

First Presbyterian Church
1 Kings 19:1-18, “What Are You Doing Here?”
by Pastor Matt Johnson 6/22/2025

We heard last night about bombings that have shaken not only nuclear Iran,
but the world.

Early reports are mixed, depending on your news source,
but the strong consensus is that this unprovoked attack
will reverberate for many years to come.

In the church world, we hear about the decline of the church.

Our Presbyterian denomination is going through major structural changes,
trying to figure out how to function
with fewer members, fewer churches, and less money.

I won't belabor other spheres of life, but ...

does it ever feel as though no matter what you do,
the forces of money, power, pride, lust, greed, and overconsumption,
will just keep chewing up the world,
chewing up one generation after another,
one nation after another,
one congregation after another,
one disciple after another,
until there's nobody left to call upon the face of Jesus?

Well, if it feels like that, you share the company of the great prophet Elijah
along with a lot of other faithful people throughout history
and even in this room.

And...if it feels like that... *you're wrong.*

This story is a profound one that has many dimensions.

But at the heart of it, God is telling Elijah that as a prophet of the Lord
there's no room for doom and gloom.

Even when life is at its absolute worst,
God is still God. That fact is more important
than anything else we think we know about our life
and the world.

There is a plot-driven element to this story which reads like a movie script.

A man alone in the desert, on the run from an angry queen
who is hell bent on his destruction.
To be sure, Elijah was in a tight spot. In the previous chapter
God humiliated 450 prophets of Baal through Elijah at Mt. Carmel.
In fact, they were burnt to a crisp by the fire of heaven.
This is why our passage began with the evil King Ahab told his wife Jezebel
—an icon of wickedness to this day—
everything Elijah had done.

Elijah was a man on the run.
The great man of prayer, the one who could call down fire from heaven,
the true prophet of the Living God ... was afraid.
And he ran into the wilderness.

Have you ever run away?
Have you ever been so paralyzed by fear or anxiety or anger
that you couldn't take it anymore,
so you just escaped to somewhere nobody else could find you?
Have you ever crawled into a dark corner and prayed that you would die?

That's where Elijah's at.
He is over the edge. He can't do it anymore.
He's being hunted down and he's ready for it all to be over.

I've never been hunted by the police or put on a list by the authorities,
but I've had those days where the things that seemed to make sense
don't make sense anymore.
When the days are filled with dark things and what really matters is hard to find,
and it feels like the world is ganging up on me.
It's not an experience restricted to the super spiritual –
this is the experience of an ordinary human being
searching for God in a broken world.

...

“Get up and eat.”
Elijah looked around, and there by his head was some bread
freshly baked over hot coals, and a jar of water.
He ate and drank and then lay down again.
After some more sleep, the angel of the LORD returns and wakes him again,

like God's angelic snooze button.

“Get up and eat, for the journey is too much for you.”

This was the first mystical encounter of Elijah
as he contemplated his own death, the limits of his capacity as a human.

The grace of God is on display in this scene.
God knows the state that Elijah is in, and won't allow him to be pressed
beyond the breaking point.

Twice Elijah fell asleep, twice the angel of the Lord woke him
with the words “Get up and eat,”
and twice bread and water miraculously appeared next to him.

When we're nearing our limits, even a piece of bread can be a miracle.

Elijah then traveled forty days and forty nights until he reached Mt. Horeb.

40 days and 40 nights – already an important marker of time
after the 40 days and 40 nights that Noah and his family spent on the ark,
and the 40 years that Israel had wandered in the desert.
In this passage we learn that Elijah had his own 40 days in the desert
long before Jesus of Nazareth would share the experience in his own time.

After the epic journey, he slept in a cave within Mt. Horeb.

This is no random hill in the desert.

This is a mountain also known in the Bible by another name:
Mt. Sinai.

Mt. Horeb / Mt. Sinai is where God met Israel following their deliverance
from slavery in Egypt.

On this Mountain, Moses went up to meet with God
and receive the ten commandments.

