

Mystic Congregational Church, UCC

Mystic, Connecticut

Sermon from June 20, 2010

Rev. Ann M. Aaberg

“LAST PLACE YOU LOOK”

Scriptures:

1 Kings 19: 1-15a

12th Sunday in Ordinary Time



Children frequently lose things. Actually, it's more like they frequently temporarily misplace things: small things usually, like one of the doll's shoes, or the wheel of a miniature toy car, one of the building blocks, a final jigsaw puzzle piece. Parents are drawn in to the search, but don't really pay attention unless the item is more significant, like the missing mate to a sock, or the sweater worn yesterday, or especially if it's the new jacket they just spent fifty bucks on. Bicycles really get their attention.

And I think the parental responses are somewhat universal as they hear the plea from the bedroom, "Mo-om, I can't find my sweater!"

Response #1: "Where did you last leave it?"

Response #2: "Well, it didn't just get up and walk away!"

Response #3: "You don't want *me* to come in there and find it!"

The response that sticks the most with me was the one that both of my parents would use once I found the misplaced item.

"I found it!"

"Yep, it's always in the last place you look." And my Dad would chuckle like that was the cleverest statement to be uttered in years; and, truth be told, I didn't really get it until I was much older. I thought it referred to all misplaced things needing a long and arduous search until I realized later that – duh! – once you find it, the search is over – it's located in the last place you look.

Elijah the prophet has lost something in our reading this morning. He has lost his confidence, his resolve and his trust in God. But it's important to know what happened before Elijah fled from Jezebel's threats on his life. First a little historical context. After the reigns of King David and then King Solomon over a united kingdom of all 12 tribes of Israel, ten of the northern tribes rebelled against the Davidic line and set up their own kingdom in the north and called it Israel and its capital was Samaria. Two tribes remained loyal to the Davidic line and continued to rule the southern area called Judah with its capital Jerusalem.

At the time of our story this morning, Ahab and Jezebel were king and queen of the northern kingdom of Israel and heavily promoting the worship of their god, Baal, over and against the one true Lord God of Israel. The prophet Elijah, having previously been instructed by God to confront Ahab, in the previous chapter has just single-handedly and powerfully demonstrated to 450 pagan prophets that the Lord God of Israel is way more powerful and responsive than their god Baal and Elijah subsequently slaughters all 450 of them. King Ahab witnesses the whole thing and runs home to Queen Jezebel, and our passage begins this morning with Jezebel swearing revenge on Elijah's life. And now he's off and running south to the southernmost part of the southern kingdom, Beer-sheba in Judah.

Just days before he was publicly mocking the god Baal, successfully invoking God's fire from the heavens and boldly killing all who oppose his Lord. Different tune today. He has lost his confidence, his bravado, his trust in the same Lord who has brought him this far. Or as Professor Trevor Eppheimer of Hood Theological Seminary in North Carolina writes, Elijah has lost his prophetic nerve. Jezebel is after him now and he might as well just lay down and die.

He leaves his servant in Beer-sheba and heads into the wilderness, sits under a tree, asks to die and lays down hoping it'll all be over soon. Much like the fearful and remorseful child who proudly wore the new jacket to school the day before and is now in trouble for getting so caught up in the attention that he lost it, Elijah says, "It's over. God, you might as well end it now. I'm no better than my ancestors." What Elijah forgets is the same thing the child does: his parents really care more about him than the lost jacket. The caring God of Israel sends an angel – twice - to feed him, encourage him, give him guidance and, after a long journey, Elijah arrives at Mount Horeb, another name for Mount Sinai, the same high place and holy ground where Moses encountered God.

And the word of the Lord comes: What are you doing here, Elijah? What are you doing in this cave, in this place? Why aren't you back in Israel where I sent you? "Well, I was out there working really hard for you, prophesying to all those Israelites up there who have forsaken your covenant and who have thrown down your altars and killed your prophets. I was out there but now I'm the *only one left* and they're out to kill me." I give up. I've looked everywhere. It's over.

Go out, Elijah. Stand on the mountain, for the Lord is about to pass by. And a great strong wind comes – not there. Then an earthquake – not there. Then a fire – not there. Then the last place - a sound of sheer silence. The King James Version translates it as a still small voice. The NIV translates it as a gentle whisper. And the voice of the Lord God asks him the exact same thing again, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" And Elijah is still in excuse mode – this is his story and he's stickin' to it: "Well, I was out there working really hard for you, prophesying to all those Israelites up there who have forsaken your covenant and who have thrown down your altars and killed your prophets. I was out there but now I'm the *only one left* and they're out to kill me."

And the Lord God tells him to Go, go on your way. And what Elijah doesn't know, but is about to find out, and what we don't know as this passage ends, is that as Elijah sits in that cave all by himself thinking he's the only one left and it's all up to him and he might as well not even try, God is at work. God has quietly, not with spectacular wind and fire, but quietly underneath and behind and beyond Elijah's awareness, God has been at work removing certain kings and setting up others and has protected and left 7,000 (!) others of the faithful in place in Israel. Go, Elijah, go back up there and anoint them.

Well, how about that? Not only was Elijah never alone, waited upon by angels and cared for by our loving God, but it's not all about Elijah. You're not the only one, Elijah, AND, I'm at work all the time way beyond this little cave.

Professor Eppheimer writes that Elijah's unfounded despair, based in his primary temptation, his primary *temptation*, that he has to go it alone, that it is all up to him, is the same illusion that presents itself to us when our concepts of reality do not include the dynamic presence of God.

When things get rough, when our lives take a turn downhill, when we are faced with difficult problems, many times, dare I say most of the time, we humans, even we faithful humans, begin by relying on ourselves for the solution – relying on our smarts, our money, our networks – right away getting to work to figure it out for ourselves. When those attempts don't work, we try something else, and we stick with our own devices until we run out of ideas. And then we think it's over – we're doomed. The last place we look is to God.

Our loving God who always has the best intentions for us and who, yes wants us to use our gifts, but whose Spirit works quietly in ways we don't understand, whose timeframe is not always what we expect – reliance upon whom should be our first step, not our last.

And God's divine revelation to us is not our doing. That there was a future for Elijah beyond the cave and a future for Israel was not rationally obvious to Elijah, any more than the future beyond our own problems is obvious to us. The insight that all will be well, no matter what, that God has it handled, comes from our faith, and the catalyst for that faith originates not with us, but with God.

Children look high and low for misplaced toys and articles of clothing and most of the time the item is right where they left it – in the sandbox, on the soccer field, in the car of the neighbor who gave them a ride home. And it's always the last place they look. But sometimes, sometimes, the location is revealed – the neighbor calls, the older sibling sees it on the sidewalk and brings it home – and its return is an unexpected gift.

Friends, we can find God in all those ways. God is always there, right where we left off. And God is at work all the time and can reveal that quiet behind-the-scenes, under-the-radar divine intervention to us when we least expect it as a gift. When we temporarily lose our way, or misplace our purpose, or can't find our way out of our caves, may God be the first place we look, and if we do, I bet it will also be the last. Amen.