

Grace, mercy and peace be unto you from God, our Father, and from the Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen The sermon this morning is based on the Old Testament lesson which we've just heard. We pray: Lord God, heavenly Father, send us your Holy Spirit, that he would open our hearts and minds to hear your son, Jesus Christ, as he speaks to us today. This we ask in your most holy name. Amen.

Elijah was a deeply religious man who had fought ardently for his faith. But he was convinced that it had no future because no one practiced it anymore. His fellow Israelites had given it up for other religions. Just prior to our text Elijah had had his famous showdown with the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel. The fact that Elijah emerged as victor did not make the evil queen Jezebel happy, and she decided that it was time to eliminate Elijah once and for all. The prophet learned of her plans and fled. He wasn't just fleeing from the murderous queen, though, but also from the empty and lifeless religiosity of his country Israel. He saw no point in trying anymore: "Israel has rejected your covenant, broken down your altars and killed your prophets with the sword." What future was there in that?

Perhaps you can empathize with poor Elijah, sometimes even on a spiritual level. I was at a youth weekend once with the theme "Being in and being out". I'll never forget how the youth sat in a circle, talking about their experiences as Christians in their schools. They were often ostracized and made fun of because they said that they were card-carrying Christians. They wept tears of frustration, but also of joy that they were finally surrounded by people who didn't laugh and point fingers at them. Fortunately, that kind of peer pressure is not quite as prevalent when you leave high school, but it never goes away, does it? You and I know the unspoken fear and the pressure to avoid Christian topics in our conversation, to drift with the

current, do what everybody else does and say what they say. If we don't people will laugh at us, think we're odd, make a snide remark. Most of that don't want that at all. It can be a fate worse than death. The sermon text, however, tells about Elijah's experiences with God and how they motivated him to go back to Israel and keeping fighting for his faith—even though he was physically and emotionally drained and had all the symptoms of being burned out. And we can learn from his experiences and receive the same strength and take heart as we continue down life's—and faith's—path.

Elijah's experience with God consisted of two parts. The first and the more important part took place when God gave the truly remarkable show of the destructive forces of nature. God told Elijah to go stand out on the mountain while his presence passed by. How would this infinite and all-powerful God show himself to Elijah? "A great and powerful wind tore the mountain apart and shattered the rocks . . . but the Lord was not in the wind." An earthquake and fire followed, but God wasn't in those either. Isn't that peculiar? If you were physically and spiritually exhausted, in what kind of natural phenomenon would you be expecting to experience God? Where would you be looking for him? What would you want? Don't we, even today, still try to find God or look for meaningfully spiritual experiences in things that are overwhelming, breathtaking, impressive or even frightening? Wouldn't that be "the ticket" for our godless world—that God make such a show of force that every single person alive would see it and have to believe? Strong gods like that get what they want, they prevail. And they can certainly secure

my promotion, my good standing, my social status, my Mercedes for me—and all these other things that are sooo important. But God was not in these powerfully destructive forces of nature. He was in the gentle whisper. God revealed himself to us in a similarly way—not as Hercules or Arnold Schwarzenegger but as the frail Jesus of Nazareth, not as the strong and successful world leader, but as the one who was crucified, not as the one who scares or forces us into believing, but as the one who is at work by forgiving and reconciling himself with us and who lovingly addresses each one of us. And finally he does not choose to make his presence known to us by a show of strength, but comes to us in hiding: in the words of a sermon, in water and in bread and wine. He chose grace, love and peace with us instead of power over and imposing his will on us—and all of that so that he could win us back for God. And we remain true to him by faith and follow him for that very reason: He really has won us over and because we would rather have his grace, love and peace than all of the pros and cons of power. And it is exactly that love and grace that he shows us unconditionally that motivates and enables us to go back out and keep the faith in a godless world.

The other part of Elijah's experience with God was the short discussion he had with God. God didn't tell Elijah to take the day off, but rather sent him right back into the middle of his struggle. That shows us many things, but I'd like to mention two of them—and please remember both of them when your road starts to get rocky. First, it shows us that God has a plan, a course of action, for us, even if we think we are at the end of our rope. And that knowledge we have by faith helps keep us from

despairing or from giving up when the going gets rough. Second, it shows us that God has not abandoned us, when we are in the middle of a crisis. It was under those—critical—circumstances, at the depth of Elijah’s despair that God drew near to him. When we are in pain or suffering emotionally, we sometimes ask ourselves what we have done to be punished like that, or we wonder where God was.

Observing Elijah’s experience with God, and taking into account the fact that Jesus suffered the cross, we realize that God never left us and is just as close to us in our times of trouble as he ever was.

That’s the kind of God we have—the one who shows himself in a gentle whisper and who is very near to us even when we are facing a crisis. And he is that way because he has chosen to love and save us, rather than to force himself upon us.

And now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.