

**A Sermon for Dayspring Baptist Church**  
**By Chris Fillingham**  
**“Between Two Mountains”**  
**I Kings 19**  
**All Saints Day**  
**November 5, 2017**

Sometimes the lectionary is such a helpful guide. In case you don't know, this year I am once again following the Narrative Lectionary. And so it assigns me a text and a story each week to move us as a church though the larger story of the Bible.

This fall we've been moving through the narrative of the Old Testament and that story will lead us deeper and deeper into the longing for a Messiah... that finally comes to us as a baby born in a manger at the end of December.

Then, in January we'll be following the Gospel of John through the story of that little baby, who grew, and taught us, and healed, and loved, and was crucified and rose again.

So for now, we're part way through the story of the Old Testament and like a said, I've found the lectionary to be such a helpful guide. And certainly it is today, so wisely inviting in the story of Elijah for All Saint's Day.

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It just makes sense. Elijah, after all, is often considered one of the greatest prophets in the Old Testament.

In fact, his personality looms large even in the New Testament.

Jesus talks about Elijah's story when he explains the focus of his own ministry in Luke 4.

After a while of ministering, traveling, and healing, some people of Jesus' day start to think he is the return of Elijah. **“Some say you are Elijah,”** his disciples tell him.

And when Jesus goes up on the mountain and is transfigured, who appears with him? Moses and? That's right, Elijah.

His story is certainly one of the stories of the saints.

He remains one of the great guides for us today in the life of the church and in our own personal faith.

If you know the story of Elijah then you are probably most familiar with his two different mountain experiences.

The first happened before the story we heard today. This is the story of Elijah on Mt. Carmel.

On Mt. Carmel Elijah challenged the prophets of Baal to a contest to see whose God is the real God. You see the people of Yahweh were no longer worshipping the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God of Moses and David. Their hearts had drifted toward all kinds of other concerns and other priorities.

And with that came the worship of other gods... and in particular, the god Baal...who was considered to be a good god to worship if you wanted your crops to grow. In other words, in ancient Israel **Baal was the god of economic security.**

So yes, Yahweh was nice for their parents and grandparents. But modern times call for modern gods. So more and more people of their day began worshipping Baal.

Elijah saw the emptiness in it, plain and clear, and invited the prophets of Baal (that is the religious and political spokespersons for the god of economic security) to a contest.

**“Let's see which God shows up when it really matters.”** Elijah says.

And if you know that story, then you know that Baal never showed up. But Yahweh did. Elijah prayed and fire came down and consumed the altar of God, *and the people saw and remembered who the real fire of life is.*

The fire of life is not found in our economics or in political security,  
but in the God who created heaven and earth...  
in the God whose air you breath,  
and who gives you life.

It was clear on that day. This is the one true God. The only God worth giving your life to.

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Well, you can imagine it was also a high point for Elijah.  
The kind of moment we like to think of when we think of saints.

And the kind of spirituality that we really like:  
One that shows clearly who is God and who isn't.  
One that helps us to know with renewed clarity that God has our backs.  
One in which our faithfulness to God is repaid with God's faithful presence to us.

Elijah took a bold risk, called out to God and God did not disappoint. After that moment could there be any more doubts?

Well, apparently there could. Because of all that took place in chapter 18. Turn the page to today's reading in chapter 19 and we have a very different story... that takes place on a different mountain.

It's the story of what often comes in the spiritual journey... a story of the absence of God.

Yes, God shows up powerful and mighty on Mt. Carmel.  
But Queen Jezebel is furious about the whole thing.  
So, turn the page and Elijah is running for his life... and finds himself... out in the wilderness, despairing of life itself.

It's actually a parallel story to the Hebrew people out in the *same wilderness* with Moses after Egypt, that we heard a month ago. Remember that? The Hebrew people had just experienced the powerful escape from Egypt and the crossing of the Red Sea, but a month into the wilderness they are thirsty, and starving, and wish they could go back and die in Egypt.

**Elijah is following the same script.**

He's just experienced God's overwhelming power on Mt Carmel.  
But now he's in the wilderness, starving, despairing of life,  
and God sends him to Mt. Horeb,  
which is another name for Mt. Sinai...  
the same mountain that Moses took the people to.

The *parallels* are just striking here....  
but so are the *juxtapositions*.

Do you remember what happened when Moses and the people showed up to this mountain?  
God called Moses up the mountain and the mountain shook with smoke and fire. In fact, this is how Exodus describes it, "**Now Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke, because the Lord had**

**descended upon it in fire; ....the whole mountain shook violently... and God answered Moses in thunder.”** (Exodus 19:18-19)

It's this same mountain that Elijah has come to.  
The same mountain the Elijah climbs up, full of despair...  
feeling like he is all alone.

