

In the Name of Jesus. Amen.

“What are you doing here, Elijah?” the Lord asks Elijah, who is hiding out in a cave.

Elijah answers, “I am the only person left who is faithful to you, and they are seeking to kill me...”

...Don't you feel like you just walked in to the middle of a movie? You have to wonder, how did the great prophet Elijah end up hiding out in a cave, afraid for his life? Before we go further, let's do the “prequel” to this story.

Israel's King Ahab, not one of Israel's good kings, marries princess Jezebel. It's one of those arranged, political marriages between two countries who have much to lose if they are not on good terms with one another. Jezebel came to Israel not only as a princess and eventually queen, but she was also a priestess of Baal. God had commanded Israel, of course, to worship no other gods but Yahweh. But, pursuing an ancient form of political correctness, King Ahab not only builds a temple for Baal, he allows Jezebel to bring a large entourage of priests and prophets of Baal not only into Israel, but into the palace, where she openly worships him. Baal worship spreads throughout Israel, if not in place of Yahweh, alongside of Yahweh.

Elijah confronts King Ahab, and tells him God is angry and will punish Ahab, Jezebel, and all of Israel for following King Ahab's idolatrous lead. Ahab, of course, being King, is not accustomed to being confronted. God tells Elijah to flee from Israel, as Israel suffers more than two years of drought and famine.

After those two years, God tells Elijah to return to Israel and announce the end of the drought. Elijah does so, saying that Ahab has brought all of this upon Israel by allowing the worship of false gods. To make his point, Elijah proposes a test of the powers of Baal and of Yahweh the God of Israel. What happens next is definitely movie-worthy:

The people of Israel, plus 450 prophets of Baal, and 400 prophets of Asherah (Baal's consort) are summoned to Mount Carmel. Two altars are built, one for Baal and one for Yahweh. Wood is laid on the altars. Two oxen are slaughtered and cut into pieces; the pieces are laid on the wood. Elijah then invites the priests of Baal to pray for fire to light the sacrifice. They pray from morning to noon without success. Elijah ridicules their efforts. The priests of Baal respond by cutting themselves and adding their own blood to the sacrifice. They continue praying until evening without success.

Elijah now orders that the altar of Yahweh, and its sacrifice, be drenched with twelve

barrels of water. He asks God to accept the sacrifice. Fire falls from the sky, igniting the water-soaked sacrifice. The great crowd of people who witness this immediately begin worshiping Yahweh. Elijah seizes the moment and orders the death of the prophets of Baal. Rain returns to Israel, the end of the drought and famine.

Jezebel is enraged that Elijah had ordered the deaths of her priests. Later Elijah prophesies about Jezebel's death, because of her idolatry and other sins. That pushes Jezebel over the edge. She orders Elijah's death, who flees and travels for forty days and forty nights, to Mount Horeb and seeks shelter in a cave – where we find him this morning, explaining to God why he is hiding.

“Go outside,” the Lord commands. “I am about to pass by.”

Before Elijah even has a chance to obey, the Lord comes to him, not in a spectacular appearance of “fire and fury”; but in a “sound of sheer silence,” or “A still, small voice.”

Elijah hides his face in some combination of awe and fear, and obediently walks just outside the cave, and stops.

“What are you doing **HERE**, Elijah?” the Lord asks.

Elijah repeats the same answer he gave the first time. “I am your only faithful prophet left, and now they're trying to kill me.”

But God doesn't accept Elijah's answer. God has asked Elijah why he is **HERE** because **HERE** – hiding out and licking his wounds – is not where Elijah is supposed to be. Here, we see not Elijah the heroic prophet, but Elijah having a pity-party – and still, God comes to Elijah right where he is.

On the contrary, in this morning's gospel, we see Jesus come to his disciples not in divine silence. Rather, Jesus *leaves* the silence of his prayerful solitude where he had prayed and grieved the murder of his cousin, John the Baptist, and comes to his disciples in the midst of a frightening storm. These fellows were not only in trouble, they were in *big* trouble.

No one would doubt that the disciples believe in God, that they are faithful disciples of Jesus. But what we see here is the same thing we see with Elijah. They simply did not expect God to be there to help them in their trouble. So non-expectant were they that even when they saw him they didn't recognize him. They think he's a ghost! They seem to assume that the storm they are in is either stronger than anything Jesus could do to help, or that Jesus simply wasn't the kind of God to bother with little crafts like theirs in big storms; little, ordinary lives like theirs in big trouble as expressed in the fisherman's prayer: “O God, Thy sea Is so great and my boat is so small.”

As with Elijah, Jesus doesn't chide them or scold them or leave them alone to their fear. Jesus immediately identifies himself – “Courage!” Jesus says, “It's me! Don't be afraid!”

Peter, typically, instead of asking for help to survive the trouble they're in, asks for a little proof: “Lord, if it *is* you, let ME walk over the raging sea, too.”

Why is it, do you think, that so often, when we are in danger or trouble, instead of asking God for help, for wisdom, for guidance, why do we start telling God what to do? Meanwhile, the storm rages, Jesus is with us, holding out his hand and we don't grasp it. We grasp at other things instead, things which often make things worse rather than better.

When Peter steps out of the boat, becomes frightened and begins to sink into the raging sea, *notice that Jesus catches Peter anyway, even without Peter's asking*, saying (sadly, I think) “You of little faith, why did you doubt?”

Many of us need to see and feel the warmth and strength of a human hand when we are lonely or afraid or in trouble, in order to be able to recognize that it is really God's hand that gives us support and courage in our struggles and storms. Occasionally, it is the pastor's hand Christians feel and hold. But have no doubt, more often than not, it is *other believers' hands* – friends from church, family members, or Christian friends we have met elsewhere, that we reach for. Jesus certainly knows this need of ours, or he wouldn't have set God's majesty aside to live among us as a human being; and Jesus wouldn't have called his believers into community with one another, or entrusted us sinful and imperfect believers into one another's care.

One question which comes out of these two stories is this: Just who do you think you are? We usually ask that of someone who is seeming a little too big for her britches. But I am asking it another way this morning: Who do you think you are? Do you think you are “just” a nothing-special person of whom God expects little? Do you think you are just a tiny speck of a boat on the vast sea of eternity whom God barely acknowledges much less cares about? Do you think you are someone so “ordinary” that God couldn't *possibly* work through you to bring comfort or courage to the life or faith of another person.

God sends you, just like he sent Elijah; just like he sent his disciples – sometimes *into* a stormy situation, but always with the assurance, “Courage! It's me, the Lord. Don't be afraid.”

Faith is the willingness to surrender ourselves to the Lord, confident that our trust is not misplaced; confident that the Lord will sustain us in all things, even in death. It is *most particularly* in the midst of life's storms that we experience God's divine presence;

it is when we are sinking that God lifts us up, often without our asking; sometimes even when we don't recognize it as God. Refrain from a song:

Sometimes God calms the storm
And other times God calms His child.

Even when our faith is small, even when we are in hiding, or when we are afraid, we take our place right there with Elijah, and with Jesus' disciples who ran away on the night he was arrested. God comes to us and freely gives us a share of the Lord's divine power which gives us courage in the face of the forces of evil; which gives us peace in the midst of storms; peace that only Christ can give; the peace which truly passes all human understanding.

Perhaps God is asking you this morning: "Why are YOU here? Don't be afraid. It is I, the Lord." Amen.

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