



## BEYOND THE BROOM TREE

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New Day folks are going to a lot of exotic places this summer. The Zellerhoffs just got back from Serbia. Scott Krippaehne took a trip to Bangladesh. Summerfields are off to Mexico. The Eidsmoe's went to Lake Cushman last weekend. But I don't think Verkhoyansk, Russia is on anyone's itinerary this year. Verkhoyansk is a tiny town on the edge of the Arctic Circle. The population is about 1,400 people, and it's a place you only want to live if you're interested in raising reindeer or trading furs.

But what the town is famous for is its extreme weather. It holds the world record for the greatest temperature change in a single day. On April 26, 1998, it reached a sweltering 98 degrees Fahrenheit during the day, but plummeted to a bone-chilling -90.4 degrees Fahrenheit at night. Probably a good idea to wear layers there.

To go from that high to that low is a drastic change for one day. But our friend Elijah is about to undergo an equally drastic change in an equally quick time frame. Last Sunday we saw Elijah at a record high – the temperature was literally burning up with fire from heaven. It was a spectacular, once in a lifetime kind of event. The 450 prophets of Baal came up empty and God demonstrated beyond a doubt that he was the only true god. The people all had a change of heart and Elijah's message was finally heard. On top of that, he prayed and God sent rain at his request. He was batting 1000.

That's a pretty good day for a prophet. You would think Elijah would be riding that high for a long, long time. But his spirits are about to take a major dive. Let's look at what happened.

### **1 Kings 19:1-18**

*Now Ahab told Jezebel everything Elijah had done and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword. 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."*

Now that's a little unexpected. Given the way everyone else reacted to the showdown, you would think maybe Jezebel would have a change of heart, since Baal has been shown to be a fraud. Instead she's furious and tells Elijah, "You've just signed your own death warrant."

If this were a musical, this would be where Elijah breaks into his best James Ingram imitation:

*I did my best  
But I guess my best wasn't good enough  
'Cause here we are back where we were before...*

He HAD given his best -- and it WASN'T good enough. There was nothing more Elijah could possibly do to convince Jezebel of the truth. She didn't care about truth – she just wanted power, and Elijah was standing in her way.

So what happened?

*Elijah was afraid and ran for his life.*

Another unexpected turn. Do you remember the scene in *The Princess Bride* where Inigo, the Spaniard, finally comes face to face with the six fingered man, the vicious killer he's been tracking his whole life? He has the man at swordpoint and says, "My name is Inigo Montoya. You killed my father. Prepare to die." There's a pause. Then this evil, intimidating six-fingered man turns and runs away scared to death.

You don't see it coming. And you don't see it coming with Elijah either. Here's the man who took on the world last Sunday. This is the Elijah who defied the king and hundreds of enemies at once. This is the fearless Elijah who had no doubt his God would perform one miracle after another. Now he's running for his life?

In some ways, it's kind of a relief, isn't it? Elijah was looking pretty super-human a week ago. Now he's someone we can relate to, with real fears and reactions.

It's easy to think that if we witnessed something as spectacular as God sending fire from heaven that we would never again have a doubt or a faith crisis. Apparently, that's not the way it works.

*When he came to Beersheba in Judah, he left his servant there, while he himself went a day's journey into the desert. He came to a broom tree, 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." Then he lay down under the tree and fell asleep.*

Beersheba was a good 90 to 100 miles south of Jezreel, so Elijah had some time to think on his way there. By the time he arrives, he's not doing too well. From this far away, we can't know for certain what his state of mind was, but he's showing classic signs of depression and burnout. For one thing, he has isolated himself, even leaving his servant behind. He is pulling away from everyone and turning inward. He's shutting out the rest of the world.

Elijah is also having feelings of failure. He makes that comment that he's no better than his ancestors. He's been no more effective than they were. What he did on Mt. Carmel was probably the greatest demonstration of God's power since Moses, and he was hopeful that it would change Israel's direction. But it turned out that the leadership had only become further entrenched, and he was powerless to do anything. There's nothing worse than feeling like your life's work has been meaningless. You think you've been making a difference and suddenly find out that's not true. If the success of a prophet is measured in terms of the long-term impact they have, then Elijah had done no better than all the prophets who had gone before him. It was a depressing thought.

Physically, he's now exhausted, too, and hungry. He's just tired of the fight and he's ready to give up. All he wants to do is curl up in the fetal position and die.

