Book 4

Sunday February 2, 1975

"COME OUT OF YOUR CAVE!" I Kings 19:1-4, 9-16

What do you do when life gets to be too much for you? Maybe you do what the prophet Elijah did. He hid in a cave! Elijah had good reason to be discouraged. The country of Northern Israel in which he lived was ruled by King Ahab. And there were problems. In addition to all kinds of political abuses, Ahab had married a foreign woman named Jezebel. He hoped this marriage would cement the alliance between Israel and Jezebel's country and thereby bolster his defenses.

And it worked in part. The alliance did prevent an immediate invasion by the Syrian armies. But it produced some other results which were forseen only by Elijah.

The new Queen Jezebel was no sweet golden-haired princess who had been carried into her marriage with high romance. It was a marriage of convenience and Jezebel was going to make it as convenient as possible. She was accustomed to having her way no matter what. Opposition did not discourage her as it did Elijah. It infuriated her and pushed her into irresponsible deeds.

The basic problem was that Jezebel had brought with her to Israle her pagan religion in the form of Baal and Ashtoreth worship. These religions found extreme expression in sexual orgies and infant sacrifice. In order to make his bride feel at home in a strange country, Ahab not only permitted the invasion of these primitive expressions of religion, but actually built temples and maintained their priests at public expense. It proved to be a popular move with most of the people. Many Israelites became enthusiastic Baal worshippers, able to break all of the 10 commandments without compunction.

It was into this situation that Elijah was sent by God. Elijah warned the King that if he does not change his ways, a severe drought will come to the whole country. Ahab had never seen or heard of Elijah before this. Elijah was no Billy Graham leading a White House worship service.

Ahab was surprised when dressed in his royal robes, he was confronted by this ragged prophet from the distant border. Elijah told him, "Because the people of Israel under your leadership have forgotten the Lord and have followed false

gods, a deadly drought will come on the whole country. Then Elijah disappeared in the crowd. However, the King labelled him as a fanatic and quickly returned to his old ways without alarm.

Elijah decided to wait in the capital city to see whether or not the drought would bring the king and the people to their senses. It had been a high moment for him to confront the King. But now during the long wait, his exaltation faded bit by bit, and he slipped from the peak of his original holy enthusiasm into discouragement. And as the prophecy of the severe drought came true and ordinary people began to suffer, Elijah grew more morose.

Now the King remembered Elijah and blamed all the country's troubles on him. He sent his soldiers to arrest Elijah, but the prophet escaped with the help of friends.

But God had not forgotten Elijah and when the drought was at its worst, Elijah is told to confront Ahab and Jezebel again.

When he reached the King's presence, Ahab growled, "Is it indeed you, you troublemaker?" "I have caused no trouble for Israel," said Elijah, "You are the guilty one, you and your wife and the whole lot of you have forsaken the commandents of God and worshipped Baal."

The false prophets throughout history have often told the kings and presidents what they wanted to hear. However, frequently the clearest mark of the authenticity of a prophetic message is its unpopularity.

Though discouraged, Elijah was not afraid. He issued a challenge to the King. "Assemble all Israel on the slopes of Mt. Carmel, and with them the 850 prophets of Baal that feed at Jezebel's table." The false prophets are brought and two altars are built. Jezebel stayed away.

Elijah asked the crowd--"How long will you limp between two religious beliefs? If the Lord is God, then follow him, and if Baal is Lord, then follow him."

Elijah commanded that wood be put on both altars and he told the priests of Baal, "Call on your god and let him answer by sending fire to light the wood on your altar. Then I will call on the LORD GOD, and the god who answers

by sending fire, let him be regarded as the true God." The priests of Baal cried out to their god and danced around their altar. When nothing happened, Elijah taunted them-- "Cry louder, for surely Baal is real. Perhaps he is wrapped in thought, or maybe sleeping, or is on a journey or has gone to the bathroom and therefore cannot hear you."

The priests redoubled their efforst and even gashed themselves with knives. But at the end of the day, there was no fire on the altar.

Now Elijah soaked the wood on his altar with water and then prayed to God to light the fire. The blaze was immediate and the people cried out, "The Lord, He is God!" Then Elijah took a further step and ordered the people to kill all the prophets of Baal. And it was done.

