

Church of the Covenant  
August 2, 2015

TEXT: I Kings 19:1-16

### When faith caves in

God has the power to provide. If anyone knew that, it was Elijah. Wasn't it God who had given the prophet the courage to stand up to and the words speak out against King Ahab and Queen Jezebel? Wasn't it God who had backed up Elijah's words with power, so that when the prophet announced the coming of a drought to teach the royal pair a lesson about who was really in charge of the world, it was so? Wasn't it God who provided for Elijah in the midst of that drought, sending him out into the wilderness to find a brook with water, and sending ravens to bring him bread? Wasn't it God who orchestrated an amazing display of divine power up on Mt. Carmel, complete with special effects, as Elijah singlehandedly took on 400 prophets of Baal in a "battle of the gods" to see whose God could bring down fire from the heavens? Yes, yes, yes. God-given power, God-given purpose.

All of that – and he's running away? What's with that? His prophetic resume looked great – look what he had done. But perhaps we recognize the place Elijah was in. The place where it's possible to have done good and faithful work out there – and to still run out of steam in here. That place where we feel spent, like we are spinning our wheels to no avail. Like we don't measure up, or have too many balls to juggle and not enough hands to catch them. Ineffective, overwhelmed, underappreciated. Unable to see our way through demands and expectations, and wondering if it makes any difference. If any of that sounds like anything you know, then you know that sometimes, all it takes is one more thing. The proverbial straw that breaks the camel's back. And when we're in that place, we're not able to look back and realize

how capable we have been before. We're not able to look around and realize the support that surrounds us. That one last thing may just be a straw, but it's broken us.

Elijah had surely known God's power and purpose in his life. But after all of it – the drought, winning the battle of the Gods – still nothing had changed? None of it made a difference? The people hadn't come back to God. The pews weren't filling up. What else could one prophet possibly do? And now the Queen wanted him dead? That was Elijah's last straw – and it broke his faith.

Here's the first bit of good and reassuring news – good and faithful people do get overwhelmed, do run out of spiritual steam sometimes. We can lose perspective and purpose. We get worn out and done in. We don't see ourselves or our situation clearly. If you have felt any of those things, know that it is not just you. You are in good and faithful company.

Elijah ran to the wilderness – a place on the map, and a place in his spirit. He felt barren and isolated. He pled his case to God – baring his soul and praying the hard truths about how he felt. "It is enough now, O Lord, take away my life". Take me out of the game, God. It's just me on the team and I can't. But God wasn't done with him. God fed him and led him on for 40 days and 40 nights – a journey of biblical proportions – all the way to Mt.Horeb, aka Mt. Sinai of Moses' and 10 Commandments' fame. A mountain where God things happen. There Elijah hid in a cave – a cave on a map, and a cave in his spirit. Down, and out. Hiding from everyone, except, of course, the One from who none of us can run or hide.

"What are you doing here, Elijah?" And Elijah told God - I've done everything for you, but your people will not respond. I'm all alone and can't do it. Elijah's faith had caved in. He was

ready to throw in the towel, to let go of it all. But God would not let go of him. God does not let go, period. God told Elijah to step outside of the cave – God was coming over there.

And there's the next bit of good news. It was when Elijah was in the darkness of the cave that God announced that God was coming to him. When we are hiding or buried in our own cave places, despair, disillusionment, defeat – when we feel so awfully alone – when our faith caves in -that is when God seeks to come to us. And God knows where all the caves are.

God came to Elijah – but not in the ways that he, or we, might expect. Not in the wind, the earthquake, the fire –not the things that were visible, undeniable, blatantly powerful. Things that could have been the proof Elijah needed – God was not there. But then there came something that was, and is, so strange, that scholars can only take stabs at what it means. Most familiar to us perhaps is “still, small voice” – but others translate it as “gentle whisper”, “low murmuring sound” and “sound of sheer silence”. How paradoxical, how mysterious – it eludes our grasp. Something barely perceptible, close to nothing, maybe even nothingness itself.

And there's the good news again. In the cave – the place of isolation, resignation, where we may be overwhelmed by everything or numbed to feel nothing – it is in the emptiness, in the nothing, in the silence that God is present. God wasn't in the powerful pyrotechnics – because, though they may have given Elijah proof, proof wasn't what was needed. In the stillness, in the silence, Elijah found the needed thing – the assurance that, when there is nothing, there is God. And that is the assurance we will find when our faith caves in – when we have lost our energy or focus or will to serve.

That's powerful good news - but it's not what got Elijah out of the cave. He still voiced the same complaint, and the same willingness to give up. What moved him out of the cave and

on with his life came next. And we tend to overlook it because it's packed with names of historical characters we don't know and can't pronounce. So Elijah's supposed to anoint Hazael king of Aram and Jehu son of Nimshi king of Israel and Elisha son of Shaphat of Abelmeholah in his place? That's supposed to be inspiring?

With those words, God gave Elijah what he needed – what we all need. God assured him that God's purpose was being worked out – and not by Elijah, but through him. It was not all on Elijah's shoulders. With this came the final assurance for Elijah, as it is for us – that despite how it feels when faith caves in, Elijah was never alone. Not only was God with him – but there were 7,000 others faithful to God, unbeknownst to Elijah, who would stand with him. Elijah also came to see a bigger picture of God's work in the world – and that it would change – new kings, new prophets – new ways of God's will being worked out. Things would move on. Just because things weren't working out for Elijah didn't mean God wasn't working things out.

Sometimes we have those times when faith caves in – when we wonder if we can go on. We might hole up, we might want to give up. Speak your hard truth to God. And listen. Not for the big thing – but for the still, small, sure thing. That when there is nothing, there is God. That God is with you. That it is not all up to you. That God moves on in new ways. Hear that assurance – and move on with God.