

## Beyond the Cave

One of my favorite commentaries on this text is actually a tweet by Joy Clarkson I ran across a while back that reads:

*“This is your gentle reminder that one time in the Bible Elijah was like “God, I’m so mad! I want to die!” so God said “Here’s some food. Why don’t you have a nap?” So Elijah slept, ate, & decided things weren’t so bad. Never underestimate the spiritual power of a nap & a snack.”*

While this is wisdom I continue to return to, I’d like to dive a little deeper today.

A sermon can take many paths through a text.

The most obvious path on this text would likely be to talk about God encountering us in the still small voice.

While that is a good sermon, it is not my sermon this morning.

I’d like to take us down a different path.

What do you do when you burn out on the path you’ve been so confident in and passionate about and just want to throw in the towel?

We think of these Old Testament prophets as larger than life figures, unshakable in their confidence and their callings (and therefore perhaps, unrelatable to us).

And yet, if you include Jonah, this is the second prophet to wind up sitting under a tree wishing he was dead.

How did our confident and passionate prophet get to such a low place? For that we need to turn back the story a few pages.

Elijah was given the unenviable task of reminding King Ahab that there hadn't been rain for three years because he had let the people stray from God's path.

Delivering this message was going to be a tricky endeavor because Elijah had announced this unflattering news before and Ahab had dealt with the bad press by putting a price on Elijah's head.

Ahab was a weak king. And scripture would suggest that he really wasn't the one calling the shots.

Ahab had married Jezebel as part of a political alliance with Phoenicia, their northern neighbor, and had allowed her to introduce Baal worship alongside the worship of Yahweh.

This allowed for a nation that worshiped two gods instead of one, which is of course the worst kind of sin within a people called to be set apart, in adherence with the very first commandment Moses gave them: "You shall have no other gods before me."

It was the reason Israel was instructed not to marry foreigners, and the transgression was on display in the highest level of government.

And for that reason, the text tells us, there had been no rain for three years.

Jezebel was not content to just introduce Baal worship to Israel, she was also killing off the prophets of Yahweh whenever she could get her hands on them. Chapter 18 tells of 100 prophets of Yahweh that were being hidden in caves, just to keep them alive.

Something needed to be done, so Elijah manages to get an audience with the king to tell him there would be a showdown on Mount Carmel.

Jezebel was to bring 850 prophets of Baal and Elijah would stand alone representing the one true God.

Before the spectacle begins, Elijah stands in front of the people of Israel and says *“How long will you waver between two opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal is God, follow him.”*  
But the people said nothing.

Two altars are prepared with a bull on each.  
850 prophets of Baal in a religious frenzy are unable to make anything happen.

When Elijah’s turn comes he builds a moat around his altar, drenches it with water for dramatic effect, and calls on the Lord.  
Fire from heaven pours from the sky and incinerates everything, from the bull to the wood to the stones the altar was built of.

Elijah, the mouthpiece of the one true God, is victorious!  
The people cheer and turn to the Lord!  
The prophets of Baal are chased down and slaughtered!  
And breaking three years of drought, it starts to rain so hard that Ahab has to ride hard the 30 miles back to Jezreel before it’s too muddy for his chariot!  
And Elijah tucks his cloak into his belt and *runs* ahead of Ahab’s chariot the entire way, undoubtedly setting a new marathon time record!  
What a day!

But the high doesn’t last.  
Jezebel hears of this, and in one of the most enjoyably worded threats in the Bible, puts out the word:  
*“May the gods deal with me, be it ever so severely, if by this time tomorrow I do not make your life like that of one of the prophets that you killed”*  
The Phoenicians send their regards.

Elijah goes from hero back to the most wanted list within a day.

Elijah is brave but he isn't stupid, so he runs for his life.  
And in the midst of it all, he has an existential crisis.

What is the point of all of this?

Taking on these things God has called him to that in the end are lost causes.

Spending a hard lonely life on the run.

Hated by the powerful, blank-eyed apathy from the people

And even when there seems to be some progress forward it is always one  
step forward and two steps back.

The systems and the powers are too strong, the people are too weak of will,  
nothing will ever change. Better to lie down and die.

Have you ever been there?

Are you there now?

Maybe wanting to lie down and die is hyperbole for you. Or maybe not.

This congregation is full of strong people fighting uphill battles with little  
reward on account of causes and ways of life that God has put on your hearts.

Maybe Elijah's words resonate with you.

In our modern world, which prides itself on logic and reason,  
we are taught that the cold, hard fact of human existence is that we find  
ourselves adrift in an indifferent, even hostile, universe, shouldered with the  
added burden of having to summon the strength to continue on nonetheless.

That there is a grim nobility in persevering without hope.

Life is hard and then you die.

Elijah travels 40 days and 40 nights until he reaches Mount Horeb, which is  
a subtle nod to the reader that Elijah walks in the footsteps of Moses, who  
received the 10 Commandments on that very mountain.

Unlike Moses however, Elijah has come to mope and escape it all.

God knows this of course, and asks Elijah: “What are you doing here?” I gave you things to do out *there*, why are you *here*?

*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.”*

Trevor Eppheimer writes:

*“Huddled in his cave, convinced of his unique status as the last remaining person of faith, Elijah’s primary temptation is to think that he has to go it alone, that it is all up to him. This illusion presents itself to us when our concepts of reality do not include the dynamic presence of God, which empowers us to trust in the resources of divine grace--which specializes in making the impossible possible.*

*That there is a future for him beyond the cave--and for Israel after Elijah--is not rationally obvious to Elijah. Such an insight can be received only as a gift from God, not inferred strictly on the basis of the immediate circumstances.*

*In other words, the catalyst for faith--which allows the understanding to surpass the limits set for it by reason--must originate somewhere other than the self or the situations in which we immediately find ourselves. It must originate instead in God.”*

What does it mean to be a people of faith in a world of logic and reason?

We are a people rooted in a larger story and focused on a forward trajectory.

We return to these stories for lessons of where God has been, in places expected and unexpected, and we learn from these stories what God is doing now and where God is leading us, accepting the invitation to be a part of

God's renewing and restoring plan, even when we can't satisfy those who would demand answers based solely on reason and logic.

The apostle Paul does just that, referencing this story in his letter to the churches in Rome:

*Don't you know what Scripture says in the passage about Elijah—how he appealed to God against Israel: "Lord, they have killed your prophets and torn down your altars; I am the only one left, and they are trying to kill me"?*

*And what was God's answer to him? "I have reserved for myself seven thousand who have not bowed the knee to Baal." So too, at the present time there is a remnant chosen by grace. And if by grace, then it cannot be based on works; if it were, grace would no longer be grace.*

This was indeed God's answer to Elijah, just a few verses outside of the text that was read aloud this morning.

It turns out Elijah was not alone as he was convinced he was.

God had reserved 7000 who would aid Elijah in his mission.

Snacks, a nap, and a community of 7000 to accompany him along the way.

Even prophets get discouraged sometimes.

They get tired, fed up and burned out.

They make emotional decisions, sure they have all the information, stressed that it will all fall apart if they aren't perfect in their tasks, only to be surprised that someday, somehow God has provided a way where logic and reason deduced there could be no way.

There was a future for Elijah *and* for Israel beyond the cave Elijah was hiding in.

And there is a future for us as well.

We do not have to go it alone. It is not all up to us.

Embrace the dynamic presence of God, which empowers us to trust in the resources of divine grace--which specializes in making the impossible possible.