



November 24, 2013 Messages from the Wilderness

Scripture: 1 Kings 19 selected verses

Then Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah, saying, “So may the gods do to me, and more also, if I do not [take your life] by this time tomorrow.” Then he was afraid; he got up and fled for his life, and came to Beer-sheba … [he went] a day’s journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a solitary broom tree. He asked that he might die: “It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors.” Then he lay down under the broom tree and fell asleep … 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. After the earthquake came a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper.

MONDAY 11.25.13 1 Kings 17:1-16, 18:1-2, 7-8, 16-19 Elijah challenged wicked King Ahab

When Ahab became king of Israel, he married Jezebel, a Baal-worshipping queen from Sidon (cf. 1 Kings 16:29-34). Their reign brought Israel economic riches, but spiritual poverty as they actively suppressed the worship of Israel’s God (cf. 1 Kings 18:4). The prophet Elijah boldly challenged the idolatrous king, saying God would send an extended drought. In the difficult drought conditions, God miraculously provided for his faithful prophet.

- There’s a lot of trust in this story. Elijah trustingly followed God’s direction even when it must have been scary. The widow (not even an Israelite—17:9; cf. Luke 4:24-26—and running out of food) trusted Elijah and shared her bread (17:13-15). Ahab’s servant trusted Elijah to keep his word. What people have been trustworthy in ways important to you? In what ways have those people affected your ability to trust God?
- Ahab greeted Elijah with, “Is that you, the one who troubles Israel?” (18:17) Ruling as a tyrant, and seeking to kill anyone who was faithful to Israel’s God, the king still blamed his kingdom’s problems on the one man who dared to speak God’s word to him. When have you, in a large or small way, had the chance to “speak truth to power”? How did you do, and what were the results—externally, and in your own heart?

Prayer: Lord God, in ancient Israel you needed one man with a brave heart and an honest tongue. Grow me into the kind of person you can count on when you need just one person to stand up for the right. Amen.

TUESDAY 11.26.13 1 Kings 18:20-46 Elijah's God triumphed over Baal

Elijah confronted King Ahab, and called Israel to account for worshipping the false god Baal. He set up a showdown with the prophets of Baal where the true God could prove himself. Elijah made sure that, if anything, his God faced handicaps (like a water-soaked altar and sacrifice). Both sets of prophets called, but only one god answered. The God of Israel was the true, living God, and Baal was not. The drought broke—Elijah's victory seemed complete.

- Elijah challenged the Israelites: “How long will you hobble back and forth between two opinions? If the Lord is God, follow God. If Baal is God, follow Baal” (verse 21). Like the earlier Israelite leader, Joshua (cf. Joshua 24:14-15), he also called Israel to choose who they would serve. Each of us faces the same question, and neutrality is not an option. Who do you choose to serve today? How are you living out that choice in meaningful, tangible ways?
- Led by Ahab and Jezebel, most of Israel worshiped the Canaanite god Baal. The temptation to worship false gods is still with us. Today there's a vast array of “modern Baals”—material possessions, financial security, reputation, career achievement, even “right” theology. Prayerfully ask if you are putting any “modern Baals” ahead of God. Join Elijah in his prayer: “Lord, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, let it be known today that you are God in Israel and that I am your servant” (verse 36).

Prayer: Lord God, I choose to serve you today. When my attention or my commitment wavers, I ask you to remind me of my choice, and to keep drawing me back to your path. Amen.

WEDNESDAY 11.27.13 1 Kings 19:1-14 God ministered to Elijah in the wilderness

God gave Elijah a great public victory. But Queen Jezebel was still in power. Angry about Baal's defeat, she threatened to kill Elijah. Her defiance of him and God was too much for the “successful” prophet, the bold man of action. Tired, depressed and afraid, he ran. God cared gently for Elijah's physical and mental fatigue. Then God spoke again to Elijah in his wilderness—perhaps in the way Elijah least expected.

- Canaanite images often showed Baal with fists full of thunderbolts. God sent fire on Mt. Carmel, but not here. The *New Bible Commentary* says, “A gentle whisper” and ‘a still small voice’ (RSV) do not do full justice to the enigmatic Hebrew, which may be better rendered ‘a brief sound of silence.’ ... it implies God was at last passing in the silence after the storm.” When have you heard God, not in sound and spectacle, but in silence?
- Elijah didn't just wander aimlessly in the wilderness. He went to Mount Horeb, also known as Mount Sinai—the very place where God had made a covenant with the people of Israel in the days of Moses (cf. Deuteronomy 5:2). What are some of the sacred places, the fixed points in your life's journey with God? Do you ever consider returning to them in times of difficulty or pain?

