

When You're In The Cave...
Listen For Whispers

A Sermon on 1 Kings 19:9-18
Year A - Pentecost 12
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JJ¹

Throughout history one of the most popular places to hide has been caves. Caves offer a lot of natural protection. Protection from madmen like King Saul whose deathly rage pursued David all over Israel. Future kings, little boys and everyone in between have made caves a hiding place, running away from danger and life's problems.

Sometimes we feel like crawling into a cave to get away from this world and all the problems and struggles of life. While we might not have the option of hiding in a cave, we often go crawling into mental and spiritual caves. We go into these caves to sulk and feel sorry for ourselves. We go into these caves when the pressures of life seem too much to handle. We go into these caves when it seems nothing is working out in life. We go into these caves when no one seems to care, even those who are supposed to care the most—even God.

That's where we find Elijah today. We find him both physically in a cave, along with mentally and spiritually. Elijah was one of God's Old Testament prophets. In fact, he is one of the greatest prophets. Elijah ministered in the northern kingdom, Israel. It's important to remember the history of the kingdom of Israel to help us understand things being written in the Old Testament. The united Kingdom of Israel didn't last long at all.

Just three kings—Saul, David & Solomon—then there was civil war and a dividing kingdom. Where we pick up today is when Ahab was king of the northern kingdom, Israel. Scripture describes Ahab as the king who “did more evil in the eyes of the LORD than any of those before him” (1 Kg. 16:30 NIV84). It didn't help that he married unbelieving Jezebel who imported her prophets of Baal to serve her spiritual needs.

Elijah was called to serve in a country where the government and the majority of the people were both morally and spiritually bankrupt and corrupt. With all the difficulties, Elijah's ministry was also one filled with the power and love of the LORD. On one occasion, the LORD fed Elijah by sending ravens with food (1 Kg. 17:1-6). Some time after that, the LORD miraculously fed him, a widow and her son by replenishing their small amount of flour and oil every day in the middle of a severe drought (1 Kg. 17:7-16). Through the power of the LORD, Elijah even later raised that widow's son back to life! (1 Kg. 17:17-24).

Then there was what looks to us and perhaps seemed to Elijah to be the pinnacle of his public ministry. The day on Mt. Carmel (1 Kg. 18). The severe drought and famine plaguing the land wasn't enough to draw the Israelites away from the lies of Jezebel's pagan prophets of the fertility god Baal. The

LORD and his servant Elijah had had enough. A big showdown on Mt. Carmel to prove once and for all who the true God was. While the prophets of Baal wailed, Baal was silent. Elijah prayed to the LORD, and the LORD rained down fire from heaven that consumed the water soaked sacrifice, wood, stones and water in the trench! Baal wasn't just infertile, he was impotent! The people saw what happened and cried out, "The LORD—he is God!" (1 Kg. 18:39). That day Elijah and the faithful purged Israel of the 450 prophets of Baal, putting them to death (1 Kg. 18:40ff.).

It was a mighty day indeed! And it seems Elijah thought things would now change in Israel. Now at long last there would be a spiritual renewal in the land. Now Elijah's time under the cross would be over. Now he could relax and enjoy a less stressful ministry.

Yet from the heights of Mt. Carmel, Elijah falls into the depths of frustration and doubt. Even after this amazing and undeniable act of the true God's glory and power, evil queen Jezebel is not swayed. In fact, her hatred and rage against the LORD and his people boils over. She promises to kill Elijah. And what does Elijah do? Continue to stand firm after standing his ground on Mt. Carmel? No. He flees in fear and

frustration. There isn't a renewal. Not that he can see. His life is still threatened, and no one seems to care or defend him—not even God! Where was the fire and brimstone for these people who have broken the covenant? Where were the earthquakes, wind-storms and fires of judgment God had sent so many times before?

Nothing.



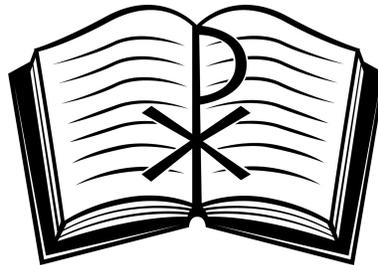
So Elijah flees. He flees, oddly enough, hundreds of miles to the south to the very place the covenant had been made between the LORD and Israel—to the mountains of Horeb. To the place where God had come once before in fire and wind and earthquake. After 40 days and nights of travel, Elijah reaches the mountain, finds a cave and is ready to hand in his resignation as prophet.

