1 Kings 19:1-15

Have you ever been tired? The kind of tired when your arms seem to hang, your legs just barely shuffle on as your whole-body aches. The kind of tired where your mind seems to slog on only due to heroic efforts of focus. The kind of tired where you strain to remember a time before constant labor, and your will struggles to find sufficient motivation to continue. The kind of tiredness that cannot draw strength by looking back on what has been accomplished, but instead dwells in frustration and a deep and despairing fear that all your efforts have ended in failure. This is the kind of tiredness I image the prophet Elijah endured in this story. Yes, that’s right, you guessed it, I’m preaching on the Elijah reading. If you thought some sense of humility would keep me from preaching on it, then you were sorely mistake. Elijah was a man who burned the candle at both ends, he was a man who exhibited great zeal and power, but who also knew what it meant to burn out and despair of life itself. Prior to this story we see Elijah in the middle of the culmination of his prophetic ministry, the great test between the power of the Lord and the power of the false god Baal. Elijah had cried out to the people “How long will you go limping between two different opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him.” Elijah had then issued a challenge to the prophets of Baal, arguing that whoever’s god answered the offering of his prophets with fire was the true God. This was followed by a spectacular display of divine power as fire fell screaming from the sky, consuming not just the offering but the altar upon which Elijah had placed it. The people fell on their faces crying “The LORD, he is God; the Lord, he is God” as the prophets of the false god Baal had been executed. Now, at the height of his triumph, Elijah runs. Why? Is it cowardice, faithlessness, doubt? It should be noted that, despite the cries of “The Lord, he is God” by the people, the apostate king and queen Ahab and Jezebel still remained in power. The people may have been willing to acclaim the Lord as God, but actually returning into their covenantal relationship with Him seems to have been a bridge too far. Now, after years of living like an outlaw, receiving food only through divine intervention, after spending all of his zeal and his energy declaring with fiery words the Lordship of God, after openly challenging the king and putting his life on the line in a contest with Baal’s prophets, Elijah was tired. After all the zealous energy and unending toil Elijah had put into his ministry, after God had literally caused fire to fall from the sky, Elijah’s life was still being threatened by the same old enemy. So now, having reached the very limits of his energies, after expending all that his zeal and his devotion could muster and then some, he turns and flees his ministry down out of Israel through Judah into the Sinai peninsula, going as far away from Jezebel as he possibly could. He had done all he could, had given all he could, and now he was ready for death. “It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life, for I am no better than my fathers.” Perhaps Elijah had thought that he was to be the one to restore faith in Israel, that he would finally call his people back into covenant loyalty with the Lord. Now at the end he realizes that he is not better than his ancestors. He is not better than Moses who died before entering the promised land, or Samuel who the people forced to give them a king, or David whose failures brought disaster on his people. In the end, Elijah is all too human as well, and after running his race he is tired, and is ready to come to the end. But the Lord was not finished with Elijah, and instead of dying he is brought to Horeb, the sight of the giving of the law to Moses where it all began. There in the cleft of a rock God visits Elijah with the simple and yet piercing question “What are you doing here, Elijah?” In Elijah’s answer can heard all the frustrated zeal of his prophetic ministry, and in his complaint his fire seems to return even in the midst of his great weariness. “I have been very jealous for the Lord, the God of hosts. For the people of Israel have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword, and I, even I only, am left, and they seek my life, to take it away.” God, don’t you see what’s going on? Don’t you see how I have struggled for your name, how faithless the people are, how they have heaped abuses on me for serving you? How can you ask me what I’m doing here? But God does not argue with Elijah. Instead, he makes a tremendous demonstration of his power. First a mighty wind tears into the mountain, blasting the rocks to bits and raking the stone and earth, followed by the terror of an earthquake as the cave shakes and rocks beneath the divine power, only for a roaring fire to sweep down onto the mountain side devouring everything in its path leaving a singed ruin in its wake. This was the sort of raw power Elijah was used to seeing God display, the sort of majesty God had shown in past revelations to His people, the sort of energy that befitted the Lord God. Yet God was not in the wind, or in the earthquake, or in the fire. Instead, in the deafening silence that followed the displays of power, barely audible or discernable Elijah hears God in the sound of a low whisper. Here God demonstrates to Elijah a different, deeper divine power. Throughout his ministry Elijah has relied upon a certain hard power energy in his dealings with apostate Israel. There is a burning zeal for the ways of God in him, and in the displays of divine power that had accompanied him Elijah had overawed God’s enemies with the glory of God. But when the energy and power given to Elijah failed, Elijah despaired and fled in weariness and frustration into the wilderness. Now God teaches Elijah a valuable lesson. God is a God of power, but we should not seek the true essence of our religion in a God who gives us the power to ride roughshod over our enemies. The deeper power of God is revealed not in the fire, earthquake or wind but in the still quite whisper, it is revealed in the Son of God who willingly chose to come in the form of a servant, it is revealed