

## Labor Day Meditation: Elijah's Cave

I Kings 18-19

Pastor Peter Hiett

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Well, this is Labor Day Weekend and lots of people are traveling so I thought I'd take a break from our series through the book of John and preach on labor and a passage that's intrigued me for a long time.

It's a story of Elijah in I Kings 18 & 19. In 874 B. C. Ahab became king in Israel. He took for his queen the Sidonian princess Jezebel. When vocalized in Hebrew, the name Jezebel means "no dung" or "the queen who takes no dung." Jezebel enticed Ahab in to worshipping Ba'al and his consort Ashera. Ba'al was the fertility God who rode the storms, having fiery lightning bolts and bringing rain - rain which fertilized the earth by impregnating Ashera, the Earth Mother, who bore fruit. To Jezebel, Ba'al and Ashera were earth, wind, fire and rain - the fundamental elements of Creation. The worship of Ba'al involved cultic prostitution and human sacrifice. And for Ba'al, Jezebel, had the prophets of the Lord massacred but Elijah prophesized to Ahab saying that the Lord would stop the rain and the Lord did. Elijah fled into the wilderness where he was fed by ravens. In the third year of the drought, Elijah challenges Ahab to summon the prophets of Ba'al and Ashera and assemble all Israel on Mt. Carmel.

In *I Kings 18:22* on Mt. Carmel, Elijah proclaims to all

*<sup>22</sup> I, even I only, am left a prophet of the Lord; but Baal's prophets number four hundred fifty. <sup>23</sup>Let two bulls be given to us; let them choose one bull for themselves, cut it in pieces, and lay it on the wood, but put no fire to it; I will prepare the other bull and lay it on the wood, but put no fire on it. <sup>24</sup>Then you call on the name of your god and I will call on the name of the Lord; the god who answers by fire is indeed God. All the people answered, "Well spoken!"*

So on that Mt. of Judgment the prophets of Ba'al call on their god. They shout, dance and cut themselves – bleeding all over themselves. At high noon Elijah taunts them saying "Maybe your god is busy, or asleep or taking a dump and can't be bothered." The priests of Ba'al continue their ravings until evening and nothing happens. Then in verse 3, Elijah takes 12 stones, symbolizing the 12 tribes of Israel. He takes them up the mountain and labors. He labors to build an altar, which he names Israel. The he digs a trench, or ditch, around the altar. He puts the etes [pronounced ates], that is tree wood or timber, on "Israel" – the altar. And on the timber he places he sacrifice. Then Elijah prays that Israel would see the fire of God and believe—believe that they would know God. At that, the fire of God descends upon the mountain consuming the sacrifice, the wood and even Israel, the stone altar. The people cry out, "Yahweh, (I AM that I AM) is God. "Together, they massacre all the prophets of Ba'al.

Elijah's servant climbs the mountain and looks to the sea seven times and on the

seventh time the sky grows black with rain. The drought is over and Elijah is filled with the power of God as he runs ahead of King Ahab's chariot all the way to Jezebel (17 miles away). Undoubtedly he's thinking, "It's done. My labor was not in vain. New Israel will have faith." Imagine if we had faith like Elijah—faith in a God who answers with fire—faith in firepower.

*1 Kings 18:46* <sup>18</sup>...the hand of the Lord was on Elijah; he girded up his loins and ran in front of Ahab to the entrance of Jezreel. <sup>18</sup> <sup>1</sup> Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done, and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword. <sup>2</sup> 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." <sup>3</sup> 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. <sup>4</sup> 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."

Elijah runs to save his life and then prays, "God take my Life!" Can you imagine—after seeing all of that power - earth, wind, fire and rain? After all that – he curls up under – a tree and wants to die... Can you imagine? I CAN In fact that's why I wanted to preach on this passage. I'm not sure I can understand it or anything that's going on in this passage so I'm calling this meditation – in hopes that you'll meditate much more. I can imagine... I think I've curled up under that very same tree on more than one occasion. Elijah prayed "enough." All that labor – three years in the wilderness challenging a whole country; building Israel; calling down fire and still Jezebel didn't believe and so Ahab didn't believe

Elijah was exhausted and overwhelmed, overwhelmed with evil. I suppose he'd probably witnessed human sacrifice, demonic oppression, mass starvation, ritual occult prostitution and now Jezebel's stone cold heart.

Sometimes, I'm just utterly overwhelmed by the depths of evil in this world. Americans are experts at denial but if you see the evil – it'll knock you to your knees under the tree. It's overwhelming. And yet even more overwhelming is the power of God.

