

**Message Delivered at Christ Church
Saturday & Sunday, June 19th & 20th**

TEXT: I Kings 19:1-15a

Delivered by Paul A. Johnson

Good morning, everybody. We're glad you're here to worship the Lord today. I hope you had a good week this week...

I had a good week, though I'll tell you it started off a little bit painfully.

I came into the office on Tuesday morning, and did what I normally do when I come in to get myself situated at the beginning of a day...hooked up my computer, and straightened my desk a little bit...and then went out to the church kitchen to get a cup of coffee. So I poured my coffee...and I can't remember whether, as I began to walk back to my office, I was reading something or just kind of thinking about things...but I ended up doing a couple things that are a problem when you do them at the same time: First, I was walking quickly; and second, I was looking down.

Now there are certain things we know are sharp. Knives are sharp. Razor blades are sharp. But there are others things...such as open kitchen cabinet doors...that we only discover how sharp they are by walking into them.

And I, my friends, on Tuesday morning learned just how sharp and painful a kitchen cabinet can be. I walked into that thing like a locomotive on a mission. Walk into an open kitchen cabinet hard enough, and they can leave a surprisingly deep and colorful dent in one's forehead. And I know that for a fact.

Now I still got a little reminder of this escapade over my left eye; and though I'm not a doctor or a nurse, I got a hunch I could end up with a little scar from that kitchen cabinet. And I don't care how miniscule it is--if I do, I'm just going to tell you right now...when I tell this story again, I'm changing it. Next time I explain this, I'm going to find some way to do it that involves Harley-Davidsons, mountain-climbing, and power tools...

But it's worth saying that there are a couple of lessons I've learned this week from my left eyebrow. One is to close the kitchen cabinets.

But here's the other lesson...life is much more difficult when it's live looking down than when it's lived looking up.

Today we heard part of the story of Elijah. And Elijah's looking down. So we get a tale of how God does some work on him.

Elijah was the first great prophet, and he was from a place called Tishbe. He was called Elijah the Tishbite. A prophet was a person in whom the Spirit of God rested especially powerfully. What made a prophet a prophet is that God spoke directly to them, and then they revealed to the people what God was saying and doing. Sometimes the prophetic word would be one of comfort or encouragement. But lots of times...especially when a bad king was on the throne...they were words of judgment.

In Elijah's time, there were two Hebrew kingdoms. The one in the north was called Israel. The one in the south was called Judah. Elijah lived and prophecied in the north. The king of the northern kingdom was a guy named Ahab, and his wife was named Jezebel. Ahab was one of those bad kings, and Jezebel was a bad queen. Neither of them were faithful to God. Instead of worshiping the Hebrew God, they were worshiping a pagan god called Baal.

Now here's why Elijah is in the predicament we read about this morning:

In I Kings 18, God tells Elijah to do battle with the prophets of this god called Baal that Ahab, Jezebel, and the people of Israel were worshiping. So Elijah challenges the prophets of Baal to the equivalent of a prophetic cage match...the God Yahweh versus the god Baal. The challenge is accepted. So at a place called Mount Carmel, with Ahab and the people present, the prophets of Baal set up an altar...complete with wood and a cow to sacrifice. "Pray to your god," Elijah says to the prophets, "and see if he'll light the fire." So the prophets of Baal do all the stuff prophets of Baal do—including self-flagellation. But the fire doesn't light; and after talking some trash, Elijah sets up an altar to the Hebrew God and in a dramatic show of faith, pours water over the whole thing. And when Elijah prays to Yahweh, the fire of the Lord fell from the sky and consumed the wood, the sacrifice, and even the rocks and dust; and because it was not a particularly gentle time in either human or Hebrew history, the prophets of Baal were put to the sword.

That's what's been going on. On God's behalf, Elijah has gone face-to-face with the powers of the world. And the Lord has proven victorious.

Now Ahab is the one who sits on the throne. But Jezebel is the one you really don't want to mess with. She's got a stiff backbone, a short temper, and a long memory. So when she finds out the entire structure on which her power rests has been undercut by this guy from Tishbe, she sends him a text that says something like this: "May I end up like one of those poor jokers you killed if by this time tomorrow I don't make *you* like one of those poor jokers you killed."

Elijah's faithful actions have offended the queen. He's done what he's supposed to do; but he's paying a price. He's not happy about it; and he's running for his life. He's in trouble and he's afraid. More than that, he's disappointed, and his tank is on empty, and he's what we call in the vernacular, "toast."

So he flees to the countryside; leaves his servant behind, sits down by himself under a bush, and there he tells God that he's had it, and is ready to give up.

So I'll ask you...have you ever had those moments when you feel as if you're about the equivalent of a snake's belly in a deep ditch? You know...nothing's going right; the results don't match up with the effort; we can't catch a break; the plans don't come together, or people don't respond the way we want them to respond, or we just can't seem to make it work. It's times like those that make our shoulders slump. Now we all know some people who seem to be immune to that experience, and who shrug off setbacks. But most people, it seems, have moments when one's soul is trouble; when looking down is a whole lot easier than looking up...and that's a difficult and painful place to be.

