched in honor of him and his potential return; traditional families will also crack open a door in case he returns that night, to welcome him. And in

Christianity, on the mount of transfiguration, only two people appear with Jesus when he is transfigured: Moses, and Elijah. And Jesus tells his disciples that John the Baptist is himself Elijah come back, to prepare the way of the Lord.

So, here is a towering leader, now so despairing that he wants to die. The trash-talking prophet who oozed confidence and strength has now completely lost his nerve, and his resolve. Thank God that accounts like this are given to us in the Scriptures! Because it tells us that it happens to everyone, even to the best of us.

And what we have learned this past year is that it's been part of our reality during our covid quarantine. When we look at the data, just from the state of Washington, we see that a high percentage of the population has been affected by mental health issues, stress, anxiety, depression.

And so, along with being glad that the *Bible* is realistic about this issue, I'm glad that *the state of Washington* has been realistic and open about this as well, and has been providing access to professional resources for people during this time. Sheri Teesdale preached a great sermon about this last July—you can find it on our website if you'd like to listen to it again—and one of the things she said in her sermon that I would like to reiterate, is that because we have had to be open

and realistic about mental health issues this year, that hopefully we can normalize things like depression. Instead of people feeling stigmatized by it. The Bible never stigmatizes people who struggle. It normalizes those experiences, and at the same time speaks to the grace of God and the healing and growth that can happen amidst and beyond those experiences. What the Bible tells us is that our lives are not stuck. There is a way out and a way forward, with God's help.

In this covid wilderness that we have been living through, it has been evident that we need to avail ourselves of all the resources at our disposal. Professional resources, self-care resources, and of course spiritual resources.

And along those lines, let's take a moment to see how God so graciously deals with Elijah and gradually brings him out of his cave of discouragement and restores hope and purpose to him. It's moving to see God at work here. This reminds me of how Jesus went to work in restoring Peter after the resurrection, when he is depressed, even though the victory of resurrection had been clearly accomplished.

Here are a few observations from our text, of God at work in classic and consistent God-like ways. I'll move fairly quickly through these, so don't run to the fridge or the bathroom.

1. God provided for his basic needs. God feeds him, gives him water to drink, and gives him sleep.

When we are in the cave, the wilderness, the valley of the shadow of death, or however we describe our experience, one of the most important things we need is simple, basic, needs being met. Get sleep, without guilt. Eat good food. Drink water.

It's a beautiful thing here that God understands Elijah's state of heart and mind, and especially his physical situation, how depleted he is. And God just feeds him, gives him water to drink, and gives him sleep. This is self-care 101. Do the simple, basic, things: eat, sleep, drink water. Go for a walk outside if you can.

2. In the same vein, God gives him needed time and space to recuperate.

40 days and nights, like many of the other people and situations of the Bible. Some think this is more of a symbolic number than a literal number, but whatever. The point is clear: here is space and time, needed to recuperate.

I so appreciate that when God does speak to Elijah after his time of recuperation and rest, he deals with him gently, with a question. He doesn't scold him, or tell him to buck up and be a man. It doesn't say that Elijah lost God's favor for wanting to give up. It doesn't say that God was disappointed in Elijah. It

doesn't say that Elijah was a failure. Elijah was loved by God and free to tell his own story, even when that meant choosing to step away from the work that was crushing him, for a time. God understood that, and gave him space and time.

And so God asks him, “What are you doing here?” In other words, talk to me. Tell me what’s going on. And Elijah’s somewhat humorous response reflects his still-depleted state of heart and mind—he still feels alone, and like his useful life is over—which leads to the final thing God does:

3. God tells Elijah that he has more for him to do—that his work is not yet fulfilled. And God gently recommissions him. Tells him that he is not alone; there *are* faithful people—don’t be discouraged. And, there is a young man that I need you to mentor and to pass along the mantle of leadership.

And it needs to be noted that God did not speak to Elijah in the big and spectacular, but in, literally, “the sound of silence.” For those of you from the 70’s, you’ll get this silly cultural reference I’m about to make: God didn’t speak through Earth, Wind and Fire, but Simon and Garfunkel (get it? “The sound of silence.” Though that song has a completely different

meaning than the sound of silence that Elijah heard). There's my bad joke for the day.

There seems to be an intentional contrast between how God spoke and acted in the prophetic showdown with the prophets of Baal, and how God is now speaking to Elijah. Elijah, it seems, did not need another massive and awe-inspiring display of God's power and might. That may have been too much for him. He needed God to speak by means of silence. In and through silence.

I don't want to make too much of this, because I repeat myself a lot on this subject, but it comes up so often in the Bible: where and how do you and I hear God's voice? Especially when you're feeling down, or want to go into your cave, or flee into the wilderness. As is often the case, it isn't always the grand and expected ways that are best for us—though God often speaks in those ways too, and they are good—but in the quiet, the silent, the solitary moments of our reflection. Where God engages us in a *process* of healing, and growth, of emergence from something. We need the space and time and encouragement and the gentle nudge to reengage our life's purpose.

It's the process that matters, as much as the end result. And part of Elijah's process, and perhaps part of ours as we emerge from our wilderness, is to know that his life still has purpose. He is needed. Just like you and I are needed.

I mentioned last week that wilderness is often a time for preparing for the next thing that God wants to do in our lives. And whether it's a wilderness that we are led into, like Jesus, or a wilderness that comes upon us for other reasons, the purpose is the same: to hear again a calling; to affirm our identity and our purpose as God's beloved children and servants.