

Time Out
1 Kings 19:9-18

I grew up outside a small town in rural New Jersey. At the far back of our property grew our garden; and behind the garden, the railroad tracks. Those tracks designated the end of my “safe” world and entry into the “wild”. You see, across those tracks was the “woods”.

Deftly navigating the rows of vegetables I came to the bank. And down the 3 foot bank with my 4-foot person was quite a challenge. I’d look both ways and listen for any rumblings – then run across the tracks. On the other side stood a higher bank, but easier to manage because of the railroad ties a neighbor had contrived as steps. I’d scramble up those steps and into the trees. Once there, the underbrush tripped you up if you couldn’t find a path. The snakes that sometimes wandered into our garden made their home out there. Travel far enough, and you’d come to the river. It was a wonderfully rich place for childhood imagination.

Within those woods my older brother and I made our fort. We found a group of young trees close together and flexible enough to bend just right. We cleared all the brush and picker bushes from between them with some garden tools, and then took all that we had cleared and used it as thatching, weaving it all through and around the trees. You could barely tell it was there from the outside.

Despite its adventurous surroundings, we did an okay job of making it nice and snug. My mother even gave me an old broom to sweep the remaining leaves off our dirt floor.

This camouflaged cave became a safe retreat when the frustrations of my young life seemed too much for me. Often I would run off to the wild and sit in the cool green of my own canopy. All alone in the wilderness I had time to recoup.

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This morning, Elijah’s story begins in a cave.  
A cave on Mt. Horeb – Sinai – the Mountain of God.

Exhausted: physically and spiritually.

Alone, because he has left everyone behind as he fled for his life.

There were times when I sought my wooden haven in what then felt like much the same state – not that a 10-year-old can claim the same challenges of a great prophet ... And yet, any of us can be exhausted.

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But let me rewind and briefly set the scene for how Elijah got to this cave. He’d been having a hard time of it: his fellow prophets had all been murdered for trying to turn the

people of Israel from worshiping Baal back to the God of their ancestors. Elijah had even prepared a contest between the gods. The God of Israel performed a great miracle before all gathered, and Elijah destroyed Baal's prophets.

The people repented.

Elijah had succeeded.

Happy ending.

But, of course, everyone was not happy, and so Elijah's life is threatened.

He runs.

He runs and leaves his servant along the way.

He runs into the wilderness where he falls exhausted and prays:

“It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life”.

He wanted to rest – he prayed to die, to end his life journey and mission and lay down his mantle.

With the strength he receives in sleep and divinely offered bread, Elijah finally makes his way to the mountain of God – and this morning's reading picks up there.

“At that place he came to a cave, and spent the night there. Then the word of the Lord came to him, saying, ‘what are you doing here, Elijah?’”

What was he doing there? He was resting!

Just imagine Elijah having to EXPERIENCE all that he had!

Frustration,

treachery,

miracles,

murder

and exhaustion.

Of course Elijah is resting.

And when asked, he offers his experiences in his answer:

“I have been very zealous for the Lord;

the Israelites have forsaken your covenant,

thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets.

I alone am left, and they're seeking my life to take it away”...

... I've done all the right things – I've done it all for God.

I've given of myself physically and spiritually and emotionally to succeed.

Look at all I've done, and I really feel I've gotten nowhere.

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Have you ever felt that way? To some extent we all can relate. We work hard, and, sure, there's a good result...but your work isn't done. There's always something more to do, and all your effort seems to be for so little. Even when you practice “do unto others” sometimes

you just to get slapped in the face – and these aren't even the big global struggles like hunger and war. Sometimes it can be very discouraging.

We all have things that bring us to the ends of our ropes. But what do we do when we finally hit the edge?

Elijah did what he could.

He ran to the wilderness – to his safe haven – to God's own mountain, where he could be safely alone with God in his great frustration and sense of helplessness.

“What are you doing here, Elijah?” seems to me one of the best pastoral questions the Great Counselor could ask. God makes Elijah take inventory to see what has brought him to this place. What has pushed him to seek solitude in God? God knows the answer, but allows Elijah to express in his own way his great need. And after Elijah enumerates his many complaints, what is God's reply?

“Go out and stand on the mountain before the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by”.



But Elijah doesn't immediately comply.

He's still safely within the cave when the great wind begins splitting rocks.

And he's still deep inside when the earthquake shakes the mountain around him.

And he's *still* not left his sanctuary when the fire burns.

Not until the silence surrounds him does he move to obey God's voice:

“Go out and stand on the mountain before the Lord”....

I imagine Elijah's voice in turn. “Are you kidding? After everything I've been through?... Time out! I'm not going out in that”.

He's already been a witness to fire and destruction and brokenness.

He's been in harm's way, and he's not about to step out into more.

He's just not ready.

“Step out of the cave,” God tells him – but Elijah doesn't.



Now, perhaps you have heard this passage interpreted as I often have.

God is not in the wind, the earthquake or the fire.

God is the still small voice of the silence.

And this is an inspired word – because in our busy lives of

keep moving,

make and do,

don't stop –

I think we sometimes need to enter the silence in communion with God.

But as I re-read, the text only states: “and after the fire a sound of sheer silence”

into which Elijah finally feels prepared to enter.

Could it be that God is **no** more in the silence than in the wind, the earthquake or the fire – but that the silence, the peaceful, open silence, is what makes it okay for Elijah to step out before God?



There are times in our lives when we hear the call, but we simply aren't ready to respond. There are times when we need that extra little time and space to refuel.

There are times when we need to run to our own wilderness retreats or to take summer vacations, or tune out the news for a little while. If we try to take all of life in without a break, we run the risk of being tapped out by the intensity of it all.

Even Jesus took some time away from the crowds and his own disciples to go off alone and pray.

But the key to remember, as we each seek our moments of healing solitude, is that Elijah's story does not end in the cave. I couldn't stay in my leafy fort forever. And we are all still in the world, with its many demands on us.

Eventually we must make ready to step out on the ledge to answer God's call.

And even though we've perhaps waited through the storm until we sense a space into which we are prepared to enter, the amazing thing is just this: God is there.

When Elijah finally prepares to exit the cave, wrapped in the silence that he has so needed

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God hasn't gone anywhere.

And although Elijah again recounts his recent pains, God knows he is finally ready to use those experiences to grow and move on. Elijah's call has remained.

And now he is prepared to embark on the next stage of his journey.



Summer is the season when many of us take some time out – to rest from the year that has been and to prepare ourselves for the new church year to come. The days are longer, the gardens are green, the mountains are cool.

Before we reenter the long cycle, it is right to give ourselves a moment of peace. And if you find yourself feeling guilty for taking the extra time, look to Elijah.

God was not in the wind                      nor the earthquake                      nor the fire –  
nor the silence.

But God was there all along, giving Elijah the time out he needed, and ready to speak a word when he emerged.

So take some time out. *And get ready to step out on the ledge once more.*