

***Where God Was Not***

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[Music Intro]

[Male voice] The following is a presentation of Artisan Church in Rochester, New York.

[Voice of Pastor Scott]

How many of you could name all four presidents on Mount Rushmore? You don't have to shout them out, just if you're confident you could do it—hand in the air. OK yes, I see a few hands. So we have George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Teddy Roosevelt and Abe Lincoln. The four presidents on Mount Rushmore. Mt Rushmore is interesting because it takes, you know, all of the American history up to that point and and tries to pick the top four presidents that we've had. And, you know you can read about the artist's decision to choose those presidents, and that's kind of interesting to do. But also Mt Rushmore can be a fun game to play about any topic. Have you ever done this with your friends? Like if we're going to name, if you're going to put four pro basketball players on the basketball Mount Rushmore who would it be? It would be Michael Jordan, Bill Russell, Bird and Magic. When LeBron gets on there who has to get off? That's the that's like the big big debate. If you're going to do it for say, the Buffalo Bills you have Scott Norwood and... I'm actually not sure who else would go on there but what about for Rochester figures? Great figures from Rochester history. Who do we start with? Susie B or Freddie D.? I don't like, it really drives me up a wall when people do that. Susan B. Anthony, Frederick Douglass, great figures. George Eastman. Who would be the fourth one? Morrie Silver? Always comes back to baseball doesn't it... We have a lot of medical people in the in the room, and I'm going to be out of my depth here but do you know famous medical scientists? Marie Curie maybe Louis Pasteur and who else? Yes the Salk vaccine. That's great, I know that one! So it's a fun game to play and, you know over drinks some time do this with your friends. Pick a topic and try to come up with who the Mount Rushmore would be.

But if we were doing Mount Rushmore for characters from the Old Testament, I think the first one would be easy, right? It would be Moses. And then right up there with Moses would be Elijah. How many of you would come up with Elijah as the second one? How many real Bible nerds do we have in the room? Elijah is definitely up there. And as a matter of fact, there's a story in the Gospels in the New Testament in the Christian stories where there's kind of like a

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live action Mount Rushmore. With Jesus up on a mountain, and who appears there with him? Moses and Elijah. Like these are the ones. I guess if you're going to do this it probably should be Mt Sinai right, if you're going to carve it into a mountain. Ahh, Bible nerds. So Elijah is going to be the subject of the sermon today. And I believe that the story that that we read in the lectionary passage gives us something really powerful and inspiring. And I think this story, I hope anyway, I really do think it will be powerful inspiring for you. Whether you think you are the like an top tier Christian who's about to retire and get put on the Mount Rushmore of Christians of all time. Or whether, the show of hands, how many get in. Or whether you're barely hanging on by a thread. Maybe you're not even sure why you're here today. Maybe you aren't clear on how much longer you're going to keep trying. I hope, and I think, that this passage can be inspiring to everybody on either end and everybody in between. And this I believe is the one of the great powers of Scripture, which is that God can speak to us no matter who we are no matter where we are in our own stories. The stories of God's people as contained in scripture can be powerful to us. And so can I ask you to take a moment open your hearts and your minds to what God might be ready to show you where ever you might put yourself on that continuum. Ask God to, and allow God to, open the door to your heart and your mind just a little bit wider. Take maybe twenty seconds of silence and do that.

So I want to give you some background on Elijah story before we get to the story that is about Elijah in the reading for today because in order to get to the power of what happened in today's passage, which we get from the lectionary, I think you really need to know what happened to him before that. So Elijah if you don't know was a prophet of Israel. Perhaps one of the greatest profits. By the way, do you know what a prophet in the Bible is? It's not really some Nostradamus kind of figure who cryptically predicts the future in their writings. Although there is a little bit of that that you can get in the prophetic readings. But the main job of the prophets in the Old Testament, and hopefully we still have some prophets in our midst today, was to call people to the ways of God. Often quite dramatically to call people to the ways of God. And interestingly, the audience for the prophets is almost always the people who should already know the message that they're delivering. Yes, the prophets of Israel have kind of this weirdo with a megaphone aspect to them. I was just at Red Wings game recently so this is fresh in my mind. But the thing with the prophets is that they're not shouting at the people outside the religious community calling them in. They're shouting at the people inside the religious community who should already know what they're shouting at them. So it's not just calling people to the ways of God, it's calling the people of God. And it's not just calling them. It's calling them back to the ways of God. And even more specifically, the message of the prophets is most often delivered to the leaders of the people. The kings and rulers, the priests the religious leaders who at times lead God's people astray. And there's almost always an element

