

Elijah's journey:  
*sometimes you just want to go hide in a cave*

When I was little the word 'desert' always conjured up images of the Sahara – vast, unending dunes of windswept sand, a place that was surely as inhospitable to life as the surface of Mars. But then my father was transferred to Arizona, and I discovered the Sonoran desert with its saguaro and a hundred other kinds of cacti that were both beautiful and terrible at the same time, and, actually, it's not a bad place to live if you can stand the heat. And then when I was in seminary I found myself in the wilds of southern Israel – dry, rocky, and unless you were a goat or a lizard, completely uninhabitable.

Deserts – dry, barren, rugged wildernesses – can take all kinds of forms. They don't look the same, they don't feel the same, except for one thing – it's a tough place to try to make a life for yourself.

Last week we looked at Abraham's journey through the wilderness, the kind of journey that God, or at least life, puts us on. This is the kind of wilderness where we find ourselves stripped of a home base, a safe and secure place to be, and set adrift. It's not a journey or a wilderness we have chosen for ourselves.

But Elijah is a different story. He took off. He was scared. He was overwhelmed. And he bolted. Elijah was like a high-wire artist who gets 3/4 of the way across the Grand Canyon and then looks down and realizes just how dangerous and impossible what he is doing is, and panics. He gives up; calls it quits. *I just can't do it anymore; it's too much.* And Elijah curls up underneath one of those scrubby trees in the terrible barren wilderness of southern Israel, and prays that God would let him die.

The irony is that Elijah had already done what he was saying was too hard and too overwhelming and too scary for him to do. He didn't bolt at the prospect of a daunting task that he felt like God was asking him to do. He bolted when he about had things wrapped up and was ready to put his feet up a while and take a well-deserved break. After David, and if you don't really count Solomon, there were really only two good kings in Israel and Judah for the next 400 years. Those were the years of the prophets, the men God called to grab the kings by the neck tie and shake them until their teeth rattled to be good and sure they had their attention, and then remind them of their job description: that they served only at God's good pleasure, and their job wasn't self-glorification or the accumulation of riches and power, but to lead the people in living out their covenant relationship with God in the land that God had promised Abraham.

Ahab was one of the worst of the kings. Back in chapter 16 we are told that "Ahab did what was evil in this sight of the Lord," which was what the author said about all of the kings, actually, but then he went on to say that "Ahab did more to provoke the anger of the Lord...than had all the kings of Israel who were before him."

So Elijah went to Ahab and told him there would be a draught; Ahab would not be able to do the most very basic thing a ruler is supposed to do, provide his people with food. And sure enough, no rain fell for three years. Not a drop. And Ahab was so livid he searched high and low for

Elijah so he could beat him up, run him through with a sword, trample him with a thousand chariots, and then start all over again. It's pretty hard to command the respect of your people and live high on the hog at their expense when they are all starving to death.

And then if that weren't humiliating enough, Elijah hunts him down and proposes a showdown. A public drubbing of Ahab and his gods, actually, although Ahab couldn't have known that at the time. For the life of me I can't figure out why Ahab agreed to it, but as he was told, he assembled all of Israel at Mount Carmel, along with the 450 prophets of Baal, and the 400 prophets of Asherah, and Elijah challenged their gods to a test: produce fire. A simple task for a deity, really. So the prophets of Baal and Asherah raised their hands and called out to their gods and begged and pleaded and finally whined some, and even shed a little blood just to prove they were serious, but nothing. No fire. And when it was his turn, just to rub a little extra salt in their wounds, Elijah douses his firewood with water, prays a short, simple prayer to the Lord, and his wood and offering explode in a blaze. The Israelites realize they have been fools and do in the false prophets, Ahab is defeated, or at least humiliated, and at long last, rain comes to Israel. It is a dramatic moment of professional triumph for Elijah. After three long years he has gotten his message through to Ahab, and turned the hearts of Israel back to their God. His mission has been accomplished.

