

No More Hiding in Caves

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After six days Jesus took Peter, James and John with him and led them up a high mountain, where they were all alone. There he was transfigured before them. His clothes became dazzling white, whiter than anyone in the world could bleach them. And there appeared before them Elijah and Moses, who were talking with Jesus. Peter said to Jesus, "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here. Let us put up three shelters - one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah." (He did not know what to say, they were so frightened.) Then a cloud appeared and enveloped them, and a voice came from the cloud: "This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!" Suddenly, when they looked around, they no longer saw anyone with them except Jesus. As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus gave them orders not to tell anyone what they had seen until the Son of Man had risen from the dead. (Mark 9:2-9)

Do you ever feel like quitting? I mean really quitting everything? Do you ever feel like staying in bed, shutting off the alarm, pulling the bed clothes over your head and letting the world go by? Does the idea of finding a cave and then hiding in it appeal to you? Do you sometimes look at the stack of emails in your inbox and dream about deleting all of them unopened? When you drive home along I-66 do you have fantasies about deliberately missing your exit and keeping on driving? When you look at a kitchen full of dirty dishes, unwashed laundry and unwashed children do you ever want to run away? Do you ever dream about going to some place where nobody knows you and where you can just hide?

If you ever have felt like quitting then you are in good company because most of us, including the spiritual giants of this world, have felt the same way. Elijah was one of them. He wanted to quit. He had just come down from one of the most amazing mountaintop experiences that a man could ever witness. It had taken place on Mount Carmel, one of the most beautiful places in all of Israel. It was a center for pagan worship and Elijah had challenged the 450 prophets of Baal to a "little" competition. An altar had been set up with wood and a prepared sacrifice but no fire had been lit. The challenge was to see which god would answer by fire. The prophets of Baal had gone first and they had danced and pranced around the altar from early morning till late at night but no fire had fallen. Nothing had happened. Now it was Elijah's turn and, to make the competition a little more exciting, he asked them to soak the wood with gallons of water. Then he prayed a short prayer and the fire of the Lord fell and burned up the sacrifice, the wood, the stones and the soil and also licked up the water in the trench.

When the people saw it they fell on their faces and shouted, "The Lord - he is God! The Lord - he is God!" It was a spectacular moment and Elijah celebrated by having all 450 prophets of Baal slaughtered on the spot, tolerance wasn't high on the list in those days! Then he ran all the way to Jezreel which was a distance of about 17 miles. He was on top of the world but then came the crash; Queen Jezebel put the word out that she would have him killed in the next 24 hours. Jezebel was a force to be reckoned with - she was the daughter of the King of Sidonia, a dedicated

Baal worshipper, and had already killed many of the Lord's prophets. Elijah was terrified. This time he ran for his life and finished up in the Judean desert near Beersheba. The angel of the Lord came and ministered to him but Elijah kept on traveling through the wilderness until he reached Mount Horeb - which most scholars believe was actually Mount Sinai. There he went into a cave and spent the night. He was ready to quit. He'd had enough excitement for one lifetime.

And the word of the LORD came to him: "What are you doing here, Elijah?" 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." (1 Kings 19:9-10)

Elijah really was feeling sorry for himself. He was totally convinced that he was the only faithful person left on the face of the earth. Have you ever felt that way? Have you ever felt as if

everything was up to you and you weren't up to it? Have you ever felt as if you have done your best and yet it wasn't enough? This story is for you.

The LORD said, "[Elijah] 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. After the earthquake came a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper. 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 came to him again and said, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" (1 Kings 19:11-13)

But still he didn't get it. He gave the very same answer: "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." (1 Kings 19:14) Elijah was so consumed with himself that he could not grasp the fact that he had just had a personal encounter with the living God. He had just talked with the God who created the heavens and the earth, the God who could raise up nations and bring them down. He just didn't get it. So this time the Lord gave him something to do and a promise to remember...

