

**Proper 7C  
I Kings 19:1-15a  
June 20, 2010**

**The late, great rabbi Ed Friedman once said, “When things are going really well, watch out!” He understood that it is in moments of greatest success, greatest satisfaction, greatest accomplishment that we are most vulnerable.**

**We are vulnerable to sabotage, sometimes by others who resent or resist our success. We are also vulnerable to self-sabotage, doing ourselves in, just so we can feel more human, more fallible, more comfortable. Why wait for that other shoe to drop? Sometimes it feels better to bring it crashing down on your own head, just to get it over with.**

**We see this in this morning’s lesson from the Hebrew scriptures. The prophet Elijah should have been riding high, yet in this selection from I Kings, we find him running in fear of his life. Elijah was coming off a great string of successes. He had faced down the priests of the god Ba’al at Mount Carmel. It was a triumph! Elijah had called fire down from heaven to light the flame at his sacrificial altar. And no matter how hard the priests of Ba’al danced and chanted, nothing happened. The God of Israel was decisively proven to be more powerful than the God of the Phoenicians.**

**Then Elijah pressed his advantage, slaughtering the priests of Ba’al. Not a single devotee of this interloping, false god would be left alive. And so Elijah triumphed in the name of the God of Israel, the one god, the real god. False worship was wiped out, true religion was restored, and everything should have been great in the land of Israel forever more.**

**Except that Elijah hadn't reckoned with Queen Jezebel. Jezebel was a foreigner, a worshipper of Ba'al, who had married Ahab, King of Israel, and brought her pagan god with her into the promised land. Now in our time, the word "jezebel" has come to mean a sexy, conniving woman. But three thousand years ago, when this story took place, the problem was not that Jezebel was seductive, the problem was that she was bloodthirsty.**

**Jezebel was a queen in the same sense that Caligula was an emperor, or that Michael Corleone was a godfather. She was ruthless, vindictive, and murderous. If you didn't accommodate her whims, you would just be killed. If she wanted something, she took it, whether it was a local man's vineyard or a prophet's life.**

**So when Jezebel learned that all her priests, all of the priests of Ba'al had been killed, well she sent Elijah a message. And Elijah got the message, just as clearly as if he had been delivered a bulletproof vest with a fish inside and told that "Luca Brasi sleeps with the fishes." He was next on Jezebel's hit list.**

**When things are going really well, watch out! Elijah should have seen it coming. Seen it coming, and been ready.**

**But instead of facing Jezebel down, instead standing on his successes, instead of trusting that the same God who had made the priests of Ba'al a laughing stock would stick with him, and guard him and protect him, Elijah fled instead.**

**He went a long way, running, running, fleeing for his life. Fifty miles and more on foot, out of the Kingdom of Israel, into the Kingdom of Judah. Over the border, you would think he would relax. But no, Elijah just ran faster, harder. He left his servant there in Beer-sheba and headed on alone, into the wilderness, praying to die.**

**But Elijah hadn't counted on God. You see, you can run from God all you want to, but you can't hide. God went with Elijah into the wilderness. God provided cakes and water, and Elijah kept going. God led Elijah through the wilderness, the metaphorical forty-day-and-forty-night wilderness, like Moses, like the children of Israel leaving Egypt. God led him and fed him and never abandoned him.**

**And in the end, Elijah arrived at the mountain of God, Mount Horeb, also known as Mount Sinai. The place where God talked to Moses. The place where the law was given. The place where you might expect that God would turn up and talk to you, too.**

**And God DOES turn up. And God DOES talk to Elijah. But Elijah's won't listen, because Elijah has given up. Elijah is trying as hard as he can to quit, to stop being this prophet, to stop fighting Jezebel and the followers of Ba'al and Ahab and all the rest of them. God asks, "What are you doing here, Elijah," and Elijah gives the whole litany of complaint. Surely he can quit. Surely he can be done. The worship of the Lord of Hosts is done in Israel and Elijah is the only one left alive. Surely God will let him off the hook.**

**Well, not really. There's a lot of noise out there on the mountain for a while, but the answer Elijah is looking for can't be heard in the noise. Nothing in the fire, the storm, the earthquake says, "OK Elijah, you win. Give up and go home." Instead, there is this sound of sheer silence. And Elijah leaves his little cave and goes out to listen harder, but he still doesn't hear what he wants to hear.**

**Instead he hears the same question. "What are you doing here, Elijah?" And he gives the same answer. *Poor me, poor Elijah, it's all a failure. I'm a failure. I'm all alone and Jezebel is after me.***

**How did this happen? How did mighty Elijah, the prophet of Israel, the mouthpiece of the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, come to this? Cowering in the wilderness, hoping to die, running like a rabbit, begging for mercy? God had not abandoned him. God was as close to him as ever, feeding and leading and speaking and saving. But Elijah had somehow given up his vision, his sense of God, his very identity.**

**Elijah had forgotten who he was. Instead of being the person God made him to be, instead of doing the work that God had called him to do, he became instead the person Jezebel wanted him to be, fearful, hunted, cowardly. He let Jezebel drive him to despair. He let Jezebel chase him into exile. He let Jezebel define his very identity.**

**And so the mighty prophet who had mocked the priests of Ba'al became a sniveling ball of anxiety, shivering in the wilderness.**

**This story happened three thousand years ago, in a time so distant, we only have these ancient texts with which to glimpse it. Three thousand years ago, but you know what? People have not changed. It's not just Elijah's story, this is OUR story. It's the story we find ourselves trapped within, every time we let our fears and our failures, our enemies and our emotions tell us who we are, every time we believe those lies and hunker down in terror. It is so easy to cave in the face of resistance. It is so natural to let our failures define us. It is just plain old human nature to give in to all those opposing forces, whether they come at us from outside or rise up in our own hearts.**

**It is too easy to believe those other voices, to take them on and let them live and grow inside our minds. You know the voices. The ones that say things like ... *I'm nobody special. I don't deserve this happiness. I really am neurotic, narcissistic, and needy. Why would anyone love me? I knew this would just end badly. I am a rotten parent. I am an obsolete worker. I am a failed spouse. I can't win. I shouldn't expect any better. Everyone is out to get me. Why bother? Why did I think it could be any different?***

**And we forget that it is God who has named us and claimed us. We forget that we are children of God, created by God to be good, to do good, that we are made GOOD. We don't hear that still, small voice of God asking us gently, "Why are you here? Did you forget who you are? Do you forget that I made you and I love you and I am always, always with you and I will never forsake you?"**

**Elijah forgot who he was. Elijah ran in terror. But there was nowhere he could run where God was not. And in the end, Elijah went back to Israel. Not because he suddenly got brave, or realized he was wrong. Elijah finally stopped long enough to hear God's voice, small, persistent, but ever, ever present.**

**He got new marching orders, and it was clear that he was not going to be allowed to quit being the great prophet of Israel. He was going to have to be the person God knew he could be. But he wouldn't be alone. Because when God sent him back, it was to anoint kings who would overthrow Ahab and Jezebel. He would anoint a new prophet, Elisha, to take up the work when he had to lay it down.**

**And most importantly God would go with him, back to Israel, just as God had gone with him out of Israel into the wilderness. God never forgot Elijah. God never gave up on Elijah.**

**When things are going really well, watch out! Remember that. Because it's easy to forget. Forget who we are. Forget whose we are. But God never forgets. God never gives up. God goes with us – even into darkness. God draws us out again, into the light.**