

Elijah's Pilgrimage & Yours



1 Kings 19 & Psalm 42
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Hudson United Methodist Church
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What are your summer plans? Will there be travel? Will there be time outdoors? What reading will you do? What television viewing? With our first hot summer week here today, do you have any television and reading plans for the hottest part of your day? Can you take time for a pilgrimage beyond your air conditioning?

This summer in worship we will go on a pilgrimage of the mind to Israel in the time between the lives of King David and Jesus. Our primary Bible readings are Old Testament passages important to Jesus and his story. We will read them with our Christian lens. Today, we begin our pilgrimage with Elijah.

Who was Elijah? Every year just before Lent begins, we read an account of Jesus' transfiguration (See Luke 11:28-36). Jesus hiked up a mountain with Peter, James, and John to pray. While praying at the summit, Jesus revealed his divine nature. With him appeared Moses and Elijah. Peter, James, and John witnessed Christ talking with the two most important men in Jewish scripture. We know quite a bit about Moses, but who was Elijah that he was standing there chatting with Christ?

In 1 Kings 17 we first read of "Elijah the Tishbite, of Tishbe," as he confronted his king, Ahab, about his wife's introduction of Baal worship in Israel. Ahab's marriage to Jezebel, the daughter of a neighboring king, had been arranged by their fathers for diplomatic reasons. 1 Kings 17 and 18 tell us about the increasing conflict between Elijah and the royal couple, especially Jezebel.

Finally, Jezebel's prophets and Elijah had a competition to see whose god was more powerful. Both built altars to their gods. First Jezebel's prophets of Baal prayed for their god to send fire for their sacrificial offering, but no fire came. Then Elijah had the people douse his altar and sacrificed bull with water, twice, and so much that there was standing water in a trench around the altar. Elijah then prayed for God to show his power, and God did with a blast of fire that consumed everything—sacrifice, wood, and even the water in the trench. Jezebel was so angry that Elijah fled for his life. His flight into the wilderness is our primary Bible reading today.

What happened when Elijah fled? After leaving his servant in Beersheba, Elijah traveled alone into the wilderness. After a day, he fell asleep under a lone broom tree/bush. Elijah was exhausted after his showdown with the prophets of Baal. Fear of execution probably robbed him of rest as well. When he was finally safe, Elijah was so exhausted that in his prayers he asked to could die.

He didn't die. But as he slept, an angel came with fresh bread and water, not once but twice. With that bit of rest, Elijah traveled into the wilderness for forty days until he arrived at Mt. Horeb, the same mountain where God gave Moses the Ten Commandments. There in a cave, the word of the Lord came to Elijah, "What are you doing here, Elijah?"

Imagine that! Have you ever listened in the night to hear God say, "What are you doing here?" One of God's qualities is omniscience, knowledge of everything. Why did Elijah have to explain himself to God? Why would you?

Elijah replied about his zealous activity on God's behalf. He even claimed, "I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away."

Friends, it is not that God does not know what we are doing. It is that we misperceive what is going on in our lives, just like Elijah. Who among us has not felt like we are the only one who has ever faced one of life's great traumas? Whatever that trauma is for you—a cancer or dementia diagnosis, a child's birth defect, struggles in a required class needed for graduation, a tight budget squeezed tighter with our current rate of inflation—who among us has not felt this profound discouragement, this profound sense of being abandoned by God, family, and friends? We understand how Elijah felt when he said, "I alone . . ."

But the reply given for this bleak self-assessment was "Go stand on the mountain . . . for the LORD is about to pass by."

Elijah stepped out of his cave on the same mountain where Moses once saw God's back. (Exodus 33:17-23) As Elijah stood there the wind was so strong the mountain split and rocks broke off. But God was not in the wind. The wind was followed by an earthquake. But God was not in the earthquake. The earthquake was followed by a fire. But God was not in the fire.

After wind, earthquake, and fire there came a silence so strong Elijah wrapped his face in his mantle at the entrance of his cave. Once again, the voice asked, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" Once again, Elijah told of his zealous action, of his sense that he alone was faithful.