On this mountain, God's presence was marked
by earthquakes, by wind, and by fire and thunder.

Now Elijah, having been delivered from the wrath of Ahab and Jezebel,
hides out in this same mountain where Moses once met with God.

Then comes the question from Yahweh, “What are you doing here, Elijah?”

Elijah isn't new to the game. He's ready for the question.
He knows what got him to where he is.

"I have been very zealous for Yawheh God Almighty.
The Israelites have rejected your covenant, torn down your altars,
and put your prophets to death with the sword.
I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too."

Or in other words, "What am I doing here? Uh ... I don't know,
maybe just trying to save the planet by defeating all the bad guys?
The people who are in charge have ruined *everything*
by selling you out. I'm next."

Elijah is not only hiding in a cave physically,
he's also withdrawn into a cave in his heart.
He sees his world through his own righteous actions
vs. the terrorizing activity of his enemies.

When our world is collapsing, this is a very natural thing to do.
But it isn't always accurate.
Our world can easily be reduced to the fight or flight response
in our brains
rather than set in the larger truth of God's enduring love and promises –
which extend from before we are born
to long after we and our enemies will be gone.

So in v. 11 "Yahweh said, 'Go out and stand on the mountain
in the presence of the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by.'

Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart
and shattered the rocks before the LORD,
but the LORD was not in the wind.

After the wind there was an earthquake,
but the LORD was not in the earthquake.
After the earthquake came a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire."

Wind, earthquake, fire – a repetition of the great signs of the LORD’s
presence on this mountain with Moses and Israel centuries before.

But God is not in them.

“And after the fire came a gentle whisper.”

One of the great lines in the Hebrew Bible.

The King James Version puts it this way:
“and after the fire a still small voice”

This quiet voice is not explained.

It doesn’t say, “And the Lord was in the whisper.”

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks reflects that, “In effect, God was saying to Elijah:
false prophets believe in power. At Mount Carmel you showed
that I am a greater power. You defeated idolatry on its own terms.
That may be fine for those tempted by idolatry,
but that is not who I am.

The supreme power cares for the powerless. The creator of life loves life.
The voice that summoned the universe into being is still and small,
hardly louder than a whisper. To hear God you have to listen.”

As before, Elijah’s second mystical encounter comes in two parts.

After the whisper, the Lord *again* asks Elijah,
“What are you doing here?”

Again he replied, “I have been very zealous for the LORD God Almighty.
The Israelites have rejected your covenant, torn down your altars,
and put your prophets to death with the sword.
I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too.”

Encountering the presence of Yahweh in the whisper
after 40 days and 40 nights might change most people.
But not Elijah. Not this man. He’s not changing his tune.

Elijah knows what’s happening around him. His situation is what it is.
Jezebel won’t be swayed by the whisper
any more than she would be by fire from heaven.
God knows Pharaoh didn’t pay attention to the plagues.
Unhinged leaders don’t just suddenly become wise and reflective people.

Elijah would say, “It’s not cynicism, it’s realism.”
It’s understandable. And ... *it’s wrong*. Elijah was wrong.
His story, which drove him into the desert,
 which he apparently rehearsed over and over during those 40 days,
 and which he has now recited two times
 to the Lord of all Creation was that
“he’s all alone, everyone else has been killed, and he’s next,”
was wrong.

How do we know? In verse 15 the LORD said to him,
 “Go back the way you came, and go to the Desert of Damascus.”

Back the way he came? Back toward Jezebel and certain death?
 Yes. But he won’t die. And he’s not alone.
 He thought he was the only one left.
In truth, there were not 7, not 70, but 7,000 remaining
 whose knees have not bowed down to Baal
 and whose mouths have not kissed him.
And the God of angel armies walks with each of them.
 There was more to hope for than Elijah could know.
 For all his wisdom, courage, and faith, Elijah was still *not God*.
 As humans our perception is limited.

What is the story you have told over and over which you are so sure of
 that you have left God out of it?
 How might you rewrite it if asked by the still small voice,
 “*What are you doing here?*”

wait in silence

close in prayer