



# Massanutten

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Powerful Retreats

A Sermon Preached by Ann Pettit

June 27th , 2010

13th Sunday in Ordinary Time

1 Kings 19:1-15a

(This text comes from The Message, by Eugene Peterson)

*Ahab reported to Jezebel everything that Elijah had done, including the massacre of the prophets. Jezebel immediately sent a messenger to Elijah with her threat: "The gods will get you for this and I'll get even with you! By this time tomorrow you'll be as dead as any one of those prophets."*

*When Elijah saw how things were, he ran for dear life to Beersheba, far in the south of Judah. He left his young servant there and then went on into the desert another day's journey. He came to a lone broom bush and collapsed in its shade, wanting in the worst way to be done with it all—to just die: "Enough of this, GOD! Take my life—I'm ready to join my ancestors in the grave!" Exhausted, he fell asleep under the lone broom bush.*

*Suddenly an angel shook him awake and said, "Get up and eat!"*

*He looked around and, to his surprise, right by his head were a loaf of bread baked on some coals and a jug of water. He ate the meal and went back to sleep.*

*The angel of GOD came back, shook him awake again, and said, "Get up and eat some more—you've got a long journey ahead of you."*

*He got up, ate and drank his fill, and set out. Nourished by that meal, he walked forty days and nights, all the way to the mountain of God, to Horeb. When he got there, he crawled into a cave and went to sleep.*

*Then the word of GOD came to him: "So Elijah, what are you doing here?"*

*"I've been working my heart out for the GOD-of-the-Angel-Armies," said Elijah. "The people of Israel have abandoned your covenant, destroyed the places of worship, and murdered your prophets. I'm the only one left, and now they're trying to kill me."*

*Then he was told, "Go, stand on the mountain at attention before GOD. GOD will pass by."*

*A hurricane wind ripped through the mountains and shattered the rocks before GOD, but GOD wasn't to be found in the wind; after the wind an earthquake, but GOD wasn't in the earthquake; and after the earthquake fire, but GOD wasn't in the fire; and after the fire a gentle and quiet whisper.*

*When Elijah heard the quiet voice, he muffled his face with his great cloak, went to the mouth of the cave, and stood there. A quiet voice asked, "So Elijah, now tell me, what are you doing here?" Elijah said it again, "I've been working my heart out for GOD, the GOD-of-the-Angel-Armies, because the people of Israel have abandoned your covenant, destroyed your places of worship, and murdered your prophets. I'm the only one left, and now they're trying to kill me."*

*GOD said, "Go back the way you came through the desert to Damascus. When you get there anoint Hazeal; make him king over Aram."*

Since I was last with you two weeks ago, I've done a bit of traveling. I had the opportunity to participate in the Leaders' Training for the Stephen Ministry program we are in the process of setting up at Massanutten. This particular Training Course was in Orlando, which meant I needed to fly to get there. I'm not particularly fond of flying, but sometimes it's the best way to get from here to there.

I left out of Shenandoah Valley Airport and though I knew when I made the reservation the plane would be on the smallish side, memories of the Barbie airplane I played with as a child still came to mind as we boarded. When I say I don't particularly like to fly, I really mean, I get a little nervous. And so, as the Barbie Airship made its way down the runway I felt every shake and bump and shudder the plane made as it left the ground and moved through pockets of turbulence. I began to panic; I was sure something was terribly wrong by the amount of shaking going on. I studied the flight attendant's face for any sign of alarm on her part; I was keenly aware of the passengers around me and their body language. Nobody else seemed concerned, and gradually I was able to talk myself down from my panic. It was a thankfully short flight to Dulles, where I caught the connecting, uneventful and smooth flight to Orlando. I was happy to be safe on the ground.

Last Saturday it was time to return to Virginia, and I left Orlando on a nice big plane. The take-off was smooth and though I still watched the flight attendant's face closely, I was pretty relaxed. And then it happened. As the beverage service cart was making its way through the cabin, the pilot's voice came over the intercom. "Ladies and Gentleman; we are moving toward some turbulent air and will be suspending beverage service at this time. Flight attendants please take your seats." Interrupting regular activity on a flight was a sure sign that something was terribly wrong in my mind, and again, I felt panic begin to move through me. Here I was coming back from this great conference about Stephen Ministry, with all this wisdom to share, and our lives were in danger. All I'd learned would be for naught. Surely God wouldn't allow this to happen! And then the words which I have read and spoken and heard proclaimed many times before came to me: *in life and in death we belong to God*. And with them a sense of peace.

But what intriguing to me was: not only did I hear those words for myself, but I could envision myself offering those words to the passengers around me, if and when turbulence gave way to chaos in the plane. I waited as we continued moving through the air, prepared to speak these words of assurance if needed. And as I waited I reflected on the wonder of God's timing and grace. The sheer panic from my flight the week before had been replaced by a deep and powerful confidence in God's love. I was, indeed, pleased.

