

**Sermon**  
**1 Kings 19:1-15a**  
**Corey F. O'Brien**

**“Unspectacular”**

**Let us pray**

**May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be always acceptable in thy sight Oh God, My strength and my redeemer.**

Elijah, he is larger-than-life. He is faithful, confident, and authoritative. He is able to bring about miracles through prayer, even raising the dead and calling fire down from heaven. He is able to confront a powerful king and accuse him of sin, and he dares to challenge a large crowd of people who follow the God Baal, and he out runs Ahab's chariot in a 17 mile race.<sup>1</sup> Yet in today's Scripture we find the prophet Elijah an intimidated, suicidal, self doubting yet self-righteous whiner who is on the run from God.

This passage is once again a story about "being called by God." For many of us, the idea of a calling is just for some people, like pastors and missionaries, and maybe doctors, nurses, and teachers. We think the voice of God, whether it's loud and clear or a still, small one, is reserved for people who are doing something considered special in our society. Something that serves God and humankind in a distinctive way and that almost requires an anointing. But, I think that call is a universal experience one that each and every one of us may feel at any given point in our lives, and I can guarantee you there will be times when you will want to run from that call. That is a completely acceptable and normal response. Even ordained pastors may want to run from a call. Let's face it,

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<sup>1</sup> Choon-Leong Seow, "1 Kings," in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, ed. Harriet Jane Olson (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1999), 126.

how many of us would want to accept the responsibility of feeling called by God to do something. Who would want such a job?

There's just too much risk and too little reward in speaking truth to power or in traveling a long hard road between one mountaintop experience to another. Yet each and every day this is what we do. No wonder one may want to run away and hide. But, we are not alone in this feeling and as we will see today in our Scripture passage, Elijah can certainly testify to that.

Elijah's troubles began on one mountain, Mount Carmel, where Elijah humiliates the prophets of the god Baal by setting up a contest between the power of Yahweh and the power of Baal. Of course the power of Yahweh is triumphant and Elijah succeeds in making the prophets of the Baal priesthood look ridiculous before the crowd. The people pay homage to Yahweh and then upon Elijah's orders they seize the prophets. Elijah then proceeds to kill 450 prophets of Baal that were supported by the Queen Jezebel.

In the beginning of our Scripture passage today we find Ahab rushing off to his wife, Jezebel. Jezebel is a fanatic devotee of Baal. Ahab tells Jezebel all the details about what Elisha has done to the priesthood of Baal. Jezebel in her rage sends out a message vowing to kill Elijah.

Basically, Jezebel runs Elijah out of town. So here's poor Elijah persecuted for doing God's work. His life is now threatened. He becomes frightened and flees. Elisha becomes the hunted man, and since he is only human, he does the human thing and runs. Elijah goes to Beersheba. At that time Beersheba was under Judah's control. So Elijah life is legally well beyond the reach of Jezebel. But still, he does not remain there. It is interesting that when he was on Mount Carmel, he relied on his servant to help him, but

now he leaves the young man in Beersheba, while he ventures alone into the wilderness beyond Judah. Elisha is seeking to be alone. We could conjecture from this about what it's like for any of us when we become depressed. Often we seek to be alone. So all alone Elijah has run out of steam, he is run down and he is depressed and after a day's journey alone in the wilderness he sits down under a solitary broom tree and he prays to God out of his depths: "It is enough; now, Oh Lord, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors." Exhausted, Elisha lies down under the broom tree and falls asleep. We can imagine that as he falls asleep, Elijah presumably hopes that he will wake up and not have to face any more challenges. Perhaps, this story may begin to sound very familiar to you as you look into your own lives.

But, back to the story. God has not given up on Elijah. He is awakened by an Angel, who provides food and water for Elijah. But Elisha is not ready yet for anything significant. He eats and lies down again. But the angel comes a second time bringing the things Elijah needs to make his way for the always significant 40 days and 40 nights journey. Which translates as, it's a really long way to go.