Then the LORD said to Elijah, “Go.” This command was followed with a plan of action for the battle ahead. The LORD finished by telling Elijah he was not alone. “Yet I will leave seven thousand in Israel, all the knees that have not bowed to Baal, and every mouth that has not kissed him.” (1 Kings 19: 17-18)ⁱ

Elijah thought he alone was faithful to the LORD, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. But the LORD knew better. The LORD knew that there were 7000 in Israel who had not worshipped Jezebel’s god. The LORD knew Elijah was not alone.

Even if you believe you are alone, the LORD who knows all knows that you are not alone. No matter what the bad news, no matter how alone you feel, the LORD knows that you are with others, maybe seven thousand or maybe just seven, but there are others who share the same struggle you are facing praying with the same faith in God. How do we hear God’s answer to your prayers?²

Well, if Elijah is our example, we do not hear God in wind, earthquake, and fire. We do not hear God in our own zealotry. Blinded by our own illusions of being alone we often miss seeing our allies in our struggles. We will never find our 7000 allies by sitting alone in either a cave or our air conditioning.

But there is something Elijah did that led him to an ability to hear the word of the LORD. He stopped his frantic pace. He left town. He slept. He ate simple food. His forty-day pilgrimage led him to a silence so profound that he was blessed to converse with God.

In our reading, it seems that Elijah’s pilgrimage to Mt. Horeb was unplanned. Elijah was fleeing execution when he went to the place where Moses saw God. Jesus’ pilgrimage with Peter, James, and John to the top of a nearby mountainⁱⁱ for prayer was an ordinary hike when Christ was revealed by speaking with Moses and Elijah. Jesus’ pilgrimage had a plan that included three witnesses. His identity as God’s son was confirmed by a visit from two heroes of Israel who had once conversed on a mountain with God.

Friends, it seems we have a choice. We can go into the wilderness driven by panic and fear, or we can go on a prayer pilgrimage with Christ. Either way, in pilgrimage we can find a quiet center to hear the Lord’s voice.

How can you make your pilgrimage to hear the Lord this summer? Will you flee like Elijah, or will you walk with Christ? Will you follow the example of our youth mission team and go on a long road trip? Will you stay home? While staying home can

include our mission here in Hudson, perhaps our mission at home is some of the noise that keeps us from hearing God. It was for Elijah.

So, what are your plans? I want to share a three-part plan for all of us who want a local pilgrimage to find the quiet where we can hear God.

First, travel locally. We are so blessed to live in a region rich with opportunities to take a pilgrimage away from our daily burdens. Within an hour's travel there are many hiking trails—some challenging, others easy enough for a young child. There is also Como Park on good weather days, and the Minneapolis Institute of Art (MIA) on days when your hike needs air conditioning.

Second, go outside daily. This could be a hike to the falls at Willow River State Park, but it can also be sitting outdoors on your apartment balcony, walking through your neighborhood, or weeding your garden. God never made us to hide in air-conditioned caves, God made us to be outside. Even on these very hot days, take a mini-pilgrimage by stepping outside to listen for the voice of God.

Third, read books and watch television as tools for in your pilgrimage of the mind. Rather than reruns or news beyond an hour a day, try watching a travel documentary followed by reading a related book.

Here are my summer pilgrimage plans. Someday I hope to go to the Holy Land, so this summer I will watch *Rick Steves' The Holy Land: Israelis and Palestinians Today*ⁱⁱⁱ and other Holy Land documentaries. I will go to our church and public libraries to prayerfully find a books about or set in the Holy Land. When I go outdoors, I can imagine I am gardening with Adam and Eve, walking with Jesus, or sitting with Elijah at the mouth of his cave. I will travel locally. I will visit the fig tree and other plants from the Bible at the Conservatory in Como Park. I will look for Bible stories I know among paintings of the Holy Land in the permanent collection at MIA. Both Como Park and MIA are free, a gift from past generations explicitly so we can have these local travel experiences when we cannot go to the Holy Land this year.

Friends, will you join me and make a pilgrimage? Will you travel in the Spirit to that place where you can hear the voice of God?

ⁱ All Bible quotations are from the New Revised Standard Bible.

ⁱⁱ Jesus, Peter, James, and John were not on Mt. Horeb as Moses and Elijah had been.

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wg1unr6eNpQ> Accessed on 6/18/2022.