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in the prophets writings and orations of you should know better and if you don't change your ways you're going to be in trouble. And what we do as religious people very often is we take that language of impending judgment and we turn it away from our own communities and and kind of attack other people with it. When what we should be doing is listening to it as if it were addressed to us because it is.

Now it turns out that powerful people who have set up systems and even arranged entire governments based on the pretense of religious belief but who are not really following God because there's no money in it or no prestigious it or no way to advance their power in it. It turns out that those people don't actually like to be told that they need to repent and change their ways or else God is going to bring about their destruction. They don't like it and their followers don't like it either. And so the Elijah's ministry as a prophet takes place during a time when the nation of Israel is heading in all the wrong directions for a variety of reasons. The Israelites have turned to idolatry and to the worship of pagan gods. It's due in large part to their leadership, their corrupt King. King Ahab and the wicked queen his wife, who's name is Jezebel. And if you're wondering, yes these two people in the Bible, these two characters in the Bible, are the reason why the names a Ahab and Jezebel are attached to all kinds of other literary and pop culture references because they were such bad people. So Ahab and Jezebel actually consider Elijah, who would come to be known as one of the greatest prophets of Israel, as their enemy because he keeps calling them to account saying you're leading the people astray and you're dooming us all the destruction including yourselves. You know he's doing a prophet thing. And so the most famous story about Elijah, the one that I heard in Sunday school a lot growing up and maybe some of you did too if you went to Sunday school as a kid, as an occasion when he gets into a standoff with the prophets of Baal. Now Baal is one of these pagan god that's the god of the Canaanites. And if you know the story of the Israelites, the Israelites are always at odds with the Canaanites. And that Yahweh is the true God, the One True God of Israel and Baal and Asherah and some of the other gods are the gods of the pagans, the Canaanites. And Jezebel, who marries kind of into this Israelite community by marrying Ahab, brings with her all these other gods and kind of insists that the people of God start worshipping Baal.

And so Elijah gets into this standoff, this prophet battle, out in the plains with the prophets of Baal. He's all by himself and there's four hundred fifty of them. And he challenges them to a "sacrifice-off". Have you ever had a "sacrifice -off"? I haven't either. So he says, OK prophets of Baal, set up an altar over here put a put a bowl on it but don't light the fire. I the one prophet standing of Israel will make an altar over here and put a bowl on it but I won't light the fire. And then we will each pray to our gods and whichever god lights the altar up first is the one true god. And he says you guys go first, because he knows he knows what's going to happen. Which

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is nothing. Nothing happens. The altar stands there. The wood is there. The bowl is there. Nothing. And they start, you know, praying and chanting and crying out and cutting themselves with knives. And Elijah actually starts taunting them. He actually says to them maybe your god's in the bathroom. Maybe he's asleep. And then he prays to God and God sends this fire. But first he says no no, let's make it let's increase the degree of difficulty here and like douse the whole thing with water. Barrel after barrel of water. We're going to dig a trench all the way around it filled the trench with water. And God sends down this fire that consumes the animal consumes the altar. Wicks away all the water in the trenches. To leave no doubt who is the one true God. And then Elijah kills the four hundred fifty prophets of Baal. Which it's not only a bloody detail, but also ends up being the source of his biggest trouble yet with Ahab and Jezebel.