So Elijah makes his way to Horeb, otherwise known as Mt. Sinai, where God appeared to Moses. In The Lectionary Commentary, Lawrence Farris says that, "Nothing unimportant happens on mountains in Scripture.... what begins as a flight from tyrants soon becomes a journey to God led by God." When Elijah comes to that place he finds a cave in which he can spend the night. This is probably much like we would crawl into bed and pull the covers over our head so that we would not have to listen or respond but just give in to our feelings of despair.

Elijah isn't just running from Jezebel; He is running from his vocation, from where God wants him to be, and from what God wants him to do. When God asks Elijah, not once but twice, why he's there and not where he should be, Elijah answers both times with the same words with a response that could almost be read as a self righteous whine: "I've been working so hard and trying to do the right thing, and those people have totally abandoned you, and I'm the only one left whose faithful, and I'm all alone. So just kill me now." In Elijah's words we can hear the voice of a generalized oppression that sometimes results from stress, fear, and just being totally burned out and exhausted. The burned-out Elijah can only see the darkest side of his situation as he voices his ego centered complaint to God.<sup>2</sup>

In response to this despondent complaint Elijah is commanded to come out of the cave to witness a theophany which means the temporary revealing of God in some tangible form. So, now comes the wind, the earthquake, and the fire but, surprisingly Elijah does not venture out of his hiding place. Would you come out? Elijah does not come out of his hiding place until it's all over and he hears the "sound of sheer silence."

"Although he has always claimed to stand before the Lord, he fails to obey this time."<sup>3</sup> Elijah is unimpressed by the show. When God asks him, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" Elijah once again begins to whine and gives the same answer to the question as he did before. The psychology of this narrative is remarkable. When are we more likely to find ourselves alone and self justified than when we've run away from the tasks before us? Through his whining Elijah does just this and tries to justify himself. At this point God basically says listen, Elijah you need to get back to work; I have things I

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<sup>2</sup> Richard Nelson, *First and Second Kings*, ed. James Luther Mays, Interpretation (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1987), 126.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 126-127.

want you to accomplish, and you're the instrument for getting them done. Elijah is being re-commissioned by God. And that's just what the story is, a story not just about call but, about being re-commissioned by God. Just because we have been called once does not mean we will not be called again and again.

Scholars often concentrate on and disagree over the importance of the sheer silence in which God's voice is heard and we could spend days on that topic. However, I don't think that's what's really important in this passage. This is about a man who is called by God to do God's work, just as all of us may be called. This man does this work until he becomes burned out and depressed. When he becomes fearful and overwhelmed he does what most of us would do, he hides.

All of us will be called to do things in our lives at times when we feel too overwhelmed to be able to undertake them. So I want to propose a radical thought to you. The important thing is, to remember that we must take care of ourselves first, for only then will we have the strength to do the things that we are called to do. You may say to me that that's not the idea. God calls you to do something and you have to do it. I would agree with that, however, I would like to point out to you that when Elijah goes off alone into the dark night of his soul God does not give up on Elijah. The angel brings Elijah food, Elijah is protected in this journey. God does not become angry with Elijah. God even allows Elijah the time alone that he needs to rejuvenate himself.

Elijah does not come out into the wind, earthquake, and fire. He comes out when the storms are over, when there is silence. And although Elijah is still complaining when he hears God's Command to go back to work, he is psychologically ready to hear it. Elijah, then without a word, obeys God and returns to his work. It is in this unspectacular

way the passage ends. Elijah thought he was the last faithful man left standing, and yet the text goes on to speak of 7000 more faithful ones, and before long, Elisha becomes Elijah's companion and understudy.

So I say to you when you feel yourself overwhelmed or depressed, you are not alone. And if you need to run and hide for a bit to take care of yourself, you're also not alone. God will allow you the time you need. The call will return and you will be re-commissioned. And most importantly, you do not need to go it alone. For if anyone could have tried to go it alone, you would expect it to be Jesus. But Jesus did not try to go it alone; his first act of Ministry was to form a community. Each of us, as followers of Jesus, has a vocation, and there are things that we need to do in this world, no matter what great challenges we face. If Elijah got discouraged and even gave up, it's not surprising that we might do so too. But through the grace of God we are given the chance to recover and the opportunity to once again be called by God. And this, my friends, is spectacular. Amen

## Bibliography

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