After a while the pilot came on again to tell us we were beginning our descent into Charlotte, where I would be changing planes. I relaxed as the plane made its

way downward; but then the wheels hit the ground. I felt the plane moving with such speed I was certain something was wrong and the plane's brakes had failed. Back into Panic Mode, I did what any good passenger would do, I planted my feet firmly on the ground, pushing with all my might to assist the pilot in slowing the plane. And of course it worked; the plane came to a safe stop, just where it should, and we left the plane, bound for our various destinations.

As I thought back on my various reactions to the flights I had, my mind was drawn to Elijah and his strong call to accountability to the people of Israel. He told them their faithfulness limped back and forth between God and Baal; it changed with the direction of the wind, or in my case – the bumpiness of the plane ride. I thought of Elijah's experience as well. As we've read this month, Elijah's ministry took him into the presence of political greatness and power and also into the ordinary life in a poor woman's home. It showed forth in strong messages and calls for faithfulness, and also in quiet moments of care and grace. And, as we read today, within his ministry he found himself gripped by fear, even when he had just experienced the power of God at work in mighty ways on Mount Carmel.

We meet Elijah on the run today; he's scared for his life and runs as far as he can to get away from Ahab's mean, vengeance filled wife, Jezebel. He panicked, certain that he'd failed. He was retreating, ready to be done with this whole prophetic adventure.

We can imagine how Elijah must have felt. After that amazing contest on Mount Carmel, in which God was shown to be the one true God; Elijah probably felt pretty good about things at that moment. He'd been able to bring the people to a point of faithfulness, as he mediated the contest between Baal and God. But he'd barely had a chance to savor the triumph of that event, when, Jezebel began her rants against him, threatening his very life.

Elijah's escape took him to Beersheeba, outside of Israel and Jezebel's reach. From there he went on alone until he finally collapsed under the shade of a bush, perhaps too weary to continue. The great prophet of God, lay exhausted, defeated and alone.

Yet he's not alone at all. As he slept God began to heal his weary and wounded spirit. Through bread, water and rest, his body began to gain strength. Although Elijah ran, he could not escape the God who had called him. Although he wanted to give up on God, God would not give up on him.

Elijah's experience of God at work in his life, the swings in his confidence and strength are, perhaps, not so far from our own. At times we are bold and secure, finding it possible to step out through word and deed, in service to Christ. Yet, at other times we fade back; we even run away, afraid of what might happen, uncertain of ourselves and longing to be relieved of whatever lies before us.

As events conspire to drag us down, we might lose sight of what God is doing; it may be hard to see a way through, and so we look for a way out. Elijah's words of lament are probably not too different than the ones we've spoken ourselves:

*"I've been working my heart out for GOD, the GOD-of-the-Angel-Armies, because the people of Israel have abandoned your covenant, destroyed your places of worship, and murdered your prophets. I'm the only one left, and now they're trying to kill me."*

In an achingly honest way, Elijah lays it out for God: nothing he does has made a bit of difference. After pouring his heart into his work, emptying himself for the sake of God's call to him, the people are still faithless, and he's left running for his life.

Maybe you've been there as well. Life has suddenly taken a new and hard turn. The very thing you've poured your heart into begins to fall apart; that person you've reached out to help takes advantage of you; the relationship you've nurtured and sacrificed for through the years breaks – and nothing you do makes any difference. Despite all the energy, passion and love you've given, life has conspired against you. *At those moments, it feels for all the world like we're alone – that there's nothing left for us.*

In the midst of Elijah's escape and despair, he finds that God is his companion on this retreat. When Elijah pours his heart out to God in frustration, God stays with him. But not only did God stay with him, God was filling him up every step of the way. At no point is this more evident to Elijah than when God comes to him on Mount Horeb, also known as Mount Sinai. On this Mountain of God, Elijah experiences the presence of God in a new and powerful way. Beyond the wind, the earthquake and the fire comes the sound of sheer silence. And in that quietness God's voice reaches out to Elijah, beckoning him on to new ministries of faithfulness. When we find ourselves beaten down by the turns our lives have taken and are unsure of what the future might hold, Elijah's life offers a reassuring and powerful witness:

a witness not only of the "Greatest Prophet" in the Old Testament, but also of a child of God who poured himself out in his ministry and discovered God was filling him;

a witness that lifts up the true source of our strength;

a witness that reminds us what success does and doesn't mean in God's eyes.

God continued to call Elijah even as Elijah was given what he needed to continue in his ministry. God bears us up for what lies beyond those times of despair and anguish, leading us into new ministries of grace and life.

*Let us pray,*

*O God, open our hearts to receive your ministry to us even when the chaos in our lives threatens to drown out your care and your call. Lead us into the future, sustained by your kindness and love. Through Christ, Amen.*