

## ***Under the Broom Tree***

1 Kings 19:11-19a

Sermon by Mark Schloneger

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*[The LORD] said, "Go out and stand on the mountain before the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by." Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence. When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. Then there came a voice to him that said, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" He answered, "I have been very zealous for the Lord, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away." Then the Lord said to him, "Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus; when you arrive, you shall anoint Hazael as king over Aram. Also you shall anoint Jehu son of Nimshi as king over Israel; and you shall anoint Elisha son of Shaphat of Abel-meholah as prophet in your place. Whoever escapes from the sword of Hazael, Jehu shall kill; and whoever escapes from the sword of Jehu, Elisha shall kill. Yet I will leave seven thousand in Israel, all the knees that have not bowed to Baal, and every mouth that has not kissed him."*

*So he set out from there . . . (1 Kings 19:11-19a)*

He was tough.

He was fierce.

And he didn't suffer fools.

His words were not the flowing, flowers of poetry  
but sharp, stinging slaps to the face.

He was Elijah, the Tishbite, from Gilead.

And he had received the word of the Lord.

Empowered by that word, this man stood alone before royalty, King Ahab,  
and prophesied that there would be three years of drought.

And, for three years, there was no rain in the land.

And in this time of hunger and thirst,

this man was first fed by ravens and then sought refuge in a poor widow's house.

And he was never hungry.

And he was never thirsty.

But then, the widow's son became ill, so ill, as 1 Kings tells it,

that there was no breath left in him.  
But this man cried out to the LORD.  
And the LORD listened.  
And life returned.

He was confident.  
And he was courageous.  
On the top of Mount Carmel before King Ahab and the people of Israel,  
this man yelled, "How long will you go limping about?  
You cannot serve both the LORD and your god Baal."  
But the people stood silent, watching.

And so, on that mountaintop,  
standing alone against four hundred and fifty prophets of Baal,  
this man said, "Call on the name of your god  
to see if Baal can provide the fire for your sacrifice. "  
Go ahead, make my day.  
But there was neither spark nor flame.  
And then, this man called upon his God, the LORD,  
and the LORD brought the fire of victory.

And the people fell on their faces,  
saying, "The LORD is God. The LORD is truly God."  
And they seized the prophets of Baal and put them to death.

Elijah again called upon his LORD, and the rain returned.  
He had won!  
And he ran!  
Touched by the hand of the LORD, he ran.  
Seventeen miles to Jezreel, he ran.  
In front of Ahab's chariot, he ran.  
With the rain bouncing off his brow.  
With the wind in his face.  
With joy. He ran.  
He was filled with the word of the LORD, and victory was sweet.

He was Elijah, the Tishbite, from Gilead.

But then, 1 Kings chapter 19, verses 1-4 But then:

*Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done, and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword. Then Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah, saying, "So may the gods do to me, and more also, if I do not make your life like the life of one of them by this time tomorrow." Then he was afraid; and he*

*got up, and fled for his life, and he came to Beersheba in Judah. And he left his servant there. But he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness, and he came and sat down under a solitary broom tree. And he asked that he might die.*

And he was Elijah, the Tishbite, from Gilead.

The man of Mount Carmel, the man who looked evil right in the eyes and didn't blink. This man, afraid? Fleeing for his life? What happened?

To more fully understand Elijah, ourselves, and our God, we must travel with Elijah between two mountains – from Mount Carmel to Mount Horeb. To reach the top of those two mountains, Elijah had to go straight through the desert.

Our journey begins at Jezreel – right after Elijah's "victory" at Mount Carmel. We know that Ahab told his wife Jezebel all that had happened on Mount Carmel, including that small detail about what had happened to those prophets of Baal.

Of course. Elijah's not stupid. He had to have known that Ahab would mention this to Jezebel. It would have been unrealistic to think that the Mayhem on Mount Carmel would somehow go unmentioned. And, you know, Jezebel's reaction shouldn't have been surprising to Elijah. After all, she was Baal's biggest booster. She was a truly a big Baal booster.

But maybe Elijah thought that he had truly converted the king. And maybe Elijah thought, for once, King Ahab would reign as a true king and would stand up to his wife. After all, this dramatic victory was in front of not only the king but all of Israel.

And maybe he was resting at a cheap chalet on the outskirts of Jezreel, sipping lemonade, satisfied that he had truly made a difference for Israel when he received that terrifying message from Jezebel: "Dear Elijah, I'm going to kill you tomorrow."

And his world came crashing down. Who was he kidding? He had NOT made a difference. Yes, Ahab was king, but Jezebel still ruled.

And he ran. He ran to Beersheba, outside the reach of Jezebel's power. But he didn't stop there.

No, he dismissed his servant, and he walked into the desert outside of Judah.  
He was separating himself not only from Jezebel but from all of Israel, God's people.  
"I have had enough, LORD," he said.  
The man of Mount Carmel,  
the man who ran seventeen miles by the power of the LORD's hand,  
laid himself under a tree . . . and waited to die.

I can empathize with Elijah in this story.  
Like Elijah, I want to feel like I have made a difference.  
Like Elijah, I want results.  
Results that are noticed. Results that are concrete.  
Results that I can point to and say, "Look, I did make a difference."

We may look back at the past year or few years and remember those times in our lives  
when we have felt God's presence in powerful ways.  
We remember and give thanks to God  
for cures, close calls in traffic, or money that appeared at just the right moment.  
For jobs. For births and marriages and healing. For miracles. For blessings.  
For God's saving presence in the midst of chaos.

