

Sermon for June 19, 2016
Father's Day
"Running From Reality"

1 Kings 19:1-15a

Elijah was running from the reality of his life. He was scared. Have you ever feared, for your life?

Elijah had been zealous for God and had made some very evil people mad. There was a contest between Almighty God and the gods of the people. And God demonstrated that these other "gods" were false gods. When the priests of the false gods called on them, they did nothing, but when Elijah prayed, God poured down fire from heaven. After that Elijah and the people executed the priests of the false gods. Of course Jezebel, the Queen, was very upset about this. She vowed that she would do the same thing to Elijah that he had done to her priests. She would hunt him down and see him killed as well. That was the reality from which Elijah was running. He was running for his life. He had made the powers of evil mad and they were retaliating. They were tracking him down to kill him. So he sought to escape that reality.

Real life for Elijah was that the Queen wanted his head. In the past Elijah had needed God, and God had answered his prayer with fire from heaven. But after the smoke cleared, he saw no sign of God left. All he saw was Jezebel's army charging at him. So Elijah panicked and ran.

Everyone who runs from something also runs to something; Elijah was no different. He was running to a cave in the wilderness on Mt. Horeb. He was seeking safety there. The wilderness is where God had protected the people of Israel in the past. In the wilderness God had cared for Israel and gave them food and water. And on a mountain God had spoken to the people of Israel and given them the law.

Elijah was terrified. He remembered that God had cared for the people in the wilderness. So he ran to the wilderness seeking God. The wilderness is where God had parted the Red Sea. That was where God had followed the people in a pillar of flame and smoke. Elijah was looking for a simpler time when life was not so complicated. No Jezebels and false gods to deal with. Just God's people trusting God to see them through the wilderness. God had spoken to the people from that Mountain once long ago. So Elijah ran back to the place of Israel's childhood. The place where their Heavenly Father had cared for them in the past.

And when he got there, God said, "What are you doing here? This is not where you should be. You should be proclaiming my word and working my deeds in the face of evil, not running in fear of it." Elijah was seeking to escape from the here and now and hide in a comfortable past. But God was in the present, as unpleasant as the present was for him. God was in the midst of the turmoil that Elijah was running from. God had been there all along, but Elijah had failed to see it.

Elijah ran to hide from the reality of his life, but God met him where he was. He ran to the cave of a familiar past out of fear. He was running from the present task that God had for him. But God followed him there. And God cared for him there. And God spoke to him.

Sometimes the way God speaks is as important as what God says. There was a great wind, and God was not in the wind. There was an earthquake, but God was not in the earthquake. There was a great fire, but God was not in the fire. Then there was a silence and God was in the silence.

God doesn't always speak to us out of the great and miraculous. Often God speaks to us out of the mundane and ordinary. Elijah saw no pillars of smoke and fire in Israel. He saw no manna from heaven, no parting of the sea. He saw no divine hand carving commandments in stone. He saw no rocks gushing forth living water. So Elijah ran to the wilderness seeking these things so that God could comfort him in a troubled time. But God was there, back in Israel all along. Not in burning bushes or pillars of fire. But in the ordinary and mundane. God's thundering voice was there all the time in the silence of everyday life.

People today are running from reality. They are afraid of the responsibilities and the troubles of everyday life. People today look around and they see no burning bushes or pillars of fire. Occasionally we see a flash of brilliance, a miracle, the hand of God? But after the smoke clears, all we see is life's troubles bearing down on us. So people try to escape into materialism, or consumerism, or drugs, or entertainment.

Many men, fathers, run from their responsibilities to their families. Our society is experiencing an epidemic of absent fathers. Some fathers abandon their families. Some refuse to pay child support. The courts have to track them down to make them pay for their children's bread. These are the obvious cases. Not all men abandon their families, but many run away in other ways. They run to their jobs and hide there. They run to the lake or to the woods and hide there. They spend time with the TV instead of with their kids. They get lost in cyberspace instead of interacting with their children. Ouch! That one hurt.

I don't mean to pick on fathers today; especially myself. This epidemic of absent fathers is but a symptom of a larger ailment. We in our society run from reality. We look around and real life doesn't look exciting to us. No burning bushes. No parting of the Red Sea each morning to get us going. All we see is the same old thing day after day. So we escape.

Elijah shows us that God is present in the ordinary as much as in the extra-ordinary. Like us, Elijah tried to escape from his troubles. It is true none of us has an army hunting us down. But we have all tried to run from our troubles as Elijah did. Elijah had tried to run and hide in the past. He tried to find God by running from his troubles.

Then God appeared to him. Not in the wind, earthquake, and fire, but in the silence. Silence is nothing more than nothing. It is not a presence. It is an absence. It is the absence of voices and sounds. But it was in that absence of sound that God appeared and spoke to Elijah. And God showed Elijah and us that our Savior is always with us. Even when there are no obvious signs of that presence.

Don't run from reality. I know you have trouble seeing God at work in the humdrum of everyday life. I know I sometimes have. What does checking homework and bandaging knees have in common with pillars of fire and smoke. What does peanut butter and jelly have to do with manna from heaven? What does waiting and listening to grown children have to do with parting seas? Where are the miracles of God in the mundane day to day tasks of Fatherhood? But God is there. We may only see it in the flashes of glory. When a child says a prayer on their own for the first time, or spontaneously gives a hug or a kiss. When they graduate, or get married, or get a job, and move on in life. The responsibilities of life, like Fatherhood, may seem devoid of burning bushes and pillars of fire and parting seas. But God is there in the absence of such grand things. God is in the small ordinary things. God even speaks through silence.

Listen! Really listen. Did you hear it? God is speaking to you!