I remember the first time I witnessed a demon cast out of a man. It was not subtle and I was totally overwhelmed by the power of God. Since then, on numerous occasions, I've seen Jesus cast out demons and even crush Satan with words that have come out of my mouth. I've been pinned to the floor by the power of God. I've seen people mowed down by His spirit. I witnessed a friend healed of HIV. Felt my leg miraculously grow and received words and visions that can't be explained away. It wasn't always like that – but now I'm 50 and I can't deny it. I've witnessed astounding firepower and, at times, it has literally been overwhelming.

I know some of you think, "If only I saw a miracle, then I'd have faith." Well you

might have a certain kind of faith - faith in fireworks – like Israel, but faith in fireworks is not faith in God. That's different than faith in God. You may think, "If I only saw a miracle, it would be better." And yet, I've found, and I think Elijah found, in some ways it can be worse because you wonder "God, why do you need my labor?" You know, God can send fire from heaven. God can create money in the mouth of fish. God can heal any disease and even raise the dead. God can make His Voice boo from heaven as the sky itself rolls up like a scroll. So, why do I have to sit at my desk and labor and labor to write a sermon? Why do you have to go to work and labor and toil to feed your ungrateful kids? WHY?

If you've really seen God's power, you've got to wonder: Why does God need our labor and us? Elijah had to be wondering, why do you need me? One little skinny old man running around a mountain consumed by Holy Fire. Such fire power and yet the power still doesn't do the job. Jezebel still doesn't believe and as we all know Israel doesn't really believe in God. So, SOON they'll be overrun by Syrians and Assyrians. Such firepower and such lack of faith. And now Elijah's got to be wondering "Where's the fire now? God you could at least fry Jezebel." So, Elijah cries "Enough!" and curls up in ball under a tree in the dark - exhausted, overwhelmed and forsaken. He must feel forsaken by God for the fire is gone. His heart cries "My god, my God why have you forsaken me?"

Sometimes, I think I feel like Elijah. Like god has asked me to labor – to dig a ditch, for instance, and I dig - sometimes even in the power of God, himself - but I turn around and He's filled in the ditch. I carry stones up a mountain – and sometimes I feel it - the power of God. Then He knocks the stones down. Not one left standing on top of another.

You know the entire Old Testament is all about building a city. Moses, David, Elijah – they're all about building a stone city called Jerusalem – the city of peace. Sometimes, they even build it in the very power of God and yet God himself has it torn down. Not one stone left standing on another. Some are still trying to build it – the city of peace – and it's the most violent city on the face of this planet.

So, ever feel like Elijah? All your life you labor, eating bread by the "sweat of your brow," and for what? You labor - sometimes even in the power of God – then you die. Do you realize that everyone miraculously healed by the Power of God in the last 5,000 years is dead or under the age of 110 and about to die?

Labor and labor for what? What's the point of LABOR?

"Enough" cries Elijah as he curls up under the tree, Inadequate, exhausted, overwhelmed, forsaken and alone. Elijah has said it and will say it again "I alone." It appears that Elijah wasn't the only prophet left in Israel, but he felt that way. Its lonely labor, standing in front of people, charged with speaking the Word of the Lord.

I have great friends and an incredible wife – yet I often feel so thoroughly alone in

my labor, delivering the Word of God. Now, please don't feel sorry for me 'cause I already feel sorry for myself. Maybe you ought to feel sorry for yourself. We're all charged with "delivering" the word of God – that is speaking truth in love to the people in our lives. That is we each must learn to exercise faith, hope, and love. And that is lonely labor. So, go you ever feel overwhelmed by the journey? You've built the altar, felt the fire, shivered in the darkness. You know that place under the tree. You've asked the questions - "God, what is the point of all this labor?" Maybe, you've even begged Him, like Elijah – "Please...just let me die." Well, Elijah curled up under the tree, feeling sorry for himself. But somebody else was feeling sorry for him too.

*<sup>5</sup>Then as he lay and slept under a broom tree, suddenly somebody (The Hebrew word is translated "angel," but it means "messenger" – it can be a man or a spirit) an angel touched him, and said to him, "Arise and eat." <sup>6</sup>Then he looked, and there by his head was a cake baked on coals, and a jar of water. So he ate and drank, and lay down again. <sup>7</sup>And the angel of the LORD...*

The Angel of the Lord is this amazing Old Testament figure. He's like fully God and fully Man and Elijah meets Him at the tree.

