

**Sermon – Elijah**  
**Sunday July 17, 2022**

If you're feeling heavy in spirit, if you're overwhelmed with life, if you're sad and discouraged, this message is for you.

- Maybe it's your work. You have tight deadlines, tough challenges and long hours.
- Maybe it's your health. You can't do the things you used to do and you're not sure what this means for and your loved ones.
- Maybe it's your children. They're struggling and you don't know what to do.
- Maybe it's the rising prices, supply chain issues and the violence in the world.
- Maybe you feel isolated, anxious and depressed.

Is anyone there right now? What do you do when you're discouraged and burned out?

We're in a series called *Faith Heroes: Lessons to Help You Face a Crisis*. We're looking at faith heroes in the Old Testament to learn how to find help to face the crises in our life.

What's encouraging is that these heroes weren't spiritual superstars. They were human beings just like us who overcame their challenges. How did they do it? They learned to put their trust in God.

And when you learn to put your trust in God, God will give you everything you need to face the crisis in your life.

Today, we're going to look at the story of a Elijah. Like many of you, he loved God. He had experienced God's faithfulness and his power in incredible ways – and yet Elijah struggled with discouragement and depression.

Now Elijah had to confront a king named Ahab. Ahab and his wife Jezebel had established the worship of Baal as the official religion in Israel. But Elijah has a plan.

He says, meet me on Mount Carmel. Bring the prophets of Baal and we'll have a challenge. So they set up two altars. The prophets of Baal call on their God. They dance around the altar. But nothing happens.

Then Elijah, calls on his God and a great fire comes down from heaven and burns up the sacrifice. The people are in awe. They seize and slaughter the false prophets. Elijah believes this decisive victory will turn God's people back to God.

But it doesn't.

**Now Ahab told Jezebel everything Elijah had done and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword. <sup>2</sup> So Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah to say, "May the gods deal with me, be it ever so severely, if by this time tomorrow I do not make your life like that of one of them."**

**<sup>3</sup> Elijah was afraid<sup>[a]</sup> and ran for his life. When he came to Beersheba in Judah, he left his servant there, <sup>4</sup> while he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness. He came to a broom bush, sat down under it and prayed that he might die. "I have had enough, LORD," he said. "Take my life; I am no better than my ancestors." <sup>5</sup> Then he lay down under the bush and fell asleep. (1 Kings 19:1-5)**

Elijah completely falls apart. He spirals into a deep depression.

- What just happened?
- How am I on the run after this great victory?
- Didn't I serve God faithfully?
- Didn't I do everything I was supposed to do?

Elijah is disillusioned. Maybe some of you are there now.

Many commentators think that this is just an editing problem. They say it's impossible for someone who's just had such a spiritual high to sink to such a low.

But God put Elijah's story in the Bible. Why? Because he wants you to know, You can love me and still struggle with depression and disillusionment.

What I want to do today is share three lessons from Elijah's story that can help you face your crisis.

Our story begins with Elijah sitting under a broom tree.

Have you ever been depressed and had a Christian friend tell you, Just have faith?

While this is certainly true, when Elijah is depressed how does God deal with him?

He doesn't scold him. He doesn't lecture him. He doesn't tell him to have faith.

What does he do? He touches him and makes him lunch.

**All at once an angel touched him and said, "Get up and eat." <sup>6</sup> He looked around, and there by his head was some bread baked over hot coals, and a jar of water. He ate and drank and then lay down again. (1 Kings 19:5-6)**

What does this tell us about God?

It tells us that God is a gentle God. He's a compassionate God. He's a God who understands us.

**As a father has compassion on his children,  
so the LORD has compassion on those who fear him;  
<sup>14</sup>for he knows how we are formed,  
he remembers that we are dust. (Psalm 119:13-14)**

You and I are spiritual beings. This means we need to pray and worship.

We're also moral beings. This means we need to confess our sins to God.

But we're also physical and relational beings. This means that sometimes what we need most is:

- The company of a good friend.
- Time to sleep-in and rest.
- Eating your favourite foods like shawarma.
- Going for a walk in nature
- Reading a good book.
- Listening to music.

God understands this. Why? Because he made us. He affirms our humanity and he gives us permission to care for ourselves and for others in the same way.

**<sup>7</sup>The angel of the LORD came back a second time and touched him and said, “Get up and eat, for the journey is too much for you.” <sup>8</sup>So he got up and ate and drank. Strengthened by that food, he traveled forty days and forty nights until he reached Horeb, the mountain of God. <sup>9</sup>There he went into a cave and spent the night. (1 Kings 19:7-9)**

Elijah thinks that after his first encounter with God, he’s good to go. He thinks his journey’s over but it’s only just begun.

So where’s Elijah going? He’s going to Mount Horeb.

