

Text: 1 Kings 19:9-18

⁹ There he went into a cave and spent the night. And the word of the LORD came to him: "What are you doing here, Elijah?" ¹⁰ 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." ¹¹ 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. ¹² After the earthquake came a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper. ¹³ When Elijah heard it, he pulled his cloak over his face and went out and stood at the mouth of the cave. Then a voice said to him, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" ¹⁴ 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." ¹⁵ 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. ¹⁶ Also, anoint Jehu son of Nimshi king over Israel, and anoint Elisha son of Shaphat from Abel Meholah to succeed you as prophet. ¹⁷ 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. ¹⁸ Yet I reserve seven thousand in Israel—all whose knees have not bowed down to Baal and all whose mouths have not kissed him." – NIV84

Prayer of the Day

Almighty and everlasting God, you are always more ready to hear than we to pray, and to give more than we either desire or deserve. Pour upon us the abundance of your mercy, forgiving us those things of which our conscience is afraid, and giving us those good things for which we are not worthy to ask, except through the merits and mediation of your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

Verse of the Day

Alleluia. Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see. Alleluia. (Heb. 11:1)

Sermon Text:

Loneliness. That one word has probably defined lockdowns and quarantines in the countless articles I have read over the last months of life in 2020. Loneliness has been the calling card of a virus that can lock away those who struggle with it in hospital rooms without visitors or in their homes without the ability to socialize even with their own family in some cases. Loneliness has marked the lives even of those who battle the disease and those who come into contact with it. Unable to see friends and neighbors. Loneliness has even effected our society which, though it can still interact, does so on a limited scale, in limited circles.

Loneliness is on the mind of the prophet Elijah in our lesson today. Perhaps he would even go farther and say abandonment. But today as we find opportunity to ponder the picture of our pouting prophet, God reminds us all that no matter what, **WE ARE NEVER ALONE!** You see **EVEN WHEN DOUBT ASSAILS YOU ... GOD IS WITH US IN HIS WORD.**

I have to admit that this is one of my favorite Old Testament Lessons. Elijah fresh on the victory of Mount Carmel where a drenched bull, with wood, altar, soil and the water caught in the trench surrounding it had been disintegrated by the heat of the fire God had sent from heaven. Where the faithful had chased down the prophets of Baal still bloody from their antics and slaughtered them in the Kishon Valley. Where the power of the Lord had come upon Elijah who ran, yes ran, beside the chariot of Ahab from Carmel to Jezreel (that's 17 miles). Elijah fresh off these awe-inspiring victories is told by Jezebel (Ahab's murderous wife) that she wants him dead. So Elijah flees, not by God's power but overcome by fear. He flees to Mount Horeb 100 miles away and why? Well Elijah says it, not once but twice, *"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."*

How quickly we forget. Life is good and things are great and we assume that this means we are doing everything right. That we have been very zealous for the Lord God almighty. Notice how Elijah is setting this up the God of power, who controls the hosts, the armies should probably be able to put an end to all this. We like to pretend that this means God now owes us something because we have done something for Him. Of course, forgetting that the only reason we live and move and breathe at all is because of His mercy for sinners such as us. Jesus once remarked, *So you also, when you have done everything you were told to do, should say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty (Luke 17:10).'* Instead, as soon as life turns downward at all, we begin to doubt God's goodness and love. His plans have not been our plans and we don't like it. Now, maybe we don't take off 100 miles in the opposite direction, but it can manifest itself in manifold ways from time spent with God in His Word to our willingness to support the Work God has asked of us to do. God's prophet and I would venture God's people, you and me, we need a reminder that God's ways are not always our ways and His ways are always better, whether we see it and understand it or not.

So God calls to the pouting prophet much as He called to Adam and Eve hiding under and behind the leaves of the garden. *"What are you doing here, Elijah?"* God in His omnipotence already knows the answer better than Elijah ever could. He isn't asking to gain knowledge. Instead, God is calling His prophet to repentance. In the most gentle of ways, forcing him to look into himself and see the selfishness that is raging within.

So God also comes to you and me. *"Where are you?" "What are you doing here, my child?"* He has not abandoned us, even when we in our doubt or sin have often abandoned Him. He still seeks us out. Calls to us, even as He calls us to repentance, away from sin closer to Him, ever closer to His Word.

Notice that too in the display God now puts on for Elijah. This was the prophet who wanted God to be present in power, making life easier, conquering foes before him not just on Carmel but every single time they reared their heretical heads. So God shows him power: a great and powerful wind, an earthquake, a fire but no God. Instead, He is found in the gentle whisper, the Word, the Word which calls the pouting prophet to repentance and places the same prophet on the path to service.

What God says next has always been interesting to me. ¹⁵ *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.* ¹⁶ *Also, anoint Jehu son of Nimshi king over Israel, and anoint Elisha son of Shaphat from Abel Meholah to succeed you as prophet.* ¹⁷ *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.* ¹⁸ *Yet I reserve seven thousand in Israel—all whose knees have not bowed down to Baal and all whose mouths have not kissed him."*

Turns out that God uses people to do His Work in this world He has made. He lets Elijah know he is not alone. Kings and prophets who call on the Name of the Lord, believers who follow the Word of their God in their everyday lives still exist even when everything else around us may call out the opposite. And so dear friends God calls out to you. This weekend we will be installing three new teachers here at St. Paul's, faithful to God, zealous for His Work. They will follow in the footsteps of servants who have gone before them, servants who are still here. They will serve, admittedly during somewhat of a strange year with masked students and masked teachers and a proliferation of disinfectant, but the quite whisper of God's Word will continue to be heard among the fear and chaos of pandemic. They serve in a congregation that numbers 900plus strong. That's 1800plus ears which have heard the gentle call of their God, showing their selfishness but more importantly showing them their Savior. His voice was perfect when ours can be filled with doubt. His voice was selfless even as it hung on the cross in blood and agony providing the perfect and complete sacrifice for sin. His voice is triumphant over sin and death and hell and it's His voice that we hear as we are called into service, whether in classrooms, or from pulpits, in our homes or on the streets yes, and sometimes simply by being a part of the number that reminds others that they are not alone as they serve their God not to earn His favor but in response, in thanks for that gentle voice, His constant presence as He comes to us in His Word of grace, His Word of forgiveness.

Loneliness and fear, these are tools that the Devil, our wayward world, and our own sinful flesh would use to drive doubt into the hearts and minds of believers, have used to drive doubt into the hearts of believers ever since the garden. Dear friends, don't buy into the lie. **WE ARE NEVER ALONE!** God is Always with us exactly as He has promised in His Word. Amen!