By the way, in first Kings eighteen, the chapter before we're going to look at where the story is told, there's no indication that I can find that God tells him to do that. He just does it. So Jezebel wants his head. And he gets terrified and flees the country. Which tells you a little bit about Jezebel doesn't it?! He just called down fire from God in Heaven. Consuming this thing. The most dramatic thing anybody ever had seen. And then, takes on four hundred fifty prophets of Baal. And Jessica says, I'm going to do the same thing to you by this time tomorrow and he's like whoa, I'm out of here. And he takes off. He flees. So Elijah is on the run. And here at long last we come to the point in the story where today's lectionary reading picks up. And so if you'd like to turn in one of your own in your Bible, or one of our Bibles, to first Kings chapter nineteen, that's where the story's going to be told. It's on page two eighty four in these red Bibles. And remember all of that background that I gave you from the chapters that precede this one, that's important for us remember to understand the significance that I'm finding in today's story. So I want you to keep in mind as we're reading it, the absolutely incredible demonstration of God's blessing and power that Elijah had just experienced. And then we're going to look at this passage and I'm going to give you three lessons that I, I think we can take from this. So here it is.

Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword. Then Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah saying, so may the gods do to me and more so if I do not make your life like the one of them by this time tomorrow. By the way, this is not the point of my sermon today but did you notice that the the objection here is not that Yahweh of the One True God of Israel who had overpowered Baal the false god of the Canaanites? The objection is with the murder. Who knows what would have happened if it had just stood with God's demonstration of God's power rather than Elijah taking matters into his own hands. But that's, as I am fond of saying, is a sermon for another day. Verse four, verse three- then he was afraid he got up and fled for his life and he came to Beersheba, which belongs to Judah. He left his servant there. But he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness and came and sat

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down under a solitary broom tree. He asked that he might die. It is enough now oh Lord, take away my life for I am no better than my ancestors. Then he lay down under the broom tree and fell asleep. Suddenly an angel touched him and said to him, get up and eat. He looked and there at his head was a cake baked on hot stones and a jar of water. He ate and drank and lay down again. The angel of the Lord came a second time. Touched him and said, get up and eat otherwise the journey will be too much for you. He got up and ate and drank. Then he went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights to Horeb the mount of God. And at that place he came to a cave and spent the night there. Now I want to pause here. We have a few more verses that I want to look at. That's actually the end of the lectionary reading but I want to go a little bit farther into the text. But I want to stop right there and make some observations because I think this part of the story might speak to a certain subset of our population more deeply.

And that's for those of you who feel that you are at the end of your rope. You might feel completely out of energy. Whether it's for your job, or for your family, or for your faith. You may feel you have no will to go. You may actually have even wished to die. The message of reassurance from this text is this, lesson number one, you're not alone. Not only are you not alone because you have a community of people around you who loves you, and if we don't say it often enough, we do. And we want to support you and if we don't show it often enough, we will do better. Not only because of that, but because you have one of the Mount Rushmore prophets of Israel having the exact same experience. He's he's terrified. He's confused. Maybe he's wrestling with the guilt of the impossibly awful thing that he's done. He goes into the wilderness and lays down under a tree and says God I'm going to go to sleep please don't ever wake me up. And I know that some of you have said that to God. You are not alone. And I actually love the fact that the angel wakes him up and gives him cake. First of all, of that fact. But I love the fact that he goes back to sleep because if he only took one reminder, that would be too high a bar for me sometimes. He goes right back to sleep. Thanks for the cake God, I'm going to go back to sleep now. Seriously, please don't wake me up. Sometimes it takes us, sometimes it takes more than one miracle to get us where we need to be. Especially in times of massive trauma or distress. Sometimes the first miracle is just staying alive. Sometimes the first miracle is just getting up out of bed in the morning. And it takes a second miracle for us to get moving and go on up to the mountaintop. And maybe for you, or for me, it could take a third, or a fourth, or a fiftieth miracle to get where you actually need to be to experience God in a new way. And here's the other thing, God's provision and the strength that it provides, are often given so that we can accomplish a task that we don't even want to do.