Mount Horeb isn’t a familiar name. But many of us know it by its other name – Mount Sinai. What’s the significance of Mount Sinai?

For the people of God, Mount Sinai is where you meet God when you need him the most.

- It’s where God called Moses from the burning bush.
- It’s where God established his covenant with his people.
- It’s where when Moses was afraid, God showed him his presence and told him that he would go with him.

Like Moses, what Elijah needs more than anything is a personal encounter with God. And he knows that if there’s any place on earth where he can meet God, it’s Mount Horeb.

But there’s a problem.

Mount Horeb is surrounded by deserts. Not just two or three of them, but six deserts. So in order to meet God, Elijah has to journey through the desert.

Deserts are dry and lonely places. They’re full of dangers and rough living conditions. When we think of deserts, we think of suffering and isolation. We want to avoid them at all costs.

But in the Bible, deserts have a special place in God’s plans. The Hebrew word for desert is *midbar*. It’s related to another Hebrew word *medaber*. In the Hebrew language, there are no vowels. This means that words with the same consonants are closely connected.

So the word *midbar* which means desert, is connected to the word *medaber*. What's the meaning of the word *medaber*? It means *to speak*.

Because the desert is the place where God speaks. In the desert:

- God strips away our false self
- God reveals the beliefs and practices that have served us well in the past.
- God exposes our idols and our need for distraction.
- God confronts us with our pain and our fears.

But as these things are stripped away, we hear God's voice more clearly. Because the desert is the place where God speaks. It's where he meets us. **God does his very best work in the desert.**

Elijah spends 40 days and 40 nights in the desert. In the Bible, the number 40 represents trial and testing. The Israelites wandered in the desert for 40 years. Moses journeyed up Mount Sinai for 40 days and 40 nights.

So as Elijah waits on God. As he puts himself at the mercy of God's timing and initiative, we wonder, will he stay? Will he be like Israel who failed to trust God? Or will he be like Moses who knew God intimately and put his trust in him?

**And the word of the LORD came to him: "What are you doing here, Elijah?" (1 Kings 19:9)**

Now whenever God asks you a question, it's not to get information for him; it's to give information to you.

What are you doing here Elijah?

<sup>10</sup> **He replied, "I have been very zealous for the LORD God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, torn down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too." (2 Kings 19:10)**

This brings us to our first lesson: **Name your reality.**

Author Ruth Haley Barton says that after spending time in the desert, Elijah is ready to pour out his heart. He names the good, the bad and the ugly.

- The good is that he's been zealous. He's faithfully served God. He's been a conduit for God to display his power.
- The bad is that the Israelites have forsaken God and killed the prophets.
- The ugly is that Elijah has lost his way. His faith is at an all-time low.

It's easy to want to hide from the messy parts of our lives. But Barton goes on to say, **"This willingness to see ourselves as we are and to name it in God's presence is at the very heart of the spiritual journey."** (Ruth Haley Barton)

If God were to ask you, What are you doing here? What would you say?

Maybe you'd say:

*I've been very zealous for the Lord. I've been working hard at school. I've been fighting for my marriage. I've been supporting my children. I've been trying to support others.*

*But the truth is, I'm exhausted! I'm hurting, I'm sad, I'm lonely, I'm angry, I'm depressed.*

*And if I'm completely honest, I'm disappointed. I'm disappointed with life, with people, even with you God.*

Who are you when you're not hiding?

Name your reality to God. Because you'll never meet the real God until you meet the real you.

The second lesson from Elijah's journey is: **Identify your assumptions about how God works.**

You see, Elijah had put God in a box. He thought he knew how God was going to work. He assumed that after Mount Carmel, the people would turn back to him.

But that didn't happen. That's why Elijah's disillusioned. It's like he's saying:

*God, I did everything I was supposed to do. I confronted Ahab. I defeated the false prophets. And nothing happened.*

Have you ever felt like you did everything you were supposed to do and things still didn't work out?

*God, I did everything I was supposed to do. I witnessed to my friends. I fought for my marriage. I did my best to raise my kids. I served you. I went to church. I gave faithfully.*

*But my friends have abandoned me. I don't have a job. My marriage is broken. My kids have turned away. My loved ones are sick. Work is so hard. I'm anxious and depressed. And I don't know if I'm going to make it.*

But here at the mouth of the cave, God shows Elijah that he can't be put in a box. He basically says, What makes you think I don't have a plan?

Because we find out in just a few verses, that God had a plan all along. God would tell Elijah to anoint two kings and a prophet. It turns out that God's victory would come not immediately at Mount Carmel as Elijah assumed, but over years through a gradual political process.

You see, God's plans may not be your plans. God's timing may not be your timing.

