

Waiting for God
I Kings 19: 1-15
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First Federated Church
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One of the most fascinating stories in the Bible is that of the Old Testament prophet Elijah. This morning's lesson gives us a snippet of his story. It is set in the northern kingdom of Judah during the reign of Ahab and Jezebel in 9th century B.C. It is interesting to note that historians say that politically and economically their reign was an unmitigated success. The biblical writers, though, viewed it as anything *but* a success. The kingdom, in their eyes, was morally bankrupt. Faith in the Yahweh God who led the Hebrews out of Egyptian slavery had become watered down by the culture around it. As far as the biblical writers were concerned, the nation had sold their soul.

Against this backdrop Elijah issued a challenge to the god of the culture; a fertility deity known as Baal. He challenged the prophets of Baal to a "smack down." Each was to offer a bull to their respective God. The God that consumed the offering with fire would be the true god.

As the story is told both Elijah and the prophets of Baal sacrificed a bull and place it on an altar. Both dug a trench around their respective altar. The prophets of Baal poured so much oil over their sacrifice that it filled the trench. They prayed and danced and shouted incantations. Nothing. Nothing happened. Finally they fell exhausted.

Now it was Elijah's turn. He poured water rather than oil over his sacrifice. Water ran into the trench and Elijah lifted his eye and arms heavenward. He prayed to the One who had led the Hebrews out of Egypt and almost immediately fire swooped down from heaven, consuming his offering as well as the offering and the prophets of Baal.

When word got back to Jezebel about what had happened, she vowed that Elijah would not live to see the morning. Elijah, fresh off of one of his greatest victories, is frightened by a *mere* queen's threat of revenge. The great prophet runs for his life and ultimately seeks refuge in a cave. It was in the cave that that Word of the LORD comes to him and feeds and speaks to him.

From this story we can take three insights into our own lives. **First, our deepest valley experiences often come on the heels of our greatest victories.** We retreat into our own little caves.

Moses came off of the mountain top to see his brother Aaron and the nation-in-the-making dancing around a golden calf—which, by the way, was the symbol for the fertility god Baal. Disappointment is a part of life. Life is not easy. Perhaps we are given mountain top experiences to help carry us through the low spots of life. Perhaps we are given mountain top experiences to remind us that "though we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, Thou are with us." God's love for us never lets us go no matter what hardships and struggles we face in life.

Second, just as the Presence of the LORD fed, sustained and directed Elijah, so we are fed, sustained and directed. The sacrament of communion reminds us it is God who carries us through life. When we feel as if we cannot go on, God gives us the strength to carry on. The sacraments remind us that we are claimed by God, owned by

God, cared for by God and given the strength, courage and insight to be faithful disciples in our individual callings.

Third, God speaks to us in ways that we often do not recognize or expect.

Elijah was told to stand at the mouth of his cave and wait for the glory of God. It did not appear in the earthquake, nor in the wind, nor in a fire—all things that in the ancient world were signs of God's presence. It occurred, rather, in a still small voice. A still small voice that asked "What are you doing here?" The still small voice then told Elijah to get out of the cave, that he is not alone but that there is a whole community of faith of which he is a part.

I believe that God often speaks to us in the circumstances of our lives, not necessarily in the spectacular. God still calls us to be part of a larger community of faith because the work of the Kingdom is too big for any one individual or even group.

As we go about our faith journeys, we need to listen for the still small voice in our own lives. We need to remember that our greatest victories in life may leave us vulnerable to our greatest depths of despair. We need to remember that God gives us the things that we need, at the moment we need them, to be faithful to the tasks at hand. But we also need to remember that if we stumble, God's love will never let us go. It will pick us up and help us carry on.

To God be the glory. Amen.