

BETWEEN MTS. CARMEL AND HOREB

Sermon, June 26, 2016

Text: I Kings 19:1-18

I've always liked the quote by the late Reverend B. Clayton Bell, former pastor of the Highland Park Presbyterian Church in Dallas (and brother-in-law to Billy Graham) -- *"The church does not exist for the sake of simply gathering people together. Rather, the church is like a service station that exists for the purpose of getting cars back on the road. Spiritually, the church provides fuel, repairs damage, charges batteries, and cleans windshields for clearer vision so the people who come can go back into the world to serve their Lord and Savior."* (The analogy breaks down a bit, as most service stations these days are SELF-service stations where we wind up having to do everything for ourselves, which should NOT be the case in the church, but I digress!). In today's reading, it seems the prophet Elijah needed such a service station. He was running on empty, his spiritual battery was drained, his windshield was clouded and fogged by the tears and fears of depression, and he had no desire to go back out "on the road" again.

Last week when we left the prophet, he had just experienced a most stunning success. At that great contest on Mt. Carmel, Elijah's ministry convincingly demonstrated who was the true God. Eight hundred and fifty prophets and priests of the "god" Baal had prepared their altar and spent all day pleading with their god to accept their sacrifice, but there was no response. Then Elijah attended to the altar of the Lord, prayed a brief prayer, and the fire shot down from the sky ... the altar exploded into flames, the fire consumed the sacrifice and the altar and the water and even the dirt under the altar, the people saw it and fell on their faces, crying out, *"The Lord, He is God. The Lord, He is God."* So, in the past three years, through Elijah God had stopped the rain, challenged a king (and a witchy queen), called down fire from heaven, and then ended a three-year drought with a torrential downpour (just a brief aside: I don't want to get overly distracted by this, but I don't want to overlook that Elijah also arranged the execution of the prophets of Baal ... which at first sounds unduly harsh; however, we have to remember they had a whole lot of innocent blood on their hands).

In the last verse of Chapter 18 we're told the power of the Lord came upon Elijah as the rain got started and he ran a mini-marathon of some seventeen miles down Mt. Carmel all the way back to Jezreel, Ahab's palace in Samaria, getting there ahead of King Ahab who was riding in his chariot! As he sprinted along, I'm sure Elijah thought things were surely going to change for the better, now! However, when Ahab returned to the palace, he went right to Jezebel and told her about all that happened up on Mt. Carmel ... and we read that Jezebel was enraged, and sent word to Elijah that he'd be dead in 24 hours. You might think after all Elijah had just seen about the power and reality of God, that he might scoff and sing (with apologies to James Taylor), *"Oh, I've seen fire and I've seen rain! Who is this Jezebel compared to the God who can send fire down from the sky?"* But that's not what happened! When Elijah heard this, he fled for his life. We read that he went about a day's journey into the desert, then collapsed under a broom tree and prayed, *"This is enough, Lord. I've had it. Just kill me before Jezebel does. Take me home, now."*

This Elijah seems so different from the Elijah in the previous chapter. We see a despairing, rather than a daring, man. I think it was A.W. Tozer who wrote, *"Even the best of men are only men, at best."* Frightened, running away, overwhelmed, Elijah seems thoroughly burned out. Why? Well, other than being through an immensely challenging ordeal physical and emotionally, one reason might be that after all he has done, after all the risks he has taken, after all the hours, days, weeks and even years put into this effort, after all the conflict he has survived ... it seems nothing has really changed! The "government" is still run by this imperious witch Jezebel, and she is after him. And when the full force of government is after you, it is intimidating! Just ask anyone who's received a letter or call from the IRS. (I like the story about a pastor who received a call from the IRS. The IRS official said, *"One of your members stated on his income tax return that he gave \$5,000 to your church. Is that correct?"* The pastor replied, *"I don't have the records here, and I will have to check on it. But I'll say this -- if he didn't, he will."*) Another reason might be that it is not all that uncommon for depression to set in after a mountaintop experience; after experiences of intense joy and elation, feelings of dissatisfaction, blueness and melancholy often come (e.g., *post-partum depression, or post-wedding blues*).

We are always susceptible to this kind of intense and debilitating burnout after we've been on the top of Mt. Carmel experiencing some tremendous success. It might be a great accomplishment at the office, or you may have returned from a fantastic retreat, or have experienced the most uplifting worship service, or returned from the best vacation ever. But after the dust settles, and we take a hard look around and see nothing has really changed, we can become discouraged. We wonder if anything we are doing is really making any difference. It seems no matter what we do, our Jezebel, our tormenter, whatever it is ... is still there. Elijah laments, *"I was very zealous for the Lord God Almighty, but I am the only one left in Israel. The only one. I'm the only one who cares. I'm the only one who will stand up for what's right. I'm the only one fighting this battle. I'm the only one who _____ (fill in the blank)."* And so on.