And the same kind of things happen:

wind splitting rocks,  
earthquake, and fire...

they all descend on the mountain, just like it did when Moses went up this same mountain  
hundreds of years earlier.

But this time the scriptures tell us God was absent.  
“... **the Lord was not in the wind.**” the scriptures say.  
“... **the Lord was not in the earthquake**”  
“... **the Lord was not in the fire.**”

Three times in a row we hear about the earth-shattering-***absence*** of God... exactly on the very  
mountain where God is supposed to be present.

The striking *similarities* between Elijah and Moses on the same mountain are intended to make  
the *juxtaposition* even stronger.

Elijah, confident and strong, encountered God up on Mt. Carmel.  
But now, up on Mt. Horeb, Mt Sinai, Elijah experiences the life shattering absence of God.  
A profound emptiness. A sense of being alone.

In fact, twice we hear Elijah describe his deep loneliness; “**I have been passionate about  
following God, when everyone else went astray. But now, I am alone. I’m the only one left. And  
they are out to kill me.**”

Twice he says the same thing: ***I’m alone, and hanging on by a bare thread.***

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And I think it's this moment on Mt. Horeb that makes Elijah's story so important for us.

Yes, we are drawn to the story of Mt. Carmel, and it's an important story. But it's not the Mt.  
Carmel moments by themselves that make Elijah a saintly guide. ***It's the way his story moves between  
the two mountains.***

Because this is what the spiritual life is most often like. There is a movement...back and  
forth...between these two mountains.

There are the Mt. Carmel moments, where the presence of God is clear to us. Something in us  
knows. We are aware. Or we bravely trust that it's all true and that we are following God and standing  
for God's righteousness in the world. Those moments are gifts.

But if you stay on the journey long enough they will always be paired with Mt. Horeb,  
where God is dramatically absent,  
and you can't help but wonder if you are alone,  
and all that you thought mattered in the world is coming to an end.

***This is the pattern of spirituality... and of faith... and how it intersects in our life.***

Mt Carmel catches our attention and our imagination. But then a different kind of spiritual work happens on Mt. Horeb.

Because it's there, in the dark nights of Mt. Horeb, where a kind of emptiness is created in us, an emptiness that creates space in our being... that opens us up to a power of love beyond our own strength.

It's there on Mt. Horeb where we are broken of our *attachments to being in control... to our own security... to the esteem of others*... all of that crumbles and **creates space in our souls** in which we *can only be filled by the love of God*.

Gerald May talks about a similar opening up... when he describes spiritual growth as this moment from being **will-ful**... to **will-ing**.<sup>1</sup> There is a profound shift that happens here.

There is such a difference between:

a will-ful spirituality, that is pushing and insisting...

and a will-ing spirituality... that is open and being drawn.

That shift is part of what we see happening in the space between these two mountains.

On Mt. Carmel that fire comes down and consumes the altar, and Elijah encounters God's power and presence. Sometimes we will get glimpses of that. Elijah couldn't stay there, or he would stay quite will-full and pushing.

And we will too.

That's why God's love doesn't let us stay there.

Staying on Mt. Carmel will cultivate **religious pride and arrogance**.

And so... God uses the pain of our lives to lead us to Mt. Horeb. And I use that verb very intentionally. God doesn't create that pain, but God uses it... to take us to Mt. Horeb... where there is darkness and emptiness.

It's not to punish you, but to open you up. Like Elijah, there has to be created in us enough emptiness and space in order that we might be filled with God's deep, mysterious, and consuming love. And as we are filled we move from being will-ful to will-ing.

And that, according to all the wise guides, the saints of our faith, is what our life with God is ultimately about. That's what all longing and restlessness is ultimately about.

We are being drawn deeper and deeper into love.

So, trust that today.

Know that, in your dark nights and in your deep loneliness.

This is not the end.

If only you could see... something beautiful and mysterious is happening. Something holy is stirring.

You are being drawn...

deeper and deeper

into love.

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<sup>1</sup> Gerald G. May, *The Dark Night of the Soul: A Psychiatrist Explores the Connection Between Darkness and Spiritual Growth*, Reprint (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2005).

Amen.

Silent Reflection:

*How gently and lovingly  
you wake in my heart,  
where in secret you dwell alone;  
and in your sweet breathing,  
filled with good and glory,  
how tenderly you swell my heart with love.*

~John of the Cross, “The Living Flame of Love”