And through experiences such as these,  
we get a powerful sense of God's work through us and plan for us.  
We are like Elijah on Mount Carmel, touched by the hand of the LORD,  
running in front of the chariot despite the rain and the wind.

It's good to remember times like these.  
It's good to remember them because we know  
that our tables are not always full of blessings.  
Our dining room chairs are not always occupied by loved ones.  
Sometimes, we know what it's like under that broom tree.

Sometimes, we hear the whispers.  
You're not equipped for that which God has called you.  
You've made no difference.  
You're not beautiful enough, talented enough, gifted enough, smart enough,

healthy enough, wealthy enough, old enough, young enough, strong enough.

You are not enough. (Pause)

And slowly, we focus on the things we are lacking, not what we're given.  
And if we think these things long enough, we understand life, our life,  
as an extended sentence of misery broken only by intermittent periods of joy.

Under the broom tree, Mount Carmel is a distant memory.

But under the broom tree,  
Elijah was touched by an angel.  
"Get up and eat," the angel said.  
And Elijah ate. And Elijah drank. And Elijah fell back asleep.  
But the angel touched him again. "Get up and eat, for the journey is too much for you."  
What journey? Is it the journey ahead or the one that led him under the broom tree?  
Either way, the angel recognizes Elijah's emptiness, his weakness,  
and the truth behind his own statement, "I have had enough, LORD."  
Once again, Elijah ate, and Elijah drank.

And on the strength of this food,  
Elijah lifted himself up off the ground and began walking.  
For forty days and forty nights, Elijah walked.  
He was in the wilderness, the desert, but he was walking.

And he walked all the way to Mount Horeb, the mountain of God,  
the doorstep of the LORD.  
And what did Elijah do? He found a cave, and he slept.

And the Word of the LORD came to him.  
"What are you doing HERE, Elijah?", the LORD asked.  
In his slumber, Elijah answered.  
"I fought for you, Lord.  
I fought for you against your children,  
for YOUR children have forsaken your covenant.  
Now, I am alone, the last one left. And they are trying to kill me."  
In other words, "Lord, you're losing, and you're losing me."

And God responded.  
"Get up, Elijah, stand before the Lord, for the Lord will pass by."  
Then, God's special effects.  
A great wind caused rocks to tumble down the mountain and break into pieces.  
An earthquake rattled the ground.  
A great fire burned the thin, mountain trees.

It was Mount Carmel all over again!

But the Lord was not in the wind.

But the Lord was not in the earthquake.

But the Lord was not in the fire.

Then, a gentle whisper.

But this was a different kind of whisper – not those whispers that break us down.

This was a sound of sheer silence.

This was a still, small voice.

“What are you doing here, Elijah?”

And the power of Mount Carmel no longer impressed.

Elijah answered as he had already answered.

“I fought for you, Lord, I fought for you against your children,  
for your children have forsaken your covenant.

Now, I am alone, the last one left. And they are trying to kill me.”

In other words, Lord, you’re losing, and you’re losing me.

And now, we’ve reached the part of the story can be hard to understand.

There are no arguments. There are no questions.

There is simply the re-commissioning of a great prophet,

a re-commissioning in a gentle whisper.

Return as you came.

Anoint Hazael as king over Aram.

Anoint Jehu as king over Israel.

Anoint Elisha as prophet in your place.

They will execute MY judgment.

Oh, and Elijah? You are NOT alone.

I will save the thousands in Israel who have not bowed at the feet of Baal.

And it all made sense.

Yes, Mount Carmel has its place.

Yes, it is great to have Mount Carmel experiences, to witness the power  
that causes rocks to tumble, the ground to break, the flames to spread.

That causes cures, reconciliations,

that gives us safety and security in amazing ways.

But here, on Mount Horeb, Elijah was reminded of a different way in which God works.

A sound of sheer silence.

Sometimes, answers come in gentle whispers.

Whispers working its way through prophets and priests,

through nations and their people, through days, weeks, years, decades, and centuries.

Through Asia, through Africa, through North and South America,

through all of the continents.

Through ancestors, through grandparents, parents, children, and friends.  
And through congregations who commit to walking in the way of Christ.

What a comfort this knowledge is when we are sitting underneath a broom tree.  
What a comfort this is when Mount Carmel is a distant shadow.  
God's mission does not depend on your success or failure, our success or failure.  
Sometimes, God at work may be hard to hear.  
Whispers are like that, you know.

And so, let's give thanks not only for those mountaintop experiences but also for those  
gentle whispers of God – the faithfulness of ancestors,  
the love of parents, the nurture of congregations,  
the community of believers that calls us together and sends us out.

The story of Elijah's journey from Mount Carmel to Mount Horeb ends very simply.  
The Lord gave Elijah a new commission in a gentle whisper.  
Unlike before, we have no evidence of Elijah's mental state.  
We only know his response.

"So Elijah went on from there," the beginning of verse 19 states.  
There is no doubt that Elijah was filled with purpose.  
There is no doubt that he was filled with power.  
But I like to believe that this man who ran –  
the one who ran victoriously down the mountain  
and then who ran desperately away to the desert to die –  
set out from there . . . walking.

"I am confident of this: That the one who began a good work among us will bring it to  
completion by the day of Jesus Christ." (Philippians 1:6)  
Amen.