*...the Angel of the LORD came back the second time, and touched him, and said, "Arise and eat, because the journey is too great for you."*

"Too much for you" I love that. He doesn't say, "You can do it!" But Elijah, "It is too great – too much for you." Such compassion – especially when you consider that, at this point, Elijah appears to be running from God's call. All of humanity is running from God's call and He still has compassion, giving us nourishment for the journey.

I remember my mom making sandwiches for me as a little boy... the day I told her I was running away from home. "Oh Peter – the journey is too much for you." Several times in prayer, helping a friend through some awful memories, Jesus has said to my friend "I'm sorry." I don't think that means that He's apologizing for God. I think that means He feels sorrow for us. If we see His sorrow for us, perhaps we won't feel so sorry for ourselves. For then it's not just our sorrow, it's His.

Well Elijah was feeling sorrow for himself. The Angel of Yahweh felt sorrow for Him too. Elijah wasn't alone – even at the end of Himself – especially at the end of himself, he was no longer alone. The Angel said, "The journey is too much for you Elijah." I suspect that journey is Elijah's life. It's too much for you. Have you come to the end of yourself Elijah? "It's too much for you.." eat my bread, drink my cup, take my life – under the tree."

*<sup>8</sup> "So he arose, and ate and drank; and he went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights as far as Horeb, the mountain of God. <sup>9</sup>And there he went into a cave [a cave like a tomb – from the tree to the tomb] and spent the night in that place; and behold, the word of the LORD came to him...."*

Did you get that? The word of the Lord came to him and will speak to him – a word man speaking words. The word of the Lord is like a man and yet God – Who is the word of God?

*“and behold, the word of the LORD came to him [and he’d gone here in strength of Lord] and He said to him, “What are you doing here Elijah?”*

Now that’s funny. I don’t care who you are, that there is funny. Elijah thinks he’s working (laboring) but Elijah is getting worked. “What are you doing here Elijah?” What is Elijah doing there? Well, when I think of Elijah, I picture him something like this:

*Clip from Monty Python*

Elijah likes fireworks – I like fireworks. So many times I’ve prayed, “God, just slay everybody in the Spirit. Just blow our little service to bits.” I know He can do it and well , I think Elijah was looking for more fireworks. So, if Mt Carmel didn’t do the trick, surely Mt Horeb would. What’s Mt. Horeb?

*Clip from Ten Commandments (Moses receiving the tablets)*

Mt. Horeb is Mt Sinai. You want to talk fireworks. Mt. Horeb in the glory days. Do you ever look for glory in the past? Mt. Horeb is fireworks – signs and wonders – power?

One Bible scholar in England told a colleague of mine “Elijah went to Mt. Horeb because He was an American. So much faith in America consists of weekend to weekend power encounters.” Well, the Word asks Elijah, “What are you doing here Elijah?” It is like the Word of God is asking, “Are you looking for bigger tricks with earth, wind and fire?” “Elijah, did you think God, was my god, just because He has bigger tricks than Baal? Why are you here Elijah?” The Word sounds just like Jesus – “Why do you seek after signs? An evil and adulterous generation seeks after signs,” said Jesus. Adulterers seek the sign but not the substance. They seek the attributes and not the person. So they have faith in the signs of love and deeds of love but the law is not love. The Law describes the deeds of love – but it is not love. God is love. “Elijah, what are you doing here?” asks the Word of God.

*<sup>10</sup>[Elijah] 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.*

“I’ve been zealous for you Lord. I’ve been laboring for you Lord; I’ve been saving your tail, Lord.”

*<sup>11</sup>He (the Word of the Lord) 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; <sup>12</sup>and after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence.*

“The sound of sheer silence” (New Revised Standard Version); “thin silence” or “low whisper” (is the English Standard Version) and “still small voice” (is King James Version) If it is a voice – it appears to have been the voice beyond all voices – “the sound of silence” – under all the noise is silence and yet that silence speaks louder than all creation. “The sound of sheer silence.” The Hebrew is very enigmatic – all we really know is that, it wasn’t earth, wind or fire – not an element of the created order, not a created thing. All we really know is that God wasn’t “in” the earth, wind or fire, but in their absence; the absence of creation – God is I AM that I AM, I AM. He is not in them and yet everything is in Him. He is just so much more than everything.

There’s a story about three monks. One decided to preach the gospel. One decided to care for the sick. One decided to meditate in the desert in a cave. The first one became overwhelmed with his task of preaching and went to visit the second one, who’d grown bone tired with everybody’s needs. Together they visited the third one who they figured would be lonely in the cave, but he was neither exhausted, tired nor lonely. They shared their struggle. He was silent. Then he poured some muddy water into a glass vase – “Just look at the water,” he said. They sat in silence, and after time he said, “See how it cleared?” Perhaps all creation - earth, wind and fire - is like the particles (dust particles) suspended in that troubled water. We have trouble seeing God for all the dust but when we are still, we see – or better yet, know.