The LORD said to him, "Go back the way you came, and go to the Desert of Damascus. When you get there, anoint Hazeel king over Aram. Also, anoint Jehu son of Nimshi king over Israel, and anoint Elisha son of Shaphat from Abel Meholah to succeed you as prophet. ... Yet I reserve seven thousand in Israel--all whose knees have not bowed down to Baal and all whose mouths have not kissed him." (1 Kings 19:15-18)

It is an amazing encounter with lots of lessons to teach us but before we examine them let's take a look at that other mountaintop experience that forms the basis for both the Gospel and Epistle for today. This time we are at the very northern limit of Israel on the side of Mount Hermon.

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There are times when we all need friends to carry us through situations where our own faith is not enough.

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Jesus has just fed the 5000, walked on water, fed another 4000, healed the blind and then heard Peter's bold declaration that he is the Christ, the long awaited Messiah. Jesus had tried to explain to Peter that it wouldn't all be smooth sailing from here on out but Peter wouldn't listen and so after rebuking him Jesus took Peter along with James and John to a lonely place on the side of Mount Hermon. It is an amazing spot. You can see for miles and you almost feel as if you are looking out over the whole of Israel. The air is clean and sharp and the silence is almost tangible, it is quite a contrast to the lush oasis of Jericho or the hustle and bustle of Jerusalem. It was a good place to get away from everything and everyone.

But then something happened to them that was truly out of this world: Jesus was transfigured before them and his clothes became dazzling white, whiter than anyone in the world could bleach them. What

other encounter immediately comes to your mind? That's right, Moses on Mount Sinai. He glowed because he had been in the immediate presence of God, we sometimes call it the 'Shekinah' glory of God and yet there are no words that can capture the brilliance, the glory, the power, the majesty, the radiance, and the splendor of the divine presence. But even more amazing they see Elijah and Moses talking with Jesus. The transfiguration account in the Gospel of Luke tells us that they were talking to him about his exodus or his death that was to take place in Jerusalem. (By using the word exodus Luke is making an obvious parallel with the deliverance of Israel from Egypt and so is already preparing them for the redemption that Christ would win on the cross.) Peter is overwhelmed and blurts out, "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here. Let us put up three shelters—one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah." (Mark 9:5) What was Peter up to? Was he wanting to hold onto this extraordinary moment by putting up some shelters or is he just trying to be hospitable? We can't be sure, but perhaps Peter was thinking back to what we now know as the festival of Tabernacles in the Jewish calendar, the time when observant Jews still build temporary dwellings to commemorate God's presence and provision during their wilderness wanderings.

Peter was trying to grasp something of the enormity of what was happening to them in this amazing encounter with God and his response was one of faith. But the encounter didn't stop because a cloud appeared and enveloped them and a voice came from the cloud and said, "This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to Him!" (Mark 9:7) This cloud was no ordinary rain cloud, it was the cloud that points to the immanent presence and glory of God. It is the cloud that went before the Jewish people as God's protection during the Exodus. It is the cloud that appeared in the tabernacle when God spoke with Moses. It is the cloud that filled Solomon's temple as it was being dedicated. If we had any doubt that this was an encounter with the living God - those doubts are gone. And then we hear God's declaration, "This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to Him!" (Mark 9:7) This is actually a wonderful three-point sermon all in itself. Not bad for ten words!

Jewish teachers and scholars would often refer to a Bible text by hinting or quoting one or two words of the passage. People of Jesus' time

had committed the Scriptures to heart and so would understand the hint and recognize the larger context. One could reference a whole set of verses or ideas by a single word. In contemporary American culture we have a similar phenomena with advertising slogans and television shows. "Can you hear me now?" (Verizon) Where's the beef? (Wendy's) "We try harder!" (Avis) "Melt in your mouth, not in your hand" (M&M) Just do it! (Nike) You deserve a break today (McDonalds) In the first century they knew the Scriptures in the same way. The rabbis assumed that their listeners would know an entire passage even though they cite only part of the text in their teaching. The voice from heaven is like that. Three separate verses of the Bible are alluded to, although they are only quoted in part. The first phrase, "This is my son" refers to Psalm 2:7 "You are my son, today I have begotten you." The second phrase, "Whom

