

Proper 7 Year C
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Saint James, Wheat Ridge

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I'm not gonna lie to you.
Coming up with a new sermon,
preaching the Word of God
week after week, month after month,
is not easy.
It can be downright exhausting.

It's especially challenging
when I need to speak a truth
that I know some people don't want to hear.
I think an awful lot of people come to church
only to be comforted
and not to be challenged;
only to have their existing beliefs affirmed,
not questioned.

And woe to any preacher
who crosses that line,
who makes the congregation too uncomfortable.

The job is not without its pleasant moments,
indeed, without its extraordinary moments,
its mountaintop moments.

But trust me when I tell you,
there is a long, long, LONG line of prophets
who know just how much risk there is
in speaking the truth.

Elijah can certainly testify to that.
In this morning's first reading,
Elijah finds himself in quite a pickle.

The trouble all began on a different mountain,

Mount Carmel,
when Elijah challenged the priests of Baal to a showdown
to see whose God was more powerful.
Elijah humiliated those other priests.
And then he killed them.
You can read that story for yourself
In the 18th chapter of 1st Kings.
I think we can all agree that
Tolerance for religious diversity
Was not Elijah's strong suit.
But nobody ever said those Old Testament prophets
Were a cuddly bunch.

When our story picks up today,
King Ahab's pagan wife, Jezebel,
wants to get rid of Elijah.
She's had it up to here with him,
She will have her revenge.
So she threatens him.
And being the queen,
Her threats aren't just idle words.
She really does have the power to kill him.

Elijah was afraid.
And in his fear, he did a very human thing:
He ran.

He ran and he ran,
and when he could run no further,
he sat down under a tree
and he prayed to God.
"God, please, just let me die. I'm through.
I can't do this anymore."

It was an angel who woke him up,
And gave him with everything he would need
To go for another 40 days.
And you know, in Bible-speak,
40 days is code for a really long time.
Elijah was called to go deeper into a lonely wilderness,

Up on to another mountaintop,
To Mount Horeb.

This is a really significant mountain.
Horeb is another name for Sinai.
Anybody know what happened at Mount Sinai?
It's where God appeared to Moses.

Just be aware that any time a Bible story takes us to a mountain,
Something important is about to happen.
Nothing unimportant happens on mountains in scripture.

Elijah isn't just running from Jezebel.
He's running from his vocation.
He's running from *where* God wants him to be,
Running away from *what* God wants him to be doing.
Elijah is forced to decide whether or not
his fear of Jezebel
is more powerful than his faithfulness to God.

God puts Elijah on the spot.
Twice God asks him,
"What are you doing here, Elijah?"
In other words, "How can you be my servant,
how can you fulfill my purposes,
If you're not where I need you to be?"

That seems to be a question for all of us, even today.
How many of us have found ourselves in similar situations?
Maybe not on the mountain where Moses received the 10 Commandments,
but certainly on the run from what God is calling us to do and to be.

When God asks Elijah why he's there,
and not where he should be,
Elijah answers both times with the same words,
and honestly they're kind of whiny and self-righteous.

"I have been working SO HARD
and trying to do the right thing,
and those people have totally *abandoned* you,

and I'm the only one left who's faithful,
and I'm all alone, so, just kill me now."

Elijah is really focused on himself, isn't he?
Yeah, there's more than a touch of narcissism there.
He's pretty eager to paint the direst picture possible,
And to lay the blame at other people's feet.

Then again, Elijah's only human,
And isn't it tempting to try to justify our actions
When we've run away from the tasks before us.

We love this story about Elijah looking for God,
and not finding God in the wind,
or in the earthquake, or in the fire,
but instead finding God in the sheer silence.
When we think about this passage of scripture,
that's what we remember, don't we?

But memorable as that is,
maybe that's not really the main point of the story.
Maybe the main point is not
Elijah summoning God
in the cave of avoidance.

Maybe the main point is God telling Elijah
to stop complaining
and to get back to work.

And the message for us
is the same as the message for Elijah.
Get to doing the work at hand.
If you want to see your life renewed,
stop complaining,
and *do* that which needs to be done.

You may not WANT to.
You may not feel like it.
But do it anyway.

Elijah is called back into action,
not because he feels like it,
but because it's what needs to be done.

And there we have it.
The message that Elijah heard in that still small voice.
That voice said,
"Listen, Elijah, you need to get back to work;
I have stuff for you to do,
And you can't do it if you're hiding in a cave."

Every single one of us here today has been called by God.
Every single one of us has been given a task.
Some days, we may not feel up to it.
Some days we may think
God couldn't possibly be serious
If God expects us to do what we're asked to do.
Some days, we just don't want to go where God tells us to go.
Some days, we just don't want to leave our cave.

Some days, we are all like that naked man among the tombstones,
Who, after Jesus freed him from his demons,
begged Jesus to let him go with him.
That man didn't want to go back to his home town,
back to the place where everyone he met
would surely know of his checkered past,
would surely be more than ready to judge him.
If I had been that man,
I wouldn't have wanted to have gone home either.
I would have said "Lord, send me anywhere but there."

But home is exactly where Jesus sent him.
Back to the very place he did not want to go.
"Return to your home," Jesus told him,
"and declare how much God has done for you."
"Go," says God. "Return on your way."

We can't run away.
Even when we want to.
Even when it's hard.

And by virtue of our baptisms,
 Each and every one of us is called to speak out,
 And to declare how much God has done for us.

That is our vocation, all of us,
 Whether we're ordained or lay,
 Whether we're like a prophet hiding in a cave from a murderous queen
 Or we just woke up to find ourselves naked
 and wandering among the tombstones.
 Whether we feel like it or not,
 We are called to be faithful,
 Even when it's inconvenient.
 We are called to speak out
 And declare what God has done for us.

We've got to speak out, and speak truth to power.
 We've got to speak out about injustice.
 Speak out about inequality.
 Speak out about racism.
 Speak out about children being held in cages
 And families being torn apart,
 And the world we will hand on to future generations
 being destroyed while we do nothing.

However we name the evils in our midst,
 It is our responsibility to speak out,
 And to exorcise these evils from people's lives,
 Just as our Lord once did.

Both Elijah and the naked man
 are given the same instruction:
 "Return."
 Go back to the place where life fell apart;
 return to the community you fled
 out of fear and powerlessness.
 Show your face again, but as a new creation,
 clothed in the mantle of divine power and purpose,
 clothed in Christ.

It's not going to be easy.
It can be downright exhausting.
But there is a world that needs us,
And a loving God who sends us.
Faithfulness is more than being faithful
When it's convenient,
And hiding in a cave when it's not.

“What are we doing here?”
How we answer that question
May transform our lives and our world.
Amen.