*Psalm 46 The mountains shake .the waters roar and foam. The earth melts: He breaks the bow and shatters the spear. He burns the chariots with fire. Be still. Be still and know I AM. I AM GOD*

On Mt. Horeb, Moses saw earth, wind and fire and received the Law but Elijah met I AM – not the signs, but the substance. God is three persons – one substance – the substance is love. That’s what all the fireworks are about. That’s what all creation is about.

Julian of Norwich wrote:

*“...choose to set at nothing everything that is made so as to have the love of God who is unmade. God wishes to be known, and is pleased that we should rest in him; for all that is below him does nothing to satisfy us. And this is why, until all that is made seems as nothing no soul ‘can be at rest.’”*

*“Six days you will labor and 1 day you will rest” said the Lord. “Until all that is made seems as nothing, no soul can be at rest,” said Julian.*

*You know: I am made and unmade. I am created dust and uncreated breath of*

God.

*Eccl. 3 God has placed eternity in our hearts.*

Yet our bodies are made of dust. If I understand correctly, God's still placing eternity in our hearts. "Our outer nature is wasting away" wrote Paul, but our inner-nature is being renewed every day." Perhaps that's why "six days you shall labor" – exerting our self, we see the end – our self. It is through our labor, that we come to the end of ourselves which is the beginning of Him and our new self and the seventh day. So labor, then. Be still and know God, your Father.

*<sup>12</sup> and after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire; and after the fire as sound of sheer silence. <sup>13</sup>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?"*

Once again Elijah shares his sorrow and the voice says, "Go." He is to speak the Word of God is in him. He's come to the end of himself at the tree – spent the night in the tomb and the Word came to him – the Word is in Him.

*<sup>15</sup>Then the LORD said to him: "Go, return on your way to the Wilderness of Damascus; and when you arrive, anoint Hazael as king over Syria.*

The Syrians were Israel's worst enemy at the time. "Anoint Hazael over Syria. Jehu over Israel. Elijah in your place. When Elijah finally prophesizes over Hazael of Syria, he's weeping for He knows Hazael will "rip open – the pregnant women of Israel" (2Kings 8:12) and dash their babies to pieces.

*Go anoint Hazael, King over Syria" says the Lord to Elijah. The Syrians, Assyrians, Babylonians, Greeks, and Romans will utterly decimate Israel.*

So, back to our original question: "What's the point – the point - of all this labor?" Answer – a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger. Israel gives birth – Jerusalem gives birth – this old creation gives birth.

*Genesis 3 Adam your labor will be toil and Eve childbirth will be pain" "but you will give birth to the promised One.*

I've never seen a person more exhausted, overwhelmed and lonely in their labor than my wife as my first son was being born. The labor came in waves - like an earthquake or a storm - and then silence - a rhythm of labor and silence.

*Six days, you shall labor and one you shall rest.*

Between contractions, is the silence – I'd speak, "Just think about our baby." And the Word of the Father would come to the Bride and the Word would even come to the Son

in the womb like a voice from beyond. His Word – the voice beyond all voices. Well, giving birth hurts – it hurts the mother and hurts the son. And, so neither mother nor son was alone in that pain. They communed in that sorrow. Could there ever be a more intimate communion than the pain of that labor? And what a strange sort of labor? Labor doesn't create a child; labor reveals a child that God has already created. So, what's the purpose of labor? A child-the Revelation of a child. "Unto us a child is born." "Unto us a son is given."

What is the point of all your labor? It's this: coming to the end of yourself and receiving this Gift, a Savior who is Christ the Lord. Christ is being born, which means, you are being born. Check this out – you are even giving birth – to Christ, Mt. Carmel, Mt. Horeb, and Mt. Calvary – Jesus is being born. Israel is an altar, which holds the Word, which holds the sacrifice – God in Flesh. He has made himself the sacrifice on our behalf – He is love. The fire covers the sacrifice – Jesus dies and is resurrected – the first born of all creation. The world's failure, Israel's failure, Jerusalem's failure, your failure reveals the grace of God – Jesus our Lord. Jesus is being born and Jesus is being born in Elijah; the word of God is Elijah – faith, hope and love in Elijah, that's the life of Christ in Elijah. Did you know that Elijah is only one of two people, in the Old Testament – that doesn't go to Hell – that is Sheol. He doesn't descend into Sheol. Elijah skipped Hell and went straight to Heaven in a flaming chariot. "No one comes to the Father except through the Son" says scripture. Elijah met the Son at the tomb and in the tomb – he died before He died. Life died with Christ and rose with Christ. Died to His labor and became God's labor – born of God! Christ is being born and so Elijah is also being born. Elijah thought the point of all his labor was to produce a ditch, a building, a city, a nation but the point of all his labor was producing Elijah. Elijah's cave (just like your tomb) is actually a womb. This world is a womb and you are being born anew.

