



April 17, 2011
Pastor Mark Toone
Chapel Hill Presbyterian Church

*Moving Mountains:
Challenging our Cherished Heresies—Horeb*
I Kings 19

How many were here for Mt. Carmel last week? How many of you could hardly pay attention to the message after I played with that raw chicken because you were afraid I was going to get salmonella? How many of you thought that I was going to light the altar on fire? And were disappointed that I didn't? Sorry! I ain't Elijah.

Last week, Elijah took on the prophets of Baal on top of Mt. Carmel. It is one of the most courageous encounters in the Bible. Today, Elijah leads us to the top of another mountain. And you'd think you were reading about a different guy. My friend Ellis White and his wife, Rachel, are visiting from Oxford. He will read for us. *[Read I Kings 19:1-9a]*

Jezebel is the most horrible woman in the Bible. Hands down. Her mission in life was to slaughter the prophets of Yahweh. So when she sent word to Elijah that she was going to kill him because of what he had done to her priests on Carmel, Elijah believed her. So what was his response? This courageous prophet who went toe to toe with 850 pagan prophets... what was his response when he got the message from Jezebel? **"He was afraid and ran for his life."** He fled to Beersheba, the southernmost city in Judah.

Listen to his prayer: "I have had enough, Lord, take my life; I am no better than my ancestors." How would you describe Elijah's mood? Depressed! If you have ever struggled with depression, as I have, you recognize the symptoms: fear, anxiety, inadequacy, self-loathing, fatigue. Elijah is burned out! On the heels of his triumph on Mt. Carmel, you would think that Elijah would be flying high! He had taken on the prophets of Baal and won! The people of Israel were on their faces before God, the prophets of Baal were destroyed... everything seemed to be tipping in his direction. And yet, **one chapter later**, we discover Elijah in deep depression, despairing of life.

In his grace, the Lord sends an angel to minister to Elijah. He is strengthened, and then, like Forrest Gump, just keeps on running. Another 40 days and 40 nights. To another mountain 300 miles south of Carmel. He finds a cave and climbs inside. What was the name of this mountain? Horeb. Do you recognize it? *[Picture]* You should. You might know it by another name. Sinai! The mountain Moses climbed to meet with God; the mountain where God made his covenant with his people. Now, 500 years later, God's terrified prophet returns to that holy place.

How does God respond when Elijah shows up at Horeb? Pay attention! There are several surprising twists in this next passage. [READ 9b-14]

Each Sunday in this series we are asking, "What heresy does this mountain challenge?" So what about Horeb? How about this: **"It's all about me."** The opening line to Rick Warren's gazillion best-selling book *Purpose Driven Life* is this: **"It's not about you."** Why does he start there? Because we Americans think that it IS about me. Don't we? Isn't our first question often, "How will I benefit from this? How will this serve my interests?" Isn't the greatest challenge facing our culture the tendency to ask, not "What would be best for our common good," but "What is best for me?"

Even American Christianity is focused on that theme. Preachers pack out churches by promising that God will provide only blessing and health; if you are really following Jesus, you will never know poverty or illness or loss. Even Sunday services... which are supposed to be about the worship of God...often end up being about what I get out of it; how I am moved; what I gain from being there, whether I was stirred. In fact, there's a CD of praise songs designed around this theme. [*"I Exalt Me" trailer*]

Humans have always tended towards self-interest. But I wonder if we've seen an increase in self-absorption over the last few decades? What is the word for that? Narcissism. "Narcissistic personality disorder" actually used to be a clinical diagnosis. I say "used to be" because the committee that revises the Manual of Mental Disorders has decided to remove Narcissism from their 2013 edition. What shall we do with the disease of Narcissism? We'll just decide that it's normal. One way to deal with the "It's all about me" problem in our country is to declare that it's not a problem after all.

I think this encounter with Elijah on Mt. Horeb is a study in momentary Narcissism. See if you agree. What is God's first question to Elijah? "What are you doing here, Elijah?" Tell me, when you heard your father ask, "What are you doing here," was that a good thing or a bad thing? God isn't happy with Elijah. He is AWOL! He'd been fighting the good fight on Carmel, taking on Jezebel and all of her slimy minions, and suddenly he got scared.... and ran for the hills. Literally.