Prayer: Loving Lord, instead of scolding your exhausted, frightened prophet, you gave him bread, rest and compassionate hearing. I thank you that I can count on your love and compassion when I am hurting, too. Amen.

THURSDAY 11.28.13 1 Kings 19:15-21 God called Elijah to a new mission

Happy Thanksgiving Day! Elijah's depressed feelings (like most of ours) did not give him an accurate picture. God said Elijah's complaint that "I'm the only one left" (1 Kings 19:10) was not true—there were thousands of other faithful Israelites (verse 18). And God had much for Elijah to be thankful for—a renewed mission, and Elisha, a faithful helper and designated successor.

- Moses once found himself overwhelmed, trying to lead the Israelites all alone. Through Moses' father-in-law, God sent him the direction, "Get some help" (cf. Exodus 18:13-24). God gave Elijah help, too—a man named Elisha to help him, and eventually succeed him. Have you ever tried to carry "the weight of the world" on your shoulders alone? How can you recognize people God may have sent to lighten your load?
- Jezebel's bullying threats scared Elijah—but not God. He sent Elijah to anoint Jehu king of Israel. Jehu got mixed reviews from the Biblical historians, at best, but he did end Jezebel's reign of terror (cf. 2 Kings 9:30-37). Have you, like Elijah, ever felt as though you can do no more for God? What helps you to remember that, like Elijah, "the God of new beginnings" always has a purpose beyond yourself that you can serve?

Prayer: Heavenly Father, on this day of giving thanks, I thank you for the gift of your calling on my life. Grant me the lifelong sense of purpose that is my birthright as a servant of your kingdom. Amen.

FRIDAY 11.29.13 2 Kings 2:1-15 Elijah passed the torch to Elisha

The Bible only told of God taking one other person directly from earth without having to go through death. (That's how most Bible students see the enigmatic story of Enoch in Genesis 5:24.) God honored Elijah's long, faithful service by making his passage from this life unique and amazing. Elisha watched, cried "Oh, my father, my father!" tore his clothes (a sign of mourning), and then picked up Elijah's coat and his prophetic mission to Israel.

- Hebrews 2:15 said Jesus came, in part, to "free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death." "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot," written before 1862, used Elijah's story to comfort and strengthen American slaves. Does Elijah's "chariot ride" to heaven seem long ago and unrelated to your life, or does it give you one more hopeful sign that there is life beyond this life, that you need not fear death?
- Read today's Scripture again. Use your imagination to "be" Elijah, caught up in that fiery "chariot" (which was the most advanced vehicle in Israel's world) and taken directly to meet the God you've been serving. What would you do first when you entered God's presence? What would you most want to ask or tell God?

Prayer: Loving Lord, I'm counting on meeting you someday. Guide me every day in the light of that meeting, so that, like Elijah, I may have the sense that I have done what you sent me here to do. Amen.

SATURDAY 11.30.13 Malachi 4:4-6, Matthew 17:1-13 Elijah, John the Baptist and Jesus

Elijah's name lived on, a symbol of devotion to God before and after his wilderness experience. The final verses of Malachi's prophecy pointed to another prophet who would come with a spirit like Elijah's. Jesus said John the Baptist, his forerunner, fulfilled that prophecy. And Elijah himself joined Moses to support Jesus at a pivotal point in his saving mission.

- Jesus said John the Baptist was "the Elijah who was to come," yet Herod had executed John for rebuking, Elijah-like, his immoral behavior. How did Jesus' staunch support of John show how differently Jesus saw success from most human societies? Which view of success do you find more compelling? Can you recall a "mountaintop" time you've had with God? Did you, like Peter, wish you could just stay there? Jesus and his followers left the mountain, yet it seems clear that his meeting with God, Moses and Elijah didn't leave Jesus—that it went with him all the way to the wilderness of the cross and beyond. Identify one or more ways that you do (or will) remind yourself that God's presence is always with you.

Prayer: Gracious God, this week I've followed Elijah from a desolate brook through the wilderness of fear and depression all the way to the glory of your eternal kingdom. Guide me through my wildernesses to that same triumphant ending. Amen.

Family Activity: In the midst of opposition and despair, we can find hope in giving thanks for our blessings. Encourage your family to give thanks every day! Read Psalm 100. Create a Thanksgiving collage. Gather a piece of colored poster board, some magazines, a few markers and some glue or tape. Invite everyone to draw pictures and write words representing what they are thankful for on the poster board. Add some cut-outs from magazines, too. Consider leaving some blank spaces so family members can add to it through the week. Write a verse or two of Psalm 100 on the poster board. Each day, take a moment to give thanks to God for all your blessings and celebrate each day!