The distance between being in a good place and being in a bad place isn't very far. We can get from one to the other very quickly. I read an honest blog this week, written by a pastor who had just come home from a great conference, only to be hit hard with discouragement. He writes:

*I was emotionally drained, depressed, snappy, I was ready to quit. I just wanted to crawl into bed and tell everything to go away. I have such a long way to go. The church has such a long way to go. The task of getting there, personally and corporately, is overwhelming.*

*I'm supposed to be excited, fresh off the mountain top, and here I've ridden a landslide into the valley of death all the way down below. It's sucky. Very sucky. Is anyone else going through anything remotely like this? Any vision or excitement I might have gained at the conference has been removed with a shop vac and sent to the landfill.*

Some people would chalk that up to spiritual warfare. When we're doing great and least expecting it, we're more vulnerable, and the enemy attacks us. Some people would say it's biological – we get a rush of endorphins and adrenaline during a great experience, and after that leaves our system we're depleted.

The Bible doesn't really tell us what the case was for Elijah – it doesn't assign a definite cause. The story just describes his words and actions. Call it discouragement, call it depression, we've all found ourselves in the desert, sitting under that same broom tree, feeling like we're done – done with a job, a relationship that's draining, a responsibility

I remember even as a kid feeling that way sometimes. I would go to church camp in the summer and have a fantastic experience. Then the first day home I would go into this deep funk because the rest of my family just could not understand how awesomely cool Millersylvania Junior High Camp was. They would never get it.

Whatever the causes, we all go through those times of feeling down, feeling worthless, feeling like giving up. Some of you are here this morning thinking, "That's me right now." You identify completely with Elijah's emotions.

I think that's partly why God gives us such raw, transparent stories in the Bible. If we can relate to these people's struggles, maybe we can find hope and comfort in the same things that gave them hope and comfort. God brought Elijah out of his desert, and he can bring you out of yours as well.

But at the moment Elijah's asleep, sawing logs under the broom tree.

*All at once an angel touched him and said, "Get up and eat." He looked around, and there by his head was a cake of bread baked over hot coals, and a jar of water. He ate and drank and then lay down again.*

*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." 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. There he went into a cave and spent the night.*

I love the story of this angel for many reasons. He wakes up Elijah two different times. The first time, all the angel tells him to do is eat. He doesn't say, "Suck it up, you big baby." He doesn't say, "You've got to hang in there man – God's got another assignment for you." He doesn't even try my trick. Once when Karin was discouraged and venting, I said "Hon – you've got a great life." Possibly the least supportive thing I could say at the time. I thought what she needed was for me to correct her outlook. I was wrong. What she needed was a caring, sympathetic husband.

All the angel tells Elijah is, "Get up and eat." Get up and eat. The first priority was for Elijah to take care of himself. He had **permission to rest up**. Isn't that encouraging? God knows what we need the most and he says it's okay to stop and replenish. His work for us will wait. And, I might add, his work for other people to do will wait. We can extend the same gracious permission to those around us when we are wishing they would hurry up and get over what they're feeling.

For some reason, we don't always believe that. We feel that somehow we will be a disappointment to God if we slow down for any reason. We feel guilty for needing breaks. That's why I like these verses:

**Psalm 103:14**

*For he knows how we are formed, he remembers that we are dust.*

**Isaiah 42:3**

*He will not break the bruised reed, nor quench the dimly burning flame. He will encourage the fainthearted, those tempted to despair.*

Do I trust that God loves me enough to know what I need and know my limits? Am I showing that kind of compassion to other people – recognizing their needs and recognizing their limits?

It's interesting to note what God gave Elijah to sustain him. Fresh baked bread and a jug of water. That's food that took some time and effort to get ready for Elijah. God didn't just point to some edible plants and a stream and say, "Help yourself." Somebody had to bake the bread. Somebody had to pour the water in a jar. God took the effort of preparing food and drink for him. He put thought and care into what Elijah most needed.

I think about the verse in Psalm 23, where it says "He prepares a table before me in the presence of my enemies." If I were Elijah, I would have thought my immediate need was for God to zap Jezebel with a great big lightning bolt. With my enemy removed, there would be no problem. Or, God could also answer the way Elijah had prayed – "Take me now, God. Please."

Instead God prepares a meal – something that will strengthen Elijah for the next phase of the battle. Both Jezebel and Elijah will live for the time being, and God will give Elijah what he needs to keep going.

God doesn't always remove our problems or give us an easy way out. But he does prepare a way for us to continue with new strength we didn't have before. He has gone to the effort to provide what we most need, whether we know what that is or not.

I don't want to make too much of a small detail, but when the angel told Elijah to eat the first time, Elijah was not aware of any food being nearby, so it says he looked around. His eyes scanned the area until they saw what God had provided right next to his head. Sometimes we don't immediately see what it is that God has provided for us. We have to look around. But when we discover it, it's right within our reach.