Did you notice, I had to chuckle at this, the angel of the Lord came a second time, touched him and said get up and eat otherwise the journey will be too much for you. And I'd have been like,

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Journey? What, what journey are we talking about? Now he had work to do. He had a place to go and be. And God's provision was going to allow him to get there even though he probably didn't want to go. So lesson number one, you're not alone. If you're out there in the wilderness lying under the tree kind of wishing that you might not wake up. So let's move on and see what happens after he gets up the second time and goes in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights. Must've been really good cake. To Horeb, the mountain of God, which is also sometimes called Sinai. And 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? He answered, I've been very zealous for the Lord the God of hosts. For the Israelites have forsaken your covenant. Thrown down your altars and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left and they are seeking my life to take it away. He said go out and stand on the mountain before the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by. Now there was a great wind so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind. And after the wind, an earthquake. But the Lord was not in the earthquake. And after the earthquake, a fire. But the Lord was not in the fire. And after the fire, the sound of sheer silence. When Elijah heard it he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. Then there came a voice to him and said, What are you doing here Elijah? He answered, I have been very zealous for the Lord the God of hosts for the Israelites and have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left and they are seeking my life to take it away. He's a kind of a name rank and serial number type. He has one answer to this question. He's going to give it every time it's asked apparently. And then the Lord said to him go and return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus. And from there it goes on and the Lord gives him specific instructions, for the continuation of his ministry and for what comes next. For what's what supposed to come after that.

Let's talk about this earth, wind and fire a moment. What would any good Jew think? If you were standing on Mount Horab, aka Mount Sinai, and there was an earthquake, a fire and rushing wind. You may not be as much of a Bible nerd as Elijah most certainly was. But that could not possibly have evoked anything other than Moses being on that same mountain. Having that same experience of God's presence. And what happened then, was that Moses received the law. Now for you and me like, getting the law would be like oh great, more rules. That's just what I want in my life. But for the people of God, the Law is- it just means like God's word is everything God has to say. All of the information and words that are going to shape our life together were given to Moses right there on the mountain where Elijah was. In the same kind of natural disaster sort of way, that Elijah was experiencing. And yet Elijah was just barely

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able to get up and go. And it had taken him forty days from that moment of depression to get to where he was here.

Here is the second lesson for us. Which, don't compare your worst day to someone else's best day. I know that's kind of a thing that we say sometimes. That sort of a cliché almost. But it's so true! And it's not just true for Instagram, right? It's true for the spiritual life as well. So I posted a picture on Instagram last night I got a lot of likes. It was a picture of my family. We were having dinner in the backyard and they were all like clean. Happy. And the light was perfect. The oppressive heat had gone away. I took a picture and posted it as if to say, this is what my life is like. I don't know if you follow me on Instagram but you probably noticed that I don't post when it's been the six hundred fiftieth day without seeing the sun in Rochester. And I'm in a terrible mood. And I'm trudging up and down through four and a half feet of snow. And I'm mad at the kids, and mad at my wife and they don't want to do me for good reason. I'm not like oh I'm going to put this on Instagram so all my friends can see what my life is like. No, that's not what you do Instagram. It's just for the happy times. But in all seriousness, for Elijah to compare that experience of being completely lost and confused with the experience that he knew Moses had had in one of the most important moments in the entire history of God's people. It would have been great folly. Where else have we heard of fire recently by the way? Well forty one days ago. Elijah had had this experience with God were God sent down fire and burned up the altar. Remember that story?