Just as a brief aside, feeling as if you are the only one is not always a bad thing! In fact, it *can* be an affirmation of how God has uniquely gifted you! If God has uniquely gifted you (*and He has*), there is going to be something only YOU can do, something only YOU can see, something no one else will quite understand and/or do quite as well as you. There is one corner of the “tent” you really have nailed down like no one else can, something you can do like nobody else. This is your gift, something you have been uniquely gifted to see and/or do, and yes, sometimes it will be lonely because only you see it and/or only you can do it. This is not a bad thing! This is your calling, so do it! Others are gifted in other areas, but that doesn’t mean you are the only one who cares. You may be lonely, but as Elijah is about to be reminded, you are never alone.

Note that God is so tender with Elijah. God doesn't slap him around and give him a theological lashing. *“Come on, Elijah, snap out of it. Where's your faith? Buck up!”* Nor does He send His angel to say, *“So, Elijah, you want to talk about it?”* He doesn’t try to talk Elijah out of his despair. In the nearly thirty two years I've been in ordained ministry, I've become convinced no one is ever talked out of despair. I think the best we can do for someone who is despairing is to just try and *love* them back on their feet again, bit by bit. Be an angel, like the angel in this text, and just cook something for them. Bake them some bread. Send them a little note of appreciation. Like the angel in this passage, simply touch them. Let them know they are appreciated and not alone. Stick with them, like Ruth stuck with her bereaved mother in law (*later in the service we'll be referring to Ruth 1:16-18*). Do all those things in ways small and large to help them fill their tanks, charge their batteries, and clean their windshields. Get them taking just small steps in the right direction, to get them back on the road again, and more often than not the hope will come back to them along the way ... which is what God is doing here through His angel. *“Eat something, Elijah. Take care of yourself. Get some sleep. Eat some more. Rest some more. And now get ready, because you have a journey ahead of you.”* The angel lovingly and patiently helps Elijah charge his battery and fill his gas tank and clear his vision and gets him moving again, sending him to a different mountain, Mt. Horeb. So, for the next forty days Elijah journeys some three hundred miles to Mt. Horeb, also known as Mt. Sinai, where God appeared to Moses.

Geographically, Mt. Horeb is very different from Mt. Carmel. Today you can actually drive right up to the top of Mt. Carmel, just outside Haifa on the Mediterranean. It's an easy climb; I've been there. Mt. Horeb, though, is different. I've been there, too. It's in the middle of nowhere, just lots of brown, rocky nothingness in the remote, dry, hot Sinai wilderness. The road to Mt. Horeb is long and lonely and isolated. Spiritually, Mt. Horeb is very different from Mt. Carmel. Anyone can have faith on the mountaintop of Carmel, the place where faith is hot, dramatic, visible, intense, convincing. Mt. Carmel is a full church on Sunday morning, with everybody around you saying, *“The Lord, He is God. The Lord, He is God.”* The journey to Mt. Horeb, though, is where you find yourself when you are all alone with your fears ... isolated, full of self-doubt, overwhelmed with difficulties. I think it's interesting to note, though, where God's people get substantial direction for their lives in the Old Testament ... not on the flashy, miraculous, dramatic Mt. Carmel, but on the dry, lonely, isolated Horeb.

There on Mt. Horeb, all alone with his fears, a voice calls Elijah to stand up. *“Go out, and stand on the mountain before the Lord, Elijah. Stand up in the midst of the doubts you have about God's involvement in your life and in this world. Stand up in the midst of your anxieties about your loneliness, about your health and your kids and your career. Stand, for God is about to come by.”* Then, *“A great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind. And after the wind, an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake. And after the earthquake came a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper.”* There's much that can be said about this powerful imagery, but time won't allow ... but when Elijah heard this voice, he knew he was in the presence of God. And there, in that lonely place, the weary but faithful prophet learned who was really in charge ... and it wasn't Jezebel.

In the little time I have remaining, I simply want to point out in the final verses that Elijah learned God was, and is, at work all along ... in these verses we see God at work in the providential ordering of history, in the process of political and religious succession, and in preserving a righteous remnant of seven thousand quiet faithful. *Seven thousand* people have remained faithful to God in the face of intense persecution and mortal danger during these recent years, this out of a nation historians believe to have had a population of approximately one million, roughly the same population as Rhode Island today. God says to Elijah in so many words (verse 18), *“You are NOT alone. There are a lot of faithful and good people you don't know about, Elijah. They are out there; they may be obscure, unorganized, inarticulate, each one getting along as best they can. They may not be as gifted as you, but they are there! They need to be braced up, Elijah. Your boldness and your faithfulness and your tenacity has emboldened and encouraged them; it has charged their batteries, it has cleared their windshields, it has given them fresh vision and filled their tanks and they want to get GOING again. Your faithful example has reassured them and keeps them going. Get to know them, and you will be encouraged as well!”*

And I believe God says the same to all of us in the “service station” church. We are not alone, either. So, let's do what we can to fulfill our calling to fill empty tanks, charge batteries, give people clearer vision, and encourage people to go back out there on the road again, driving in the way of life. Stay faithful, encourage each other, and know that our faithfulness and boldness and example can and will encourage others, as well.