Many of you have seen that first hand. You've had no idea how God would answer your prayer, then suddenly the answer is right in front of you. There are people in this congregation who have had financial needs where they had no resources to pay a bill, then God has provided the exact amount in a surprising way. Other people have not seen any way out of a conflict, only to have God give a way to resolve the tension.

Like Elijah, when we look around we will discover how God prepares answers for us we'd never expect.

The second time the angel wakes Elijah up, he again tells him to eat. But this time, he lets him know there's a journey ahead of him. Elijah had planned to end it all right under that tree. He thinks he has hit rock bottom. That was as far as he planned to travel. But he has to go another 250 miles or so deeper into the desert to Mt. Horeb, also called Mt. Sinai. It's past his breaking point, much farther than he envisioned himself able to go.

And it's not a random destination. Mt. Sinai is called the mountain of God. This is where God first gave the covenant to his people. It's where he came down in fire and smoke. It's where Moses saw the burning bush and the glory of the Lord. It's the place where God does business with his people, and that's what Elijah has got to do.

When we're at what we think is our lowest point, as far in the desert as we can go, it's good to know that God is even further in the desert. And sometimes he needs to take us beyond the broom tree – beyond where we thought we could go to bring us to the place where we're dealing directly with him. **God invites us to go farther.**

Here's the reality: Our circumstances and the way we feel about them are tied in with far deeper issues than we think. We splash around in the shallow end of the pool, and God says, "swim out further. Maybe we've explored the edges of our anger or mental or emotional state. Maybe feel we've done as much soul-searching as we're comfortable with. But God says, "You need to get to the mountain. You need to keep going with this until you get to a place where you're dealing with the real issue, which is your relationship with me." Because really it's not about depression or discouragement or anxiety or fear or anger or boredom or cynicism or bitterness or insecurity. Those are all the things we feel, but they're also symptoms of where we're at with God. That's what lies behind the way we process our lives, and God knows that's what needs to be addressed. So God strengthens us to take us to the heart of the matter, to get us to the mountain.

Sometimes it's a whole lot easier to just stay under the broom tree, to stay focused on our complaints and our tiredness of it all. But there's so much more waiting for us when we take God invitation to get up and keep going.

Elijah does just that and waits for God in the cave on the mountain.

*And the word of the LORD came to him: "What are you doing here, Elijah?"*

We've seen several instances where the word of the Lord came to Elijah. It's usually been a word of instruction, telling him what to do. This is the first time we have it coming to him in the form of a question. He is going to have to ask himself: What is it that he is wanting from God? It's a good, clarifying question.

*He replied, "I have been very zealous for the LORD God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, broken 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."*

This translation has Elijah saying he was zealous, but the word can really be translated as jealous. Elijah is telling God, "I felt jealous for you. These are your people that made a covenant with you on this very mountain, and now they're ripping up the contract. I'm your only spokesman left. You're about to lose your last representative."

Elijah has been championing God's cause, and he wants God to know that it looks like a lost cause.

God listens to Elijah's complaint, but he doesn't respond directly to it. Instead he decides to act out his answer.

*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. After the earthquake came a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper. When Elijah heard it, he pulled his cloak over his face and went out and stood at the mouth of the cave.*

Isn't that a powerful revelation? It grips me every time I read it. It seems to be bursting with meaning that's just tantalizingly out of reach. I don't know what Elijah expected when he stepped outside. This is a prophet that has seen God do incredible things. You can just imagine his anticipation building as each new event unfolded. First the hurricane force winds, tearing the mountain to shreds. Impressive, but empty of God. Maybe the next thing coming. The ground shakes and the mountain trembles with the force of the earthquake, but it too is just a signpost. Could it be what comes next? Look it's a blazing fire. That's always been associated with God. Could he be in that? No? Where is he? What could possibly be bigger than these three displays?

Then silence. This calm stillness and a barely audible whisper. It's what you call deafeningly quiet. Not at all what an a fire and brimstone prophet would be expecting. But there's no mistaking it. This is God in all his power and glory. Elijah recognizes him and immediately covers his face. It is **a truer vision** of God than he has ever had before.

How many times do I look for God in the big and spectacular, only to miss him because I'm not paying attention to the still, small voice? I want God to shake things up, to set off some fireworks, to make it obvious where he's at. Instead God shows up in a much more intimate way that requires me to stop and listen. It makes me think of that famous verse in Zechariah:

#### **Zechariah 4:6**

*'Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit,' says the LORD Almighty.*

We ask for signs from God like fire from heaven, and they're impressive when we get them. We like the dramatic and obvious. I just read in a church newspaper about someone who had witnessed a miracle in India where somebody's arm that had been crippled and shortened since birth literally grew to its proper length in front of their eyes. We hear that and go, "I'd like to see something that amazing."