So part two of Lesson two is, don't compare your worst day to your own best day. See, the lesson in short is don't compare. Comparison is the thief of joy. You know who said that? The third one on Mount Rushmore, Teddy Roosevelt said that. Comparison is the thief of joy. And comparison is death in spiritual life because if you are comparing yourself to what your neighbor is experiencing- first of all, you're probably not perceiving what your neighbor's actually experiencing. So that's not going to help you. But let's say it was true. It's just going to cause you to wish that you were having a different experience than what the one that you're having right now. Which, which apparently is the one that you actually can meet God in because, spoiler alert, the only story that will work to connect you to God is your own. But don't also compare yourself to your own past. I've had some pretty incredible experiences with God. And then as I said last week the memories can fade. And if I'm not experiencing God in the same way today that I was two or five or ten years ago, that's not because there's a problem with me. It's because that's what life does. And I believe God is present with us at all of those times. And so comparing my present with my past isn't any better than comparing my present with someone else as friend.

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Did you notice also that the places where God was not were much louder than the place where God apparently was. Rushing wind that splits mountains. God was not in the wind. Great earthquake but God was not in the earthquake. Fire but God was not in the fire. Which once again, God was in the fire before in the burning bush, like all these other things. I'm probably like, I'm so confused, God is not here. By the way Elijah still huddled in the cave. He never did actually come out the way God told him to. And what comes after all of those things, depending on your translation, might be a still small voice. You've heard that phrase. It comes from this passage in the King James version-might be like a gentle breeze. Or with the NRSV says, which I think is actually kind of the most scathing and cold, it's the sound of sheer silence. A lot of us think we want silence. Especially maybe parent. But when you experience sheer silence for for any length of time, that thing is incredibly disconcerting. Pretty soon you're like, I would take any noise right now. And that seems to be where God is finally able to get through to Elijah.

Sometimes when you hear nothing. God is there. Sometimes when you feel nothing. God is there. Here's the third lesson, sometimes when God seems most absent, God is still there. Sometimes the absence is the only way that God will get through to us. When everything seems to be going well, do you pray more or less? When things start to turn south, do you pray more or less? When you start to feel really disconnected from God, in that last moment before you give up and let go, is that your most desperate and most honest and most heartfelt prayer? It is for me. That's where God is. That's an incredibly difficult lesson to learn. If you haven't experienced it yourself, you're having trouble believing that it's true. But when you do learn it, that becomes the moment when you can actually sing that song, Your Praise Will Ever be on My Lips means. Whatever is happening in my life I will praise you. So remember you are not alone. Remember, don't compare. And remember that when God seems absent God is there.

I want to conclude with reading to you again the lectionary Psalm, which I read at the call to worship this morning. I think this is actually one of the scriptural sources for the people who wrote that song Ever Be. And then we make it our prayer. I will bless the Lord at all times. His praise shall continually be in my mouth. My soul makes its boast in the Lord. But the humble here and be glad. Oh magnify the Lord with me, and let us exalt his name together. I sought the Lord and He answered me and delivered me from all my fears. Look to him and be radiant so your faces shall never be ashamed. This poor soul cried and was heard by the Lord and was saved from every trouble. The angel of the Lord encamps around those who fear him and delivers them. Oh taste and see that the Lord is good. Happy are those who take refuge in him.

And for those of us who have experienced God through His Son Jesus Christ, we take refuge in that experience. In that knowledge. In that revelation of who God is. And we taste and see that the board is good every week when we come to communion. Even when I give a sermon that

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only gets around to Jesus at the very very end, it always gets there. The table proclaims what I never could. Because you can touch it. And smell it, and taste it. You can take it into your own body. And so I invite you, if you are following Jesus, if you are seeking to know God through him. Come and receive the body and blood of the Savior. Take a piece of the bread. Remember Christ's body which is broken for you and for me. You are not alone. Dip it in the cup, remembering Christ's blood which is shed for the forgiveness of sin the matter what you have done. You can eat it right at the table. Look to your left look to your right, recognize that you are in communion with everybody in this room. With everybody who's ever celebrated the sacrament together. With the entire witnessing church for its whole history. With Moses and Elijah. The tie that binds us here. We have a member the prayer team who would be happy to pray with you if you'd like to receive prayer. The band will come back up will sing another song or two together. I invite you to come to the Lord's table and receive the grace that's on offer here. And may his praise ever be on our lips.

[end of sermon]

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