I love" or "My chosen" recalls Isaiah 42:1 "Behold my servant whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights." The final phrase, "Listen to him" is found in the words spoken about the prophet who would come after Moses in the Book of Deuteronomy, "The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me [Moses] from among you, from your brethren - listen to him." (Deuteronomy 18:15) So you see in these few words we have references to each of the three main sections of the Hebrew Bible - (1) The teaching or Torah, (2) the prophets and (3) the psalms and each reference points to the person and ministry of Christ. Now, just in case you find all of this a little too contrived we have the words of our Epistle lesson echoing in our ears...

We did not follow cleverly invented stories when we told you about the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty... the voice came to him from the Majestic Glory, saying, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased." We ourselves heard this voice that came from heaven when we were with him on the sacred mountain... (2 Peter 1:16-18)

They were there. It was no myth. This Encounter with God really happened - we can count on it. So the question that we must answer is, "So what? What difference does it make?"

God is intensely personal, not some vague undifferentiated force - He is the unnamed Creator of the universe. It may seem more sophisticated to think of God in that way but it is not compatible with Biblical theology nor is it the God of the Bible. Generic spirituality may be very popular these days but that is not what these two encounters describe. Our God is not only an awesome God, but our God is very specific, very personal and a God who desires to be known. God wants to communicate with us. God cares about individuals. God cares about you and me. God cares about powerful people and powerless people. God knows when you feel like quitting. God knows when you feel overwhelmed, and God will always give you a way through. God will never abandon you. You can count on it.

The incident with Elijah is wonderfully reminder of this truth. Elijah was depressed but God would not abandon him to his self-pity. God could have literally blown him away in the wind or crushed him in the earth-

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quake but instead God cares about him and ministers to him in a still, small voice. I believe that God wants to talk to you and to me. The only question is, are we really listening? God has uniquely revealed himself in Jesus. Jesus may have preached and taught like a first century rabbi but He was and is unique, the only begotten Son of the Father. He is one of a kind. He is the one who was sent to redeem the world and the witness of Moses and Elijah confirms this. God's plan is to bring all things in heaven and earth together under one head and that head is Jesus. Jesus is at the very center of God's blueprint for the future. You and I have been given the privilege and responsibility of proclaiming this good news to the entire world. It is news that the world desperately needs to hear. God expects us to listen to Jesus. But we need to remember that in the Hebrew language, the word 'listen' or Shema means much more than passive hearing. It calls for complete and active obedience. The voice from heaven is telling every person who bears the name of Christ to study the teachings of Jesus and put them into practice. Encounters with God are exciting but they are never intended to be an end in themselves.

Elijah was given his marching orders. He was to go back to work and anoint Hazael and Jehu as kings and anoint Elisha as his successor, there were lots of faithful people who were ready to move forward. After this encounter Elijah was a transformed man with a new direction and purpose for his life. Peter, James and John were never the same after their encounter on the mountaintop. Their journey back into the valley of everyday living was not without challenges. They had not yet witnessed the agony of the crucifixion but the direction of their lives was set. Like Elijah they were transformed men with a new purpose for living. The same is meant to be true for you and me! We may be blessed with a miraculous encounter with God - our own mountaintop moment - they still happen and to be treasured. But if that is not our experience every Sunday we have an Encounter with the living God through the Word and Sacrament of the Eucharist. It may not always make us glow but it will make us grow if we will listen and obey. At the end of each service we acknowledge this transformation when we pray "thank you for feeding us... assuring us ... that we are living members of the Body of your Son, and heirs of your eternal kingdom." Did you hear that? We are no longer alone. We are intimately and personally connected to the living God. But we never stop there we always pray these most dangerous words: "And now, Father, send us out to do the work you have given us to do, to love and serve you as faithful witnesses of Christ our Lord." No more hiding in caves, no more running away, once we have encountered the Lord, once we have experienced his transforming grace, we have been given work to do. Let's do it!