If you're there today, so is Elijah. And this story is about how God comes to us, and won't leave us in that place. Elijah's got nothing left—and knows it—and God comes. And should we forget anything else I say today, if we simply remember that it's in the place of surrender that miraculous things happen, that's enough.

Take a look at the story again when you get home, and we see that here in the wilderness God does at least three things for Elijah to help him come back.

The first thing is that the angel tells Elijah to eat something. There's an acronym called HALT...it stands for Hungry, Angry, Lonely, Tired. These are symptoms of those times when we may be tempted to only look down, and Elijah's got 'em all. So with Elijah, the Lord begins with basics: Have something to eat. A healthy meal brings strength.

But for us it's deeper than that...have something to eat; come to the table; be part of this meal that is of pure grace, to be nourished and refreshed. Come to the table. You know we're

always welcome here; and we'd probably all describe what happens at this table differently. But we all know that God shows up here, even when we may not be very present. So we get up and eat. This meal is the one thing we do in worship that is always the same, and we do it to remind ourselves that God is always the same, and always present.

The second thing is that God sends Elijah home...now that's my word, so let me fill it in a little bit. The geography in this story matters. Beersheba is the southernmost city in the territory of ancient Judah. Elijah is safe from Ahab and Jezebel there. He's not going to get hurt in Beersheba. He's in a different kingdom, and far away. As if that's not enough, of his own volition Elijah goes even farther to become even safer. But then, God tells him to go even farther...all the way to Mount Horeb. It's a long ways away. Forty days and forty nights it's going to take to get there.

Well, Horeb is another name for Sinai. And Mt. Sinai is where God gave the Law to Moses, and Israel became a people. Horeb is where it all really began, and that's where God tells him to go...back to Israel's home, on the mountain, in the desert. Go back to the beginning; go back to your roots; go back to the ancient home, where it's safe...which in this case, isn't Tishbe, the town where Elijah was born.

Now "home" is a concept more than it is a place. For some of us, our home might literally be where we live. But for some of us, our experience of home may be found in dwelling the scriptures, or saying our prayers, or connecting with a trusted friend, or being alone on a mountaintop. For each of us, it will be different.

But somewhere, we each got a home...the place where we are reminded of who we are, and who we belong to. That's why God sends Elijah to Horeb. And that's what "home"—however we define it—is for us.

Here's what's third: God teaches Elijah to listen. God tells Elijah to stand outside his cave there on Mt. Horeb, because the Lord is gonna show up. There's wind, and an earthquake, and fire. And then there's nothing.

Now y'all, let's do some deeper Bible here...because this is really fun. In Hebrew, this is a three word phrase that is difficult to translate. The noun can mean "sound," but it can also mean "voice." The first adjective used to modify that noun can mean "quiet" or "still," but it can also mean "silence." And the second modifier can mean "thin" or "fine." In other words, there are different ways to understand what it says here, and what happens here. It's ambiguous. The King James Version says it was a "still, small voice." What we read calls it "the sound of sheer silence." They're not exactly the same thing...maybe.

But what really matters here is that it's not after all the dramatic stuff that Elijah comes out of his cave. He comes out, and begins to look up and listen, only after the "still, small sound of sheer silence." And if you notice, the dialogue between Elijah and God is exactly the same here as it was when Elijah was still in his cave. Same question; same response. But the result is entirely different. This time, Elijah is ready to hear God say—and yes, this is a paraphrase, but it is what happens—"Go; you're not done, get back to it."

Silence is difficult for us. So is listening. When we're talking we are both in control and setting the agenda. When we're listening, we are not at all in charge. But wisdom reminds us that it is only in listening that we learn. So God's gift to Elijah is the space that comes with nothing. And like filling a vacuum, Elijah is sucked out of his cave onto that mountainside, and now stands tall. No more sleeping; no more cowering; no more hiding.

So a healthy meal, an invitation home, and listening to the sound of silence...three ways God touches Elijah; maybe three ways the Lord may touch us.

But let me say one final thing about this story. Everything that I just said is way too neat. The richness in this story—for us as individuals and as a people—is greater than what can be described in a fifteen minute sermon. This story isn't one that lends itself to a well-wrapped oratorical package. There's a whole lot more here than three points. It's too rugged, and it's too raw, it's too primitive, and it's even too dangerous to pretend that what's been said this morning is everything that needs to be said.

So if you're looking for a "good for the soul" thing to do this week, try this: Read this story...in fact, read all of I Kings 19...once each day, and let it roll over you. In other words...sit there with a cup of tea and some cookies; in your homiest place, whether it's in your home or somewhere else; read it, and then listen to the sheer silence, and see what God does for us.

All sorts of things might happen. It might even be we hear a question that is much more profound than it first appears to be: "What are you doing here?" And while it is the particular answer to that question is between God and us, it may be worth noting that Elijah, himself, never actually answers it. Instead, after the quiet what he does is go back, and get to it...just as he has been told to do; presumably, now looking up, and with his head held a little bit higher than it was before.