So, it's like I labor and toil, digging a ditch for God and I turn around and watch him fill it back in – intact stones and watch him tear it down. And I scream at Him "What's the point of all this labor?" and He says, "Well, Peter, you're the point of all this labor. Peter, look at your arms, look at your shoulders, feel the breath in your lungs and the strength in your back. I'm not interested in creating ditches and stacks of stone. I'm in the business of creating you. As you build a stack of stones – I'm building you. As you make a sermon, build a home and raise your kids, I'm raising you, building you, making you, in my image. I'm giving birth to me in you – faith, hope, and love in you. Eternity in you – Christ in you. What's the point of all this labor? I'm giving birth to you."

"You see the point of all this labor? I'm giving birth to you." Everything you produce – houses, bank accounts, cities, nations – it will all pass away. But you still must labor. The point of your labor is not what you produce but what God produces in you as you labor. And you will labor to the end of your life – labor to death. Your old self in, order to see your new self, created by grace through faith.

You know we're all commanded to labor – to build Jerusalem if you will. But then God destroys Jerusalem and it comes down new from heaven. The city not made with hands – it is coming down now. Even now eternity is in us. So, you look for miracles in



earth, wind and fire and the greatest miracle in you – looking, you look for proof in signs and wonders and the greatest wonder is you. “This is the mystery hidden for ages and generations: Christ in you,” writes Paul. And in Galatians, he asks “Why do you turn back to the elemental principles of this world when the spirit of His Son cries ‘Abba Father’ in you?”

So, why all the labor? Christ is being born. Elijah is being born. You are being born and check it out. You, Elijah, the Church are giving birth to the Word of God, message of Yahweh. Christ is Lord in this world but it’s a very strange sort of labor – not about striving, but humble surrender to the miracle of grace. So, with his labor, Elijah can’t create the Word and yet he gave birth to the Word and yet he gives birth to the Word. Only the most arrogant foolish woman would think she could create a baby. He speaks the eternal Word of God. And so do you – after you come to the end of yourself, believe God’s grace and so speak God’s grace, speak Jesus to those around you. Do you see Him? You’ve labored all week to the build the altar – I mean with our arrogant, striving, our pride – we’ve dragged the timber. Do you see the sacrifice?

At high noon, the sky grows dark? The Word of God, and of Yahweh lifts His head and cries, “*eli eli lama sabachthani*.” Bystanders think he’s calling for Elijah to come save him, for Elijah was saved – they think he’s calling for Elijah but Elijah doesn’t save. Jesus saves – Jesus is saving Elijah. The veil in the temple rips, the earth trembles as if in labor, but God isn’t in the earthquake; God isn’t in the earth, wind and rain; God isn’t in the fire flashing from the heavens. God is in the man strapped to the wood for you. God is love and in this is love.

### **Communion**

God is in this [Peter points to the communion table].

He took the bread and broke it saying, “This is my Body given to you.” And he took the cup saying, “This is the new covenant in my blood.” So come to the cross (the tree) – surrender your labor and become God’s labor and be born from above.

### **Benediction**

What’s the point of all this labor? This is the point. Well in 2 Kings, Elijah gets taken up in a flaming chariot. We don’t hear from again for 900 years. Then 900 years later on a Mountain in Israel, once again he meets “the Angel” “the Word” He’s in flesh (in dust) and he’s transfigured and check this out, he wasn’t in the fire, but the fire was in him. As Elijah stands there with Jesus and Moses, this guy named Peter gets so worked up, he starts running around making all kinds of noise. “I’ll build that! I’ll build that!” God, Almighty, tells him to “shut-up.” He booms, “Peter – stop – listen – this is my Beloved Son.” You know the story. Peter still had to come to the end of himself but then the Lord met him and asked him three times – “Do you love me?” And he said, “Go and feed my sheep.” It was on Peter that the Lord built His church.

*Disclaimer: This document is a draft and has not been edited by the author. Therefore, there may be discrepancies. Some discrepancies may be minor; some may have to do with theology. When in doubt, please refer to the audio version of the sermon on this website and don’t be shy about informing us of errors.*