

Thank you, God for being the ground beneath us, the way in front of us, the encouragement behind us, the presence above us, and the light within us. Amen.

If you want to read some of the best stories ever told, just open the Bible. There are few writers who have offered us the unbeatable combination of intrigue, mayhem, and beauty that unfold throughout the Hebrew and Christian scriptures. And today we heard just one episode in one of those great stories.

The passage from 1st Kings today opens with Elijah on the top of Mt. Horeb and why he is there, on that mountaintop, is one of those good stories. As one of the great prophets in Hebrew Scripture, Elijah was filled with the zeal only a prophet can have to prove that his God, Yahweh, was the true god. His enthusiasm for this mission led him to do some pretty outrageous things. Elijah lived during the time of the King Ahab and his wife Jezebel, names that might be familiar to you. Jezebel was the daughter of King Ethbaal, as in Baal, the pagan god, that continued to be worshipped even after the arrival of the Hebrew people from Egypt. King Ahab adopted the religion of his wife and soon most of the country was happily worshipping idols. That drove Elijah crazy. He was determined to show them that they were worshipping the wrong gods. So he made a proposal to King Ahab. Why don't we sacrifice 2 bulls and put each bull on some wood to be burned? Then you can call on your gods and I will call on mine and whichever god sends down fire is the true god. Pretty gutsy. The 2 altars were set up and the Baal worshippers began crying to Baal, "O Baal, answer us." All morning long they cried and nothing happened. No answer. At the end of the morning of fruitless entreaty, Elijah comments in one of the best sarcastic responses on history, "Surely Baal is a god; either he is meditating or he has wandered away or he is on a journey, or perhaps he is asleep and must be awakened." Even prophets can't resist a cheap shot occasionally. Finally as the afternoon wore on and Baal remained silent, Elijah spruced up the bull on his altar and just to make things more dramatic, he added a moat of water around the altar. He called upon Yahweh, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

No sooner had Elijah finished speaking than fire appeared and consumed everything, including the moat of water. Elijah wasn't content to stop there but ordered the killing of all the prophets of Baal in Israel, 250 of them. Elijah may have won that battle but of course there were repercussions and when Jezebel heard that all of her prophets were dead she threatened to kill Elijah. Elijah, knowing real power when he saw it, wisely got out of town, although how he was able to order the deaths of all the queen's prophets is an interesting question. That is where we meet him in the story from 1 Kings this morning, on top of Mt. Horeb, having fled from Jezebel's murderous intentions.

He arrives at Mt. Horeb, hungry and scared, and ready to quit the prophecy business. He's hiding in a cave when God speaks to him, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" Elijah reminds God that he has worked hard for God, that Israel is a hot mess of idol-worshiping activities and that his life is in danger. God directs Elijah to leave the cave. And then there is this lovely and terrible passage where God sends a great wind and then an earthquake and then a fire but God is not in any of those things. Notice that during these acts of mighty power, in spite of God's invitation, Elijah does not leave the cave. Maybe he was too smart or too scared to come out and face the power of God. But what comes after all the fury of these elements? What draws Elijah out of the cave? It is the sound of silence. God was not in the wind that roared, the earth that quaked or the fire that crackled but God was in the silence.

This event is just one of several mountain top moments in the Bible, mountaintops where God seems especially prone to appear – Moses receiving the 10 commandments on Mt. Sinai; Jesus transfigured on Mt. Tabor; Mt. Zion, the place of God's throne. As we know so well looking out over the front range, mountains are majestic. And we, in our own lives, may have had the equivalent of mountaintop experiences – an especially colorful sunset, looking down into the vastness of the Grand Canyon, or watching a child take her first step. These moments of transcendence are intense and even life changing

and we may even seek them out.

But what we often overlook is that God is equally present in the everyday events - washing dishes, brushing our teeth, sweeping out the garage.

Each of these too is a sacred event.

And sometimes, when we stop and pay attention,

we are aware of God breathing in and out of us as we run down the soccer field,

God blessing our hands as we work in the dirt of our gardens,

or the reconciling presence of God in a difficult conversation.

God is even in the midst of the pandemic, hard as that may be to believe.

And as Elijah discovered on top of Mt. Horeb, God is even in the silence.

God in fact is in every moment of our lives – HERE, NOW.

We take the basic fact of existence for granted but

the verb to be – I am, you are, we are, he/she is, God is – is the great miracle.

There is a scene in the book, *The Snow Leopard*, that illustrates this so well.

The author, Peter Matthiessen and George Schaller, a biologist,

went to Tibet in the early 1970's to study Himalayan sheep

and to spot the elusive snow leopard.

They spent several weeks trekking in a very remote region.

While they were there, Peter, who was a Buddhist,

visited several monasteries in the region.

One of them, which goes by the lovely name of the Crystal Monastery,

had only one monk in residence, who was very old and crippled.

Because of the high altitude and remoteness, his life there was extremely difficult,

and even just finding wood for a fire was back breaking work.

Matthiessen couldn't understand how the monk managed to survive

and why he seemed so content.

His translator asked the monk about this and in response

he said with a radiant smile, "Of course I'm happy here!

It's wonderful! Especially when I have no choice!"

Especially when you have no choice?!? Are you kidding?

As red-blooded Americans who cherish our independence

and the ability to keep all our options open,

not to mention being able to choose from way too many

toothpaste options at the store,

that last line just burns inside of us and runs counter to everything we hold dear.

It reminds me of the scene in one of my favorite movies, *Breaking Away*,

where the son has taken over his father's used car lot

while the father recuperates from a heart attack in the hospital.

The son visits him and proudly reports that he gave a refund

to a guy who returned one of the cars.
His father sits bolt upright in bed yelling Refund! Refund!
No choice! No choice!

What that solitary monk was able to see so well is that what IS is sacred,
that the isolation and difficulty of his life was just what it should be –
no more, no less.
Instead of resenting his crippled legs or lack of community or long, cold winters,
he looked around at the high peaks, and the deep snow
and the blue sky and herds of sheep he said yes to what is.
Not a sullen yes or a grudging yes or a tentative yes but a wholehearted joyful yes.
If we can learn to see that every moment has some wonder in it,
that God is in even those things we would never, never choose,
then even in the midst of worldwide sickness and death,
maybe we can stop fretting
at all the restrictions and inconveniences of our everyday lives
and discover that yes, God is there
as we struggle scratch our noses under our masks,
or calculate just how far 6' is or even face the fear of infection and even death.

At the end of his visit to the monastery, the monk asked Matthiessen,
“Have you seen the snow leopard?” Matthiessen shook his head.
“No! Isn't that wonderful?”