

What happens when you discover that God is not entirely who you thought God was? What happens when you discover that your familiar thoughts and images and expectations about God are, not exactly *wrong*, but aren't *enough* to reflect the deeper reality of who God truly is? And what happens when discovering something new about God makes you discover something new about yourself?

That's what happens to Elijah in our First Testament reading today. Elijah is on the run from Queen Jezebel's soldiers, and he's hiding out in a cave on Mount Horeb, and God appears to him. God sends a rushing wind, and an earthquake, and fire before Elijah — but God is not in any of those demonstrations of power. It is only in the stillness that follows that Elijah finally hears God's voice.

The story, of course, is very familiar to us — perhaps *so* familiar that we can fail to recognize how difficult this experience was for Elijah. You see, the three things that God is not in — wind and earthquake and fire — were all traditional symbols of God's presence and power. Genesis says that God's Spirit moved like a mighty wind over the face of the deep in the beginning of Creation, and Psalm 135 says that God brings the winds out of the divine storehouse: wind is a sign of the presence of God. Psalm 104 says that God "looks at the earth and it trembles; God touches the mountains and they smoke": earthquake is a sign of the presence of God. And fire, of course, is a sign of God from way back: God appears to Moses in a bush that is flaming with fire but is not burned up; God leads the Israelites out of Egypt, going before them in a pillar of fire; Psalm 18 says that when God became angry, "Smoke rose from his nostrils and a consuming fire out of his mouth; hot burning coals blazed forth from him." Fire imagery especially was traditionally connected with the presence and the power of God.

But fire imagery is also connected to Elijah. For Elijah in particular, fire was a mark of God's presence and power *with him*. There are stories about Elijah and fire all through the Elijah cycle. In one story, Elijah calls down God's fire from heaven to consume the sacrifice he has offered — and in the process fires up the Israelites to put Jezebel's prophets of Baal to the sword as well, which is why Jezebel is after him now. And later, at the end of Elijah's life, in a story we'll read in church next week, Elijah is taken up into heaven in a whirlwind composed of horses and chariots of fire. Fire is specifically connected with Elijah as a sign of God's presence and God's power in him.

So imagine how it must have felt to Elijah on Mount Horeb to see a fire from God go before him, and to realize that fire was *not* a sign of the presence of God. Imagine how it must have felt to Elijah to realize that fire was *not* a sign of his own power to overcome God's enemies and to work God's works. If even *fire* wasn't God, then it must have been for Elijah as if there were absolutely nothing left, it was all gone, everything was empty and void.

And then, out of that empty void, God spoke. In that still, small voice that was anything but the voice of power Elijah had listened for, God spoke. And when God spoke, Elijah discovered that God was *more* than he had thought, that God's presence and God's power and God's justice and God's creativity could work in the world in many more ways than Elijah had previously suspected. And when Elijah discovered that about God, Elijah discovered something about himself as well: that he, Elijah, was *more* than he'd thought, that he could work God's works and carry forth into the world God's presence and God's power and God's justice and God's creativity in many more ways than he had suspected. Elijah was now no longer to be just the solitary, fiery prophet, standing on his own and saying "I alone am left," but Elijah was now to be sent to gather others and bring them into his mission. It's a shame our lectionary stops the reading where it does, because after God says to Elijah, "Go," God gives Elijah specific instructions about who he's supposed to go to: Elijah is to go and gather others: Hazael to be king of Aram, and Jehu to be king of Israel, and Elisha to succeed himself as prophet, and seven

thousand faithful Israelites who had not bowed down and worshiped Baal when Jezebel commanded it, and who were to be the core of a renewed Israel. Elijah was called to gather others, in a kind of ministry that was new to him, and to find God's power working through them *together* in ways Elijah had never before expected.

What happens when you discover that God is more than you had thought? And what happens when discovering something more about God makes you discover something more about yourself? New possibilities for ministry and mission happen, new energy to follow God's call is released — if you can be open to receive it.

And that's the promise for us today, too: that our life in God, our life in Christ, our life in the Spirit, our life of mission and ministry — our life is a constant invitation to be discovering that God is more than we'd thought God is, and that we, in God, are more than we'd thought of ourselves.

We are invited to discover, like Elijah, that God comes to us not only in moments of strength, not only in demonstrations of power, where we would perhaps *like* to see God all the time — but God comes to us in our weakness, when we're feeling lost, when everything seems empty. God comes to us when we're waiting for surgery, or when the diagnosis is not good, or when a relationship is breaking. God comes to us as a congregation when we're worried about increasing the budget, or anxious about bringing in new members, or afraid that our Episcopal Church and our Anglican Communion seem to be going to pieces and we don't know what to do about it. God comes to us as a nation when we are feeling helpless in the face of oil that we can't stop gushing into the Gulf, and we are brought face-to-face with our unhealthy dependence on a fuel that is so increasingly difficult to get and can be so dangerous when we do get it. We can discover that God comes to us in our emptiness — and when we discover that about God, we can discover something about ourselves: that we are called to gather together, not to deal with our weaknesses by ourselves, but to be in relationship, so that God can work through us together in ways we'd never guessed alone.

And I think that message is especially vital for us right now at Trinity. Last week at the Parish Hall meeting I talked about *practices* that help congregations to thrive, ways of *doing things* to practice our faith, ways of *doing things together* to join in mission and ministry and in the world. Practices like coming together to worship and experience God's presence with each other; or like asking each other "Where do you see God in your daily life?" and discerning together where God is and where God leads; or like engaging in theological reflection together, thinking with one another about what our faith means in the everyday circumstances of everyday life; or like beauty, creating and sharing the enjoyment of art and music because God's own creativity is made manifest in them — practices like these are ways for Christians to come together and discover God speaking and moving and acting among them in ways they'd never guessed before. In a time when traditional signs and symbols of the church's power in society seem to be changing and eroding and emptying, living practices like these can help congregations — can help Trinity — be a place that is vital and vibrant and worth coming to and attractive to new participants. When we come together to practice our faith, we discover that we are more than we'd thought we were — and we discover that God is more than we'd thought God was, too.

What happens when you discover that God is more than you had thought? And what happens when discovering something more about God makes you discover something more about yourself? New possibilities for ministry and mission happen, new energy to follow God's call is released — if we can be open to receive it.

Let us pray that we *will* be open to receive this discovery today, and let us pray that we will be prepared to discover even more in every day to come. Amen.