Then the word of the LORD suddenly came to him saying, "Why are you here, Elijah?" He said, "I have been very zealous for the LORD, the God of Armies, but the people of Israel have abandoned your covenant. They have torn down your altars and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking to take my life."

Elijah makes his case against the people of Israel. In so doing, he's also accusing God. At best, he's accusing God of incompetence: "God, you're not following through on your part of the plan!" At worst, he's accusing God of impotence: "God, your plan doesn't work!" Elijah is lost in the dark cave of doubt and self-pity.

When was the last time you were lost in this cave? A couple months ago? Last week? Yesterday? Are you there right now? What difficulty, problem or struggle is the devil using to rear doubt's ugly head in your heart? What plans of yours aren't working out? What plans of God seem to be falling apart?

There are all kinds of reasons we crawl into caves of doubt and self-pity. But what about situations similar to Elijah? While none of you has been threatened by the president for your faith, situations like Elijah's in your life might cause you to ask questions like: "How can so many be rejecting Jesus?" "Why is it so easy to find an open pew on Sunday morning?" "Why is my loved one rejecting me—rejecting God?" "Why does our nation continue to rage against us and our Lord?" Then we let that nagging doubt grow in our hearts, and like Elijah find ourselves throwing up our hands in despair: "What's the point? That's it! I'm done! I give up!" We go crawling into our



caves, doubting and forgetting God's promises.

Like Elijah, we deserve to be crushed under God's mighty hand just like those prophets of Baal. But friends, **WHEN YOU'RE IN THE CAVE...LISTEN FOR WHISPERS.** Listen for whispers because the LORD draws us out of our caves of self-pity and doubt with the gentle whisper of the gospel.

Then the LORD said, "Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the LORD, for the LORD is passing by." Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountains and shattered rocks before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind. After the wind came an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake there was a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire. After the fire there was a soft, whispering voice. When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his cloak, and he went out and stood at the entrance to the cave. Then a voice came to him and said, "Why are you here, Elijah?"

Elijah brought his case against the people of Israel, and even against God. God answers his prophet, not with great acts of power, but rather with quiet words of promise. Yes, God did display his power, but he did it so that his display of grace might be all the more astounding. He did it so that Elijah would remember that the

greatest way in which the LORD is with him isn't in miracles and mighty acts of power, but in his Word. And that Word told Elijah that the LORD was not coming in judgment, but in grace for his elect—7,000 whom God preserved in faith! That Word assured and promised Elijah that the LORD would accomplish all that he desired. It would tear down kingdoms and establish new ones. It would bring judgment on the enemies of his people. That Word assured Elijah of a promise for another mountain and another cave.

God hears our complaints too. He listens to our loneliness. He sees us as we crawl into our caves, struggling with self-pity and doubt. And God's response to us is found on another mountain and another cave. Not fiery Mt. Sinai, but darkened blood-stained Mt. Calvary. Not a cave in the mountains of Horeb, but a brand-new manmade cave on the outskirts of ancient Jerusalem, left empty after three days.

On Mt. Calvary, we find the true power and glory of God, though it doesn't look like it. There isn't a grand display of power, but a dying man. A man who truly was alone—abandoned by his friends and forsaken by his Father. Yet in his death is the greatest power there is—the power to forgive the sins of the world! The cry of Jesus' last breath is the

gentle whisper that assures us that it is finished! God's voice whispers in our ears, drawing us out of our caves of doubt by leading us to the empty cave of Jesus' tomb. We cannot be left alone because Jesus is alive and promises to be with us always! We have the assurance that God's promises are all true and totally reliable because Jesus came and conquered, just as promised!

And friends, it is with these gentle whispers of God's grace that God sends us back out to continue fighting the good fight of faith. God isn't through with us yet, just as he wasn't through with Elijah. As long as God grants us life and breath, he sends us out into this sin-darkened world with the light of the gospel. Yes, fighting against the Jezebels of this world, but not with swords and violence, rather with the Sword of the Spirit—the gentle whisper of the gospel! When the battle rages on and you find yourself in the cave, listen for whispers. Listen to God's voice. Rest your heart in his promises. Amen.

SDG²

¹ JJ is the acronym for *Jesus Juve*, which is Latin for "Jesus Help". It is a short prayer used by many ministers and sacred musicians at the beginning of their work.

² SDG is an acronym for *Soli Deo Gloria*, which is Latin for "To God Alone Be The Glory". This is a statement of humility used by many ministers and sacred musicians at the end of their work to let themselves and others know that it isn't about getting glory for themselves, but about giving all glory to God.

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