But then Ahab goes home and casually tells his horribly evil wife, Jezebel about his day, and she sends Elijah a threatening note. I have no doubt she would do all of the things she said she would do to Elijah, but it's not like his life hadn't been in danger before. Ahab had gone after him plenty of times, too. This was the straw that broke the camel's back, though. He freaked. He went belly up. After all he had been through, after the stunning display of God's power that he had seen that day, after being told there would be three years of drought, and there was, after being told that it would rain again, and it did, after being protected from Ahab's wrath for three years, Elijah collapses in a puddle of self-doubt and despair and fatigue and panic and he begs God not just to release him from his charge, but to just put him out of his misery.

It would be a laughable scene if it weren't so familiar, wouldn't it? You don't have to be called to defeat the prophets of Baal, or stand up to monarchs to be completely overwhelmed and undone by the task that God has given you to do. Moses made it through his confrontation with Pharaoh and harrowing and miraculous escape from Egypt only to fall apart when he had to deal with a million people fussing at him because they didn't like the menu and they were wearing him out. But God's call isn't only to 'religious' jobs, like leading a million indentured servants to freedom, or doing mission work in a place that doesn't have running water. Maybe it's your job that's got you ready to bolt, or the task of caring for your family. Maybe it's being a crusader for the rights of the voiceless and oppressed, or the environment. Maybe you've been trying to meet too many demands with too few resources – personal, monetary, even time – and you've finally looked down and realized how impossible and frightening and overwhelming what you've been doing is.

Usually when we read this story we jump right to the end, to the part where God isn't in the wind or the earthquake or the fire, but in the still small voice, and we skip right over something amazing, something we can hardly bring ourselves to believe: that God cuts us way more slack than we do ourselves. When things get overwhelming and we are afraid of failing, or afraid we

can't do the job that seems to have been given to us to do, that it's all just too much and all we want to do is go off and hide in some cave somewhere, usually a little voice inside our heads kicks in, a voice that we tell ourselves is God talking to us, and tells us *don't be such a wimp! Get back out there and do the work I gave you and quit whining. So, it's a little hard, get over it. Pick up your cross, remember. Give up your life! Suffer! That's what Jesus called you to do? Now get back to work!*

It's the voice of God the drill sergeant that lives in our head, but that god is no more real than the gods of Baal or Asherah. Elijah runs away in fear and doubt, forgetting all that God has done, curls up in a ball, and what does God do? He touches him, not smites him. He brings him room service! Some chicken soup and homemade bread and a visit. Compassion. Tenderness. A good, long rest. And God gives in. God lets him off the hook. He doesn't scold him for his lack of faith or fearfulness, or for being whiney. He doesn't compare him to Paul, or Helen Keller or Martin Luther King and tell him to suck it up, that he doesn't know what a hard life looks like. He relents. He backs off. He gets Elijah help, a replacement. He doesn't have to do it alone anymore. He doesn't have to shoulder the burden all by himself.

Every one of us here wants to please God. You wouldn't be here otherwise. Each and every one of you wants to do what God wants you to do, to follow the path that God has for you. Even if the path is a difficult one. Even if that journey takes you to some really hard places and demands a lot of you – more than you think you can shoulder. And I wish that you all could be privy to some of the stories of faith and commitment I have heard from you when it seems like what you have been asked to bear or do is too much. You have bourn witness to God's great power and faithfulness and inspired me more than you know.

But sometimes, sometimes when the road has been long and exhausting and the battles have been hard fought, our feet of clay feel like they can't carry us another step and we're ready to quit, to run away and hide. One day it's "well done, good and faithful servant," and the next it's "oh ye of little faith." At least, that's what we feel like God is saying about us. But I can't think of a single incident where God told someone to suck it up and get back in there. Like the Psalmist said, God remembers that we are frail, and made of dust, and sometimes what we need is a good long rest, some nourishment, and someone to take the burden off our shoulders.

God promises that he will give us everything we need to do what we have been called to do, but when we forget that, when we are overwhelmed with doubt and fear, God is gentle and compassionate, and offers rest for our weary souls and bodies.