"What are you doing here, Elijah?" What if Elijah had answered God this way: "Well, Lord, it's like this, I am scared to death. Terrified. I'm hiding. Jezebel is a scary woman and I came to Sinai because I hoped you would meet me and protect me like you did Moses." But that's not what he says, is it? Listen to Elijah's response again, and listen for what is **missing** from his response:

"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."

Hmm... what is missing from Elijah's answer? **God!** Elijah mentions how **zealous** he has been... how hard he has worked against the evil in the land. And that was true—especially on Carmel. But he leaves out one little piece of the story. **God!** God showed up. God sent down fire. If God hadn't done what God did, Elijah would already be dead. But God **did** show up and together they had a wonderful victory!

But to listen to Elijah's account of things, it was all about him—**his** zeal, **his** courage, **his** fear, **his** life. And, by the way, since Elijah is the **only** faithful one left in the **whole** land, God's in trouble. It is all about Elijah, and nothing about God and His power and His presence and His faithfulness.

So God says, "Okay, Elijah, get out of that cave and stand here. I'm going to show you something." Wind. Earthquake. Fire. A big, booming appearance. Why? Maybe to encourage Elijah. After all, God appeared on this same mountain to Moses—in wind and in earthquake and in fire. Maybe it was God's way of reminding Elijah that, just like Moses, I am with you too! Or maybe it was something else. How did God appear on the last mountain? Fire! Maybe God was saying, "Remember, Elijah, remember how I poured down my power upon you. Do you remember? I am the same God and I am still with you!"

But Elijah misses the show. Did you notice? He disobeyed God—God told him to come out of the cave, but he didn't do it. He was still afraid... still hiding. So God—in his tender grace—comes to Elijah in a different way. "A gentle whisper." The Hebrew translation, literally, is "silent whisper." That's pretty quiet! And finally, in the silence, Elijah steps out from his hiding place.

Now—now that God has his attention, do you notice what God asks? **The very same question!** "Why are you here, Elijah?" Almost the same tender question God asked Adam in the garden. Almost as if the Lord is saying, "Okay, now that I have reminded you of my power and my presence and my faithfulness, tell me again—why are you hiding here in a cave 300 miles from where I want you to be?"

It was Elijah's second chance. It was his opportunity to take his eyes off himself—off of his anxiety and fear and failure and depression—and turn them back on God where they belonged. It was a chance for Elijah to say, "Oh, Lord, I see. I am so sorry. You **are** good and powerful. But I just didn't think you were powerful enough to handle Jezebel. She's **mean!** I didn't trust you. But I know better now. Thanks for reminding me."

Elijah could have said that. What did he say? The exact same thing... word for word.. **"I was zealous, the people of Israel are evil, the prophets are all dead, I am the last one remaining...and they are trying to kill me, too."** **Whahhhhh!** Elijah still doesn't get it. It is still about **his** efforts, **his** zeal, **his**

persecution. He's still a victim. And victim stories have a long half-life. If you keep telling your victim story long enough, everything about you... all of your reality will be filtered through your victimhood.

Wow! God is in a real pickle, isn't he? If things are as bad as Elijah says, God must be out of options, right? Listen to what God does. *[Read 15-16; 18]*

God in his grace does two things for Elijah. First, as a cure for his depression, he sends him back to work. Here's the truth—**you cannot pout your way out of depression**. I know; I've tried. You can't climb into your cave or climb into your bed or climb into yourself and think or mope or pout or even pray your way out of depression. You must move. You must begin to act again. Even a little bit. One psychologist says, "If you are depressed, you can cry any 20 minutes you want to. But only 20 minutes. And then, you've got to start doing something again." God broke Elijah out of his depression by sending him back to work. And part of that job was to anoint his replacement.

Who was that? Elisha. That's the other thing that God does, in his grace. He reminds Elijah that, in fact, he is not the only resource God has available to him. Elijah says, "I, and I alone, am the only one, God—the only faithful one left to you. When I'm gone, what are you going to do?" And God rolls his eyes in heaven and says, "Oh, please; spare me! I've got 7000 more waiting in the wings and, by the way, your replacement is one of them. I want you to anoint Elisha, because I think it's time for you to retire. You've done enough."

There are two symptoms of spiritual narcissism: **amnesia and indispensability**. Elijah exhibited both. He had amnesia—he forgot how good and faithful and powerful God had been to him. And he began to believe that he really was indispensable to God's plan.