in Christ crucified. Elijah had been very zealous for God, and this is a good thing. Afterall, it was said of Jesus himself “Zeal for your house will consume me.” However, in his passion he had placed his hope for the deliverance of Israel in displays of power, and when that had not occurred he had fallen into despair. Here, God reminds Elijah that His power is a power beyond what human beings would call power. So while God has the ability to command infinite amounts of might, His true nature is revealed in a quiet whisper. This strange reversal of what we think of as power comes from a God expressed in Christ who, as Paul says “though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men.” So while God cares about covenantal faithfulness and God does punish sin, there is also a gentleness in God, a grace that proceeds from the depths of divine love. It is this grace that ultimately redeems the universe and saves humanity. God may sometimes choose to act in judgement, but we cannot demand anything of God. Elijah had looked with great expectation to the forceful overthrow of godlessness in Israel, but the Lord was working in a different way. A way which, long and meandering as it would be, was ultimately aimed at Golgotha with the Lord God of Israel nailed to a tree, faithful on behalf of His faithless people. This is often a difficult lesson for us to learn, I certainly know it is for me. Often I look out on a world of sinful depravity and a church that can sometimes seem compromised at every turn and, drawing on my deep reserves of unearned moral superiority, I feel like the prophet Elijah and I also want to cry out “I have been very jealous for the Lord, the God of hosts. For the people of Israel have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword, and I, even I only, am left, and they seek my life, to take it away” or else, like James and John, who were outraged by the Samaritans who would not accept Jesus, I also want to turn to Christ and ask “Lord, do you want us to tell fire to come down from heaven and consume them?” But this is not the way of Jesus Christ. The way of Christ is the way of the cross, it is the way of the still, low whisper that meets Elijah in the cave on mount Horeb, it is the way of a God who does not count our sins against us. So while it is true that God will someday judge the world, we cannot think only in terms of God’s displays of judgement and power. Rather, we must realize that God is just as manifest in the silent, comforting whisper that meets us in the midst of our despair as He is in the fire that poured down from heaven on Elijah’s offering. Elijah may be threatened and rejected by his people, but God’s power is made perfect not in spectacular displays but in weakness. In fact, God is always at work, even in what seem to us to be failures. Beyond the emptiness of the fire and earthquake there is the still small voice of God always at work. Elijah has not, in fact, failed because God is at work in a way that is beyond the miraculous displays wrought through him. The task that is placed before you and I, like Elijah, is not to bring in the kingdom of God by force. It is to be faithful to God’s workings in God’s time. This can often be frustrating because God often doesn’t seem to keep our timetable. As the lion Aslan, the Christ figure in C.S. Lewis’ The Chronicles of Narnia, reminds us “I call all times soon.” So what is left to us is to trust in God, even as we often cannot understand God’s workings. Even as it seems that we are crowded in on all sides by enemies and all our efforts have come to naught, still God is faithful. Even as we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, God is there with us and we need fear no evil. I am reminded of the children’s novel “The Princess and the Goblin” by George Macdonald. In it the princess Irene is given a ring with a magic thread attached to it by her grandmother, who is Macdonald’s representation of God. By following the thread attached to the ring the princess is guaranteed to find her way out of trouble and to where it is she needs to go. So even as Irene is in the darkness and terror of the goblin layer, she knows that as long as she follows the thread given her by her grandmother, her path will lead her where she needs to go and she will find her way to safety. Similarly, Elijah must learn that even in the darkness of Jezebel’s wrath, the Lord is at work in a way that is real even as the path may not be clear to him. If we are honest with ourselves, I think we will realize that we routinely fail to be faithful and trust in God as well. We also are a stiff-necked people who turn aside quickly from the ways that God commands us. But there is good news, and we can draw comfort from this story. Even as Elijah flees from his responsibilities, even as he doubts his mission and travels as far away from it as he can, God has not given up on Elijah. Even when Elijah asks for death beneath the broom tree God is there with him. Finally, when the Lord confronts him it is not with anger and condemnation, but with a quiet, gentle whisper of “What are you doing here, Elijah?” This should be of great comfort for us. First, that such a famous man of God, who even appeared on the mount of transfiguration with Christ, messes up just like the rest of us. Second, that God does not abandon him but meets him in his darkest moment with grace. Not only does God forgive Elijah, but God continues to use him. Elijah will continue on for many years as God’s prophet, finally being gloriously swept up to heaven in a fiery chariot. God was not finished with Elijah, and God is not finished with us. Even in the darkest cave of our failures and fears, the Lord whispers in the silence. His soft voice echoing through the caverns of our distress that He still has purposes for us. That his grace is not exhausted by our stumbling and that, like Elijah, He yet has a race for us to run, and glory beyond what we can ask or imagine. So then, like Elijah let us be zealous for the Lord, but with a zeal tempered with grace. Let us work for the Lord, but with the recognition that God is at work also in our failures, and when we stumble, let us listen for the quiet whisper of divine grace. Amen.