

## **“What Are You Doing Here?”**

Elijah was disgusted. He was sick and tired of being a prophet. It had earned him nothing but contempt and abuse and now it was about to get him killed. Jezebel's storm troopers were hot on his trail with orders to shoot on sight. So he crawled into cave on Mount Horeb and hid there. If he'd had an electric blanket he would have turned the dial up to “9.” Elijah was finished. Kaput. Through.

Sound familiar? Have you ever wanted to just crawl into a hole and hide? My guess is that you probably have at one time or another. I certainly have. Maybe you were caught in a sin you were trying to hide and you were terrified of what the consequences might be. Maybe you had just been terminated from your job and you had to go home and tell your wife and kids that you'd been fired. Maybe you had just found out that you had cancer. Whatever the case, I'll bet there have been times in your life when you felt like crawling into a hole and giving up—times when you didn't even feel like praying. Maybe you're feeling that way right now.

Today's Old Testament lesson about Elijah shows us how God comes to us at times like that, times when we've hit rock bottom. How he enters into the holes we've crawled into and lifts us out. How he comes to us when we feel like we're walking through the valley of the shadow of death and leads us back into the sunlight. Listen to how he did this for Elijah because it will show you exactly how he will do it for you.

When God came to Elijah in the cave the first thing he did was ask him a question. It's the same question he has for us when we crawl off and try to hide. He simply asks, “what are you doing here, Elijah?” “What are you doing here?” And Elijah's answer is basically the same one we usually give. Something like, “God, why have you let this happen to me?” “I trusted you and you abandoned me and left me here to suffer.” “how could you do that to me, God?”

Isn't our ability to blame God for our troubles amazing? When we come out on top, we congratulate ourselves. When we come out on the bottom, we blame God. A famous jockey by the name of Willie Shoemaker once said, “when you win a race they give credit to the horse; when you lose, they blame the jockey.” When we're winning we want all the glory. When we're losing we look for someone to blame. Real objective, aren't we? Now watch what God does—because this is how he deals with us when we get a case of the “Elijah blues.” He says, “Come on out of the cave, Elijah—I've got something I want to show you.”

Then God displays his awesome power. He stirs up a hurricane to show his power over the air. He summons an earthquake to show his power over the earth. He unleashes bolts of lightning to show that he is the source of all energy. He shows Elijah that he is lord over all creation and that he forces all things to serve his divine purposes. God is love—but he is also infinite power.

I'll never forget the first time I went to see Niagara Falls.

When I was about five miles south of the falls, I pulled over and got out of my car to take a picture of the Niagara River. As I was focusing my camera I suddenly realized that I could hear the sound of the falls in the distance—the roar of millions of tons of water plunging down onto the rocks below. When I looked in that direction I could see a cloud of mist rising up. I thought, “what incredible power—power that could be heard and seen from five miles away! And yet it was nothing compared with the power God holds in the palm of his hand.

So the first message God had for Elijah was: “consider my power, Elijah. Consider my power.” And that is the first thing God wants us to think about when we're in the pits. He wants to remind us that all the power in the universe is in the palm of his hand and he is willing to use that power to help us. But in case you didn't notice, Elijah declined the invitation. Rather than go out to the mouth of the cave to see the fireworks; he stayed inside to mope and sulk. He must have heard the turbulence outside but it didn't draw him out of his hiding place. He already had Jezebel's soldiers after him and maybe he figured he didn't need a hurricane and an earthquake and lightning on top of that. In any case, at this point the bottom line for Elijah was: “storm one; Elijah zero.” But then, having unleashed signs of his power, God comes to Elijah in a different way. He comes to him in a gentle breeze. He comes to Elijah with a quiet invitation—the same invitation he offers to all who are hiding in caves of fear and guilt and self-pity and despair. He whispers, “what are you doing here, Elijah?” The same words as before, but now with a completely different meaning. The first time God spoke them, they seemed like an accusation. “What are you doing here Elijah?” Sounded like, **“why aren't you doing your job? What kind of slacker are you anyway?”** But now God's power and wrath have done their work: like it or not, Elijah has regained a proper perspective. He is Elijah and God is God. And now, Elijah is ready to be renewed. Now, “what are you doing here, Elijah?” Means, “why hide in the bowels of the earth when you can be with me, Elijah? Come on out! Come back to your Father!” And Elijah came out of the cave. He stood up and shrugged of his fear and self-pity and shame and despair and was ready to return to the work god had set out for him to do. He was ready to shoulder his cross once again and serve his Lord.

Isn't Elijah's little "side trip" one that we all take from time to time as we walk through the wilderness of this world? Sometimes we find ourselves strolling through green pastures and we can feel God walking right beside us. We can see him shining through the beauty of creation and sense him breathing his spirit into our lives. At times like that we can scarcely believe that life can be so full of joy and peace. And then there are those **other** times. Times when the storms rage around us *and within us*. When the road we're traveling seems to be headed toward a dead end. When dark clouds hover over our heads and it's impossible to imagine that there are blue skies and sunshine above them. When we feel utterly alone and even praying seems useless. Who among us hasn't lain awake in the middle of the night, wondering how things could possibly get worse than they already are? Another one of God's prophets, a man named Jeremiah felt that way as he wept over the ruins of Jerusalem after the Babylonians had reduced it to rubble. He cried out, "I am a man who has seen affliction by the rod of his wrath, he has driven me away and made me walk in darkness rather than light; indeed he has turned his hand against me again and again, all day long." Luther felt that way at times. In a letter to a friend he wrote: "I can't tell you how many times in my life I have been brought to darkest despair. The devil assails me with taunts like, 'can you alone be right?' and it was a long time before I learned that such despair is nigh unto grace!" When we are in darkest despair—**that is when we are closest to God**. When evil circumstances press hardest upon us—that is when we can drink most deeply of God's renewing love. When we have no where else to turn, when we have given up on ourselves and everything else, then we can turn to God with all our heart and know that he will help. As he came to Elijah in the cave, he will come to us in the dark night of our souls. As David said, "the Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit....he will bind up our wounds; he will heal us."

So the next time you feel abandoned and utterly alone—when you've have tested your strength, and it has failed you. When you've dared the world to do its worst, and it has. When you've worshipped everything under the sun and it has failed to make you happy or keep you safe. Then remember God's infinite power and his gentle whisper and cast your trust on the only one who will never fail you. And remember the words he speaks to sinners like you and me: "come to me all you who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light." One day a little over a hundred years ago a man named Horacio Spafford received a telegram from his wife, who was on a ship bound for England. The ship bearing her and their four children had gone down at sea. She was saved, but their four children had drowned. He immediately embarked on a ship to go to be with his wife in England and when his ship came to the place where her ship had sunk, he wrote a hymn that begins this way:

When peace, like a river, attendeth my way  
when sorrows like sea billows roll  
whatever my lot, thou has taught me to say  
it is well, it is well, with my soul.

Amen.