I hate preaching sermons like this. Because I am really preaching it to myself. You all just happen to be listening in on my own personal sermon. I've been waking up early most mornings lately working big issues over in my mind. I am exhibiting both symptoms of spiritual narcissism. We are facing some significant challenges as a church in the coming year. And my sleeplessness reminds me that I am struggling with both amnesia and indispensability.

First of all, I keep forgetting God's faithfulness. I always do. As I try to worry my way through the issues, I forget how faithful He has been. How powerful. How present. How good. I forget the fire! God has poured down fire on this mountain we call Chapel Hill, too, hasn't he? He still is. Amazing power, amazing answers to prayer, amazing stories of changed lives, amazing healings. Why is it so easy for me to forget the fire?

How about you? Do you find it easy to forget Yahweh's faithfulness to you? Have you really made it this far all by yourself? Is there anything in your life that God

didn't give you in the first place? Anything that you can't point to and say, "That is a gift from my all-gracious God!" When you face the Jezebels in life—when you face the people or the circumstances that want to harm you—don't hide in the cave! Remember the fire! Remember the fire of God's Holy Spirit, alive in you, burning hot within you. Greater is He that is in you than he that is in the world!

I also struggle with the symptom of indispensability. "Everything rests upon me! If I don't do it, it won't get done. If I don't solve it, it won't get solved. I'm the only one who can possibly take care of this problem." With all that we face in the coming year, along with Pastor Jim's retirement, I came to realize that I really need to focus on my ministry here at Chapel Hill in the coming year. So two weeks ago I did something that was hard for me. I declined to stand for re-election to the board of Whitworth University. For the first time in 19 years, I won't be a Whitworth Trustee. I really struggled with this decision. I knew that my ministry here—which is my highest priority—would require extra time and attention. But I love Whitworth and especially with my daughter there right now, feel an extra passion to protect its mission and keep it on track.

And then, the Elijah complex began to kick in. "I, I alone, am best able to protect the mission of Whitworth University." And God began to speak to me: "Really, Mark? Really? You are the only one who can protect Whitworth's mission?" (He rolled his eyes at me just like he did at Elijah) Actually, I've got all kinds of great people who are as vigilant as you, and I think it's time for you to take a break!" So I am going to take a break and focus on the work God has for us right here.

Are you feeling overwhelmed by life? Are the Jezebels scaring you into hiding? Are you afraid that you are not strong enough to deal with what is driving you into that cave? Repeat after me: "It's not all about me!" It's about God and his faithfulness. Are you feeling indispensable? Convinced that you and you alone are capable of handling what needs doing—and that if you don't do it, it won't get done, it can't get done? Repeat after me: "It's not all about me!" You are not the only resource God has to work with.

You know, Jesus had something to say about this heresy. Do you remember? He said, "If anyone would come after me he must take up his cross, **deny himself daily**, and follow me." Did you hear that middle phrase? What must I do? Deny myself. Say no to myself. It's not all about me. Near the end of his life, a woman came to Robert E. Lee and asked him to bless her child. She said, "What would you say to him that would help him live a blessed life." The old man looked at the boy for a moment and then turned his tired eyes to his mother and said: "Tell him to deny himself."

Your life, your career, your family, your church, your future, your safety, your mission, your purpose, your health—it is not all about you. It is about God. Say it with me one more time: "It's not all about me!"

SERMON DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- **Read the passage out loud.**

- **Reflect & Apply Individually:** Each person take 5-7 minutes to circle words or phrases that jumped out at them; jot down your reflections; check the notes in your Study Bible for insight or help. Grapple with what the Spirit is saying to you, your group, the church—write down some applications.

- **Reflect & Apply Together:** Share your thoughts. Don't teach! Listen and reflect on God's word together; grapple with what God is calling us to do and be through this passage.

- **Pray together:** Tell the Lord one thing you are thankful for and lay one concern before the Lord.

- **Dig deeper**

1. Read I Kings 19. Compare this story to I Kings 18. Both take place on a mountain. God shows up powerfully in both instances. But there are many differences, too. What are they?

2. Do you agree that Elijah is burned out and depressed? What are the signs? In what ways does his response cry out, "It's all about me!"

3. In what way does YOUR life cry out, "It's all about me?" What is your takeaway from this story?