There are situations I've been praying about for years now. It's been hard and frustrating. I've been praying for healing, deliverance and peace. And I'd love for a quick fix. I'd love to see immediate change.

But the Lord has been reminding me,

<sup>9</sup>“As the heavens are higher than the earth,  
so are my ways higher than your ways  
and my thoughts than your thoughts. (Isaiah 55:9)

Through this journey, God has been saying, There are deeper and greater things I want to do. Not just in your heart but also in the hearts of those you love. It may look like nothing’s happening, but deep down I’m working in ways you can’t see. Because I do my best work in the desert.

God hasn’t abandoned you. He’s with you right now and working for your good.

So don’t put God in a box. **Identify your assumptions about how God works** and recognize that God may have different plans.

Back on Mount Carmel, Elijah experienced God’s presence in a spectacular way. But here on Mount Sinai, it feels like God’s abandoned him.

But in the desert, he’s learned to Name his reality. He’s learned to Identify his assumptions about how God works.

Now God has one last lesson.

<sup>11</sup> **The LORD said, “Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass 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. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake. <sup>12</sup> After the earthquake came a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper. (2 Kings 19:11-12)**

Elijah had expected God to show up in a spectacular way like he did on Mount Carmel.

But God is teaching Elijah another lesson: **Don’t always look for God in the spectacular, he usually shows up in the subtle.**

Fire is hard not to notice because it’s flashy and spectacular. But how do you notice a whisper?

A whisper is subtle. It’s easy to miss. To hear it, you need to be quiet. You need to slow down. You need to pay attention. And that’s exactly how God usually shows up.

Why’s that important?

It’s important because if you expect God to show up in the spectacular, you’ll miss him in the ordinary.

If you look for him in the highs, you’ll miss in the lows. When things don’t work out the way you want.

- When you can’t make sense of life.
- When your child’s struggling with mental health.

- When your aging parent is sick.
- When your marriage is on the rocks.
- When you're trying to find a relationship.
- When you're struggling to pay the bills.
- When you feel lost and confused.

How many of you feel like you're not where you thought you would be?

There's a great story in a devotional book by Pam Vredevelt. She says that life is like planning a great vacation. As your plane touches down, the flight attendant says, "Welcome to Holland."

Holland? What do you mean Holland? I signed up for Italy! All my life I've dreamed of going to Italy.

But there's been a change in plans, she says. The plane has landed in Holland and in Holland you must stay.

Now Holland isn't a bad place. It's just not what you expected.

You want to be in Italy, but now find yourself in Holland. So what do you do? You need to change your plans. You need to get new travel books. You need to learn a new language.

Holland is less flashy than Italy. Holland has more suffering and pain. Holland isn't where you dreamed of going. But Holland has surprises for you. It has windmills and tulips and Rembrandts.

When you look around, you'll see people coming and going from Italy. They'll look so happy and you'll hear about the amazing time they're having there. And for the rest of your life, You'll say, "That's where I was supposed to go. That's what I had planned."

The pain of those lost dreams may never go away. But if you spend the rest of your life mourning the fact that you're not in Italy, you'll miss out on all the gifts in Holland.

The Lord wasn't in the wind. The Lord wasn't in the earthquake. The Lord wasn't in the fire.

Where was the Lord? He was in Holland. He was in the gentle whisper. He was in the pain, the disappointment, sadness, depression, loneliness and longing. The Lord was with Elijah the whole time.

Many years later, another prophet would also come to turn the people's hearts back to God. He would also oppose the religious leaders. He would also know loneliness and disappointment.

He would also go up a mountain – not to find rest, but to carry a cross. And on that cross, he would be crucified. He would die for our sins so that we could be forgiven, so that we don't have to climb up a mountain to experience God's presence because through his death, resurrection and ascension, God's presence is now with you.

This means that even right now in the desert, Jesus is with you. Because the desert is where he speaks. The desert is where he meets you. The desert is where he cares for you. God does his best work in the desert.

Let's pray.

Heavenly Father,

So many of us here this morning are in the desert. There's so much going on that we don't even realize the toll it's taken. But we feel it - we're tired, empty and overwhelmed. The journey is too much for us. Lord, would you minister to us now, to all the people here in this room and out there watching online.

[I'd like to ask you all now to hold your palms up in a posture of surrender and to receive all that God wants to give you.]

Like you did with Elijah, would you touch us now with your love, give us food for our souls and lead us through this desert season. Even as you do a hard work in us, hold on to us, teach us and encourage us. Remind us that through this suffering, you are shaping your love in us to become more like your son Jesus. Lord, we surrender ourselves into your loving care.

Thank you for Jesus who died so that we could have life. Who was broken so that we could be healed. Who was forsaken so that we can know, even now that you are with us and will never forsake us.

We pray this all in his name, Amen.