And praise God he does those things. But God knows it's not the big miracles that will keep us going. It's not by might, and it's not by power. It's by his own Spirit. We need his own presence with us on a more daily, close up basis, and that's going to come on a quiet, personal level, in a tiny voice that we may have to strain to hear.

God is at work far beyond what we can see and hear. He is active and present in silence and stillness. Have we been listening for the wrong thing?

Elijah hears that small voice speak to him.

*Then a voice said to him, "What are you doing here, Elijah?"*

God repeats the question he asked Elijah before. And Elijah confirms the exact same answer he had given before:

*He replied, "I have been very zealous for the LORD God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, broken 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."*

It would seem that God was giving Elijah a second chance to rethink his reason for being there. "Why are you really here? Anything you want to rephrase in your earlier statement?" But Elijah doesn't waver from his original opinion. And God in his grace doesn't rebuke him for it. God is so patient with us, even when we can't see that we're not totally accurate in our assessment of the situation.

What God does say is this:

*The LORD said to him, "Go back the way you came, and go to the Desert of Damascus. When you get there, anoint Hazael king over Aram. Also, anoint Jehu son of Nimshi king over Israel, and anoint Elisha son of Shaphat from Abel Meholah to succeed you as prophet. Jehu will put to death any who escape the sword of Hazael, and Elisha will put to death any who escape the sword of Jehu."*

I love it that God is so detailed in his planning. He's not vague about Elijah's future at all. At its heart, this word from God is a **renewed mission** for Elijah. Not only did God not consider his life's work wasted – he had more for him to do. He gives Elijah a renewed sense of purpose, and a little peek into how some things would begin to be set right in Israel. He speaks to Elijah's cry for justice and shows him that he has in fact been paying attention to all that has been happening.

That's really what we want to know, isn't it? That God sees and cares and has a plan that includes us. We want to be useful. We want a sense of meaning. We want justice. God knows that and offers that to us.

Sometimes just having an action plan and something to do is exactly what we need. We step out in faith, trusting that God will bring our emotions up to speed as we go. The 19th century writer George Macdonald once wrote that when you're in a dark place and can't see God, you should

*Fold the arms of your faith, and wait in quietness until light goes up in your darkness. Fold the arms of your Faith I say, but not of your Action: think of something that you*

*ought to do, and go and do it, if it be but the sweeping of a room, or the preparing of a meal, or a visit to a friend. Heed not your feelings: Do your work.*

God does manage to slip in one quiet corrective to Elijah's complaint. He's been saying all along, "I'm the only one left. I'm the only one left." God gently points out that although it feels that way, that's not reality.

*Yet I reserve seven thousand in Israel -- all whose knees have not bowed down to Baal and all whose mouths have not kissed him."*

Seven thousand. Elijah had no idea there were that many people struggling to be faithful to God. **God gives him a changed perspective.** These hadn't been the people there on Mt. Carmel, because they had never converted to Baal in the first place. They were walking the same walk as Elijah, encountering the same difficulties.

One of the biggest temptations we face when we are struggling is to believe that nobody else understands how hard life is for us, that we're alone in our suffering. Take it as a perspective adjustment or a deep encouragement when God says, "There's a whole community that can support you and walk with you. You are not alone."

This is the triumph of the still small voice. God is working when we are completely unaware. He has his faithful people out there. You and I never need to feel like we're all alone in our efforts to follow him, because he's provided a support community that is also on this journey.

When Elijah had reached his lowest, he was still not beyond God's grasp. He provided new strength, new hope, new work, and most importantly, a new vision of himself to sustain him for the rest of his life. It wasn't the fire on Mt. Carmel – it was the still small voice of his Spirit.

Are you at a low point this morning? Are you feeling far beyond God's reach?

### **Isaiah 59:1**

*Surely the arm of the LORD is not too short to save, nor his ear too dull to hear.*

God is ready to take you to his mountain and restore you. It's the mountain of Calvary, where instead of a hurricane, we find a cross. Instead of a God bringing fire and brimstone, it's a God who endured the fire and brimstone himself on our behalf. He still speaks in that still small voice, saying "come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest."

As we prepare to celebrate the Lord's supper and remember what Jesus did for us, I want to give you some time to listen for that voice yourself this morning. God is asking the same question he asked Elijah: What are you doing here? What do you want from God this morning? You've come to God's mountain to do business with him. Ask him for what you need.