Scripture: 1 Kings 19:1-18 (NIV)

Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done and how he had killed all the
prophets with the sword. [2] Then Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah, saying, "So
may the gods do to me and more also, if I do not make your life like the life of
one of them by this time tomorrow." [3] Then he was afraid; he got up and fled
for his life and came to Beer-sheba, which belongs to Judah; he left his servant
there.
[4] But he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness and came and sat
down under a solitary broom tree. He asked that he might die, "It is enough;
now, O LORD, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors." [5] Then
he lay down under the broom tree and fell asleep. Suddenly an angel touched
him and said to him, "Get up and eat." [6] 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. [7] The angel of the LORD came a second time, touched him, and said, "Get
up and eat, or the journey will be too much for you." [8] 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. [9] 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?" [10] He answered, "I have 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."
[11] 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, [12] and after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire,
and after the fire a sound of sheer silence. [13] 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 that said, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" [14] He
answered, "I have 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." [15] Then the LORD said to him, "Go, return on your way to the

wilderness of Damascus; when you arrive, you shall anoint Hazael as king over Aram. **16** Also you shall anoint Jehu son of Nimshi as king over Israel, and you shall anoint Elisha son of Shaphat of Abel-meholah as prophet in your place. **17** Whoever escapes from the sword of Hazael, Jehu shall kill, and whoever escapes from the sword of Jehu, Elisha shall kill. **18** 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."

Sermon: Hopelessness, but God Gives Purpose

Today, we are sharing the story of our friend Elijah. Elijah was a prophet to the Northern Kingdom of Israel in the 9th century BCE. He was most active when King Ahab was the king. This was about 100 years after King David, and about 150 years before the Northern Kingdom fell to the Assyrians. Elijah had done some amazing things before today's story, so let's review them.

Elijah's first task as a prophet was to tell King Ahab that because Ahab and the leaders were worshiping false gods, there would be a 3-year drought. God told Elijah to go hide - from angry King Ahab, who called for Elijah's death - hide in a special ravine, where Elijah drank from a stream, and the ravens fed him bread and meat. **Miracle one**.

When the stream dried up, God told Elijah to go to Zarephath. There, a widow gave Elijah bread made from the last of her flour and oil. Instead of running out, God continued to multiply that flour and oil, and they had enough food throughout the entire famine. **Miracle 2** – or a couple of years of the same miracle every day.

At one point, the widow's son died, and Elijah brought him back to life. Huge **miracle three**.

At the end of the three years, God called Elijah to orchestrate a battle of fire between Baal (a false god) and the Lord God on Mount Carmel. The priests gave the sacrifice, but the rule was that the god had to rain down the fire. Of course, since the Baals aren't real, nothing happened with that sacrifice. But when Elijah prayed, the fire God sent was so enormous that the sacrifice, the

altar, and even the stones and sand were completely burned up. Huge **miracle number four**.

Immediately after that, the drought ended with a rainstorm. Elijah was filled with God's Spirit and outran King Ahab's chariot back to Jezreel. **Miracle number five**.

After all of that – that's where we pick up today's story.

Elijah was high on the miracles that God had just done through him. He had shown himself to be one of the greatest prophets of all times – maybe second only to Moses! He was expecting that what he had just done would convince King Ahab to turn to God and follow God's ways. He would be known throughout all history as the one who brought Israel to how God imagined they would be. Instead, Queen Jezebel called for Elijah's death. Again. Elijah was on this incredible spiritual high. And then he crashed. He ran for his life. Can you identify with how he felt?

This isn't an unusual thing – to be on top of the world, and then have something happen that completely knocks you off your feet. It's common in these situations to feel something called "all-or-nothing thinking" – a psychological term for a cognitive distortion – where what you are thinking isn't reality. It is black-and-white thinking that allows for no nuances – everything is either one way or the opposite. Everything is either perfect or horrible. Either you did a perfect job, or you are worthless. Either you are a great prophet, or your life is worth nothing.

Elijah became hopeless. He ran into the wilderness, sat under a tree, and prayed his passive suicidal ideation. He prayed that he would die. (Pause) That was Elijah's reality at that moment. He actually prayed, "I have had enough, Lord. Take my life."

But God…

Twice God sent angels to feed Elijah to give him back some strength. Then God told Elijah to go to Mt. Horeb – the mountain where Moses met with God. When Elijah got there, God said, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" On the surface, it seems like a silly question. God had led him there. But Elijah answered what God meant by the question – why Elijah was depressed.

Elijah said, "I have been very zealous for the Lord God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, torn 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." And then God said something utterly amazing. He told Elijah to stand at the entrance of the cave because God was going to pass by.

Nobody was ever allowed to see God. Only Moses had actually had a physical encounter with the substance of God. This was an unbelievable gift!

Now, I don't understand how the voice of God had substance, but Elijah had always experienced God through big things, so Elijah was ready for something big. There was a huge wind. God was not the wind. There was an earthquake. God was not in the earthquake. There was a great fire. God was not in the fire. Then, there was a quiet whisper. A still small voice. That was God. God told Elijah that it's not always a big production. God is the quiet. God is the peace.

After Elijah experienced God's physical presence, God asked the question again: "What are you doing here, Elijah?" Elijah's answer didn't change: "I have been very zealous for the Lord God Almighty…I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too." God's answer? Go back to work, Elijah. There are still prophet jobs I need you to do. So Elijah did.

And then, years later, when Elijah's work was done, he still didn't die – he is one of only two people that the Bible says ascended to heaven without dying. Elijah was taken to heaven in a fiery chariot.

Hopelessness. Depression, **But God**, Purpose.

That was Elijah. His reality said that his life was over. He was hopeless. Deep depression had overtaken him. He had done things truly magnificent for God, but the king and queen put a price on his life for the second time. Elijah's reality was hopeless. **But God** came back with a new reality. God had an important purpose for Elijah. Not only would Elijah continue his prophetic work by anointing new leaders, but he would also train his successor, Elisha, who would become a powerful prophet.

What's your reality? Do you struggle with hope? Do your brain chemicals lead to feelings of depression? Do your health concerns hold you back from the things you want to do? Do you think you are too old to make a difference or too young to make a difference? Do you honestly wonder why you are still alive because your spouse has died or your siblings have died?

But God has a purpose for you. God's still small voice is whispering it to you.

If you are on this earth, you have a purpose. If you are homebound – and we do have people watching online who have difficulty getting out – you can call people, send cards, connect with your neighbors. You can pray for people and let them know you are praying for them. If you are retired and still able to get around, God has a purpose for you, in the church and in the community. If you are in your working years, God has a purpose for you both within your job and outside your job.

Whatever your reality – too busy, too stressed, too much work, really just enjoying life right now, or frustrated with life now. It may be good, it may be difficult, **But God** has a purpose for you. A purpose that helps to bring God's Kingdom on earth as it is in heaven.

I love Elijah's story. It reminds me to remind myself, and others, that at times life is discouraging, **But God** meets us – God meets us wherever we are, because God has a purpose for each one of us in our individual lives, and together as the church. Amen.