

THE MESSAGE for Aug 7, 2011**1 Kings 19:9-18*****Elijah... Hearing the Voice of God Speak*****The Rev. Dr. R. K. Miller**

We continue our series on great people in God's great story. Today we meet Elijah. When I think of Elijah I think, *You can run and you can hide – but it won't do any good. God provides...*

Elijah is right up there with John the Baptist and Moses. He is one of the Bible's VIP's - Very Important Prophets. His story is legendary, and yet his story is not really about him as much as it is about God at work in his life as we shall see.

Elijah appears in the Bible as God's spokesperson, standing before King Ahab telling him that only God can make it rain. This was a suicide mission. The king had turned away from God and was worshiping Baal, the god his wife, Queen Jezebel worshipped. This caused a major conflict for the people, who wanted to remain loyal to the king (and queen) yet continue to worship the one true God. Many people helped the king and queen build shrines to worship Baal.

Baalism was very popular. Baal was considered to be the god of weather and fertility. He is often depicted riding on the clouds, with lightning bolts in his hands. He is believed, by those who worship him, to be responsible for sending rain. For an agricultural society like Israel, it's very tempting to worship a god like Baal.

The scene is set. Elijah asks, "Is God the one who provides the rains, and life, and fertility, or is Baal?"

His God given message to King Ahab is a direct threat to the king's authority and leadership and power. Elijah delivers God's message to the king and then runs – sort of like lighting a fuse on a stick of dynamite and running. Elijah could have been killed on the spot by the king for saying what he said. So Elijah runs and hides and God provides for his every need. Elijah's story is that God provides.

Meanwhile, a severe drought lasting three years created a severe famine, and Queen Jezebel is tracking down and killing all the prophets of God. God comes to Elijah, and tells him to go back to King Ahab with the message that the rains are coming – so says God.

Elijah is once again standing before the king. But before telling him about the coming rain, Elijah sets up a contest between God and Baal on Mount Carmel. Elijah gathers the people together with the king and asks – "How long will you go limping along with two different opinions?" Are we going to follow God or Baal? We can't do both.

Elijah is the last of God's prophets; all the others have been killed by King Ahab. Baal has 450 prophets. One against 450 or so it would seem.

Here are the rules of the contest. The prophets of Baal will build an altar and so too will Elijah. Both will get a bull, lay it on wood on top of the altar, and then call on their respective God to see which one will send fire to consume the offering.

Baal's prophets go first. They prepare the altar and wood and bull and call on Baal early in the morning until noon – nothing. Elijah begins to taunt and tease them saying, "Your god must be MIA or sleeping somewhere. Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha..."

Then it's Elijah's turn. He repairs an altar that had been torn down using twelve stones representing the twelve tribes of Israel. He puts the wood on it, then the bull, then fills four jars of water and pours it on top. He pours four more jars of water on top. And then pours four more jars of water on top. Everything is soaking wet. Then he prays... and prays... and prays for God to send fire. He wants to show the people God's power so that they will turn their hearts back to God. And guess what? God does and the people do too.

Fire comes down from heaven and consumes the bull, the wood, the altar, and dries up all the water and the people stand in awe... fall on their faces... and worship God. Anything and everything associated with worshipping Baal is destroyed or removed from their lives immediately. Mission accomplished...

Elijah triumphantly leads King Ahab and the people back into the city. The Queen is not with them. There is exaltation and victory as they come back into the city – our God reigns! Elijah is sure to take his place as the top prophet. He deserves "the prophet of the year award." His dream of success has come true. It's a new day and everyone lives happily ever after.

Well... not exactly... When Queen Jezebel hears what Elijah has done. She threatens his life and threatens to destroy the entire nation of Israel. Elijah flees to the southern kingdom of Judah. He goes into a deep depression of despair. He is so depressed that he prays for God to just take his life.

This mood swing from victory to defeat just about destroys Elijah. This may have been Queen Jezebel's ultimate goal – psychological warfare. If she was going to kill him, why send a warning? Why not just kill him. By doing what she did, she has proven to everyone that Elijah's trust in God is not as strong as his fear for his own life. Elijah going on the run proves his lack of faith. Or so it might seem.

While on the run Elijah leaves his servant behind one day and goes for a long walk in the desert alone. He sits down under a broom tree hoping to fall asleep and just die. That's how depressed he was. Just take my life God. Ever been that depressed?

If so, then know this. God has other plans. No matter how bad the situation seems, God has other plans. An angel of the Lord comes, feeds Elijah, and sends him to church. That's right – to church. “Get up and go to Mount Horeb,” the angel tells him to go to the same mountain where Moses encountered God in the burning bush.

Our reading today picks up the story of Elijah hiding in a cave on Mount Horeb....

(Read Text... 1 Kings 19:9-18)

Oddly enough God asks Elijah a question, “What are you doing here, Elijah?” God knows why Elijah is there. God sent Elijah there. But Elijah isn't so sure why he is there in worship.

He responds with his gloom and doom story -- how hard he worked for God, how unfaithful the people have become. How Jezebel killed all of God's prophets and he is the only one left. It kind of sounds like Elijah's throwing himself a pity party, which he is. Ever do that? Let's have a pity party for Elijah right now... *one, two, three.... awe....* Kidding aside -- it also sounds like someone who is really, really struggling with his faith.

Oddly enough God listens to Elijah rant and rave. But God doesn't join in the pity party nor does God address any of his concerns. Instead God invites him to come out of the cave to witness God's power in the wind, and the earthquake, and the fire – but Elijah stays in the cave. He doesn't come out until there is only silence. That's when Elijah hears God in the silence.

He comes out of the cave wrapping his face in fear. He knows God isn't in the wind, or the earthquake, or the fire (that's where you might find Baal but not God). Elijah hides his face because he is about to encounter God. He meets God in the silence of worship. And in that silence God asks Elijah the same question, “What are you doing here?”

Elijah gives the same answer, telling his story of gloom and doom. It's almost comical. God once again seems to ignore Elijah's concerns and fears. From Elijah's point of view, God doesn't seem to care about him or his situation. Notice that Elijah seems to be focused on... himself. “Woe is me... Oh poor me.... Oh what should I do now?”

It's easy to read this story from Elijah's point of view but this story is not about Elijah. It's about God and God's promise. God's promise is the only consistency in this story. Elijah swings from fear to faith and from faith to fear. God speaks to Elijah in good times and in bad times. God protects Elijah. God provides for Elijah. God proves Elijah right in the eyes of the King, and the Queen and all the people.

How quickly he forgot what God had been doing in and through his life. I wonder if that's because Elijah didn't feel God was doing anything in his life. Otherwise he wouldn't be facing all these hardships, right? Ever feel that way?

Just when Elijah's depression and despair was getting the best of him God sends him out to serve. God calls him out of the cave of worship and sends him back into the world to do God's will training and raising up other leaders to help him do God's will and work. God's way of dealing with depression is to go and to serve others. It's as if God is telling Elijah get on with life. There is work to do. And not to worry, God has everything under control.

God calls Elijah to come to worship and then go serve others. And that's what God is calling us to do too. How might you leave worship here today and go serve others? How might you go and be a blessing to others? It begins with our willingness to be God's servants.

God's promise for life is as true for us today as it was for Elijah. Because of Jesus and his cross -- life is possible and nothing can separate us from God's love. God will go to great lengths to pull us out of the caves that we love to hide in. If earthquakes and fire and wind don't pull us out, God will find something. Even if that "something" seems like nothing but silence.

You can run and you can hide – but it won't do any good. God provides...

Amen.