"The rains will come now," Elijah told Ahab, "The drought is over." And as he predicted, it happened.

But it was not all over. Ahab returned to his wife despondent and gripped by a fierce anger from his public humiliation and from the destruction of Jezebel's religious cults. And Jezebel did not take the news with quiet resignation. Her first thought was vengeance. She sent a message to Elijah, "So let the gods to do me and a hundred times more if I don't have your head within 24 hours." In other words, by this time tomorrow you will be dead!

So Elijah ran for his life. And he told God, "O Lord I've had enough of this. Take away my life, I'm no good." It was while he was in this depressed state that he finally hid himself in a cave.

But God did not let him alone for long. The Bible says-- "The word of the Lord came to Elijah--"What are you doing here in this cave? And the prophet answered, "I have worked hard for your cause, O Lord, and what good did it do, my enemies are trying to kill me." Elijah was lonely and totally discouraged.

Elijah's problem is one we're all familiar with. Who among us does not get discouraged. We work hard, we think we've been doing all the right things, and what does it get us? Like Elijah, we have our "cave" moods and we have our own kinds of caves in which to hide.

Some kinds of illness can be a cave in which we hide for a time. Studies show that hope, purpose, meaning and direction in life produce and maintain wellness, even in the face of stress, whereas demoralization by the events and conditions of daily existence helps people become ill.

One study showed, for example, that 41 out of 42 patients additted to a general hospital during a 23 day period showed evidence in interviews of feelings of helplessness or hopelessness shortly before the onset of the variegated diseases.

Illness can be a way of going into hiding for a time. It can be our cave. Actually, we can learn a lot from illness. Listen to what your illness is telling you. It may be telling you to take a rest, in fact it can force you to rest for a time. And it can tell us some other things about ourselves and others.

I remember as a child what a nice cave illness often was for me. Being one of seven children, if I had to stay home from school for a day, I had my mother's attention all to myself, and that did not happen very often when I was well.

For other people in our time, the use of alcohol can be a cave where we hide. For some people the use of sleeping pills may become a cave or the use of other drugs. We can make a cave to hide in of almost anything. For some the church becomes a cave.

Now caves aren't all bad. We need times of escape and rest and privacy. The book OPEN MARRIAGE, tells about a psychologist and teacher who worked out a signal system as husband and wife to indicate the need for privacy. If the professor was thinking through a particularly difficult problem when any interruption would be disturbing, he would put on his favorite golf hat. To his wife, this hat conveyed the message, "Leave me along for now, I'm thinking." His wife tied on a particular bandanna when she was in a similar mood. Sometimes they would wear the golf hat or the bandanna for only a few hours, sometimes for much longer periods.

This was a useful system since verbal explanations or requests can be more easily misinterpreted. Of course if either the husband or the wife began to wear the golf cap or bandanna all the time, or too much of the time, then there would be a problem.

Again the caves we need and hide in are not necessarily bad. They can be personal stability zones, places where we stop and rest and reconsider and get new energy.

But if we stay in our cave too long, then we're in trouble. Like Elijah, we have to come out of our cave. In Elijah's case, God had to call him to come out. And so it is with us. We often have to be told -- "Come out of your cave! You've been there long enough.

The body and the will have their part in mastering our cave moods. In another sermon some time ago, it was what I called the POWER OF POSITIVE ACTING. We can act ourselves into a new way of thinking. Some physical activity, some job near at hand and within the range of present effort can get us going again. In Elijah's case, God called him out of his cave and assigned him a task to get done.

Sometimes also we need an enlarged view of the world to get us out of our cave. A minister friend of mine used to preach at least one sermon a year on astronomy. When someone asked him why he talked about a subject so far removed from everyday life,he said, "Of course it's no use at all, but it greatly enlarges my idea of God."

Often when we are in a cave mood, we need a larger mental setting, a larger context in which to see ourselves and God. And often we need a larger religion. When we are in our cave we are like the little girl who said she had enough religion to make her feel miserable when she did wrong, but not enough to make her feel happy when she did right. And that was also Elijah's problem. We too, often have enough religion to make us feel guilty, depressed,angry and uncertain, but not enough to make us feel eager, radiant, inspired and joyful.

So, like Elijah, it's all right to go into your cave. You can even stay there overnight or a little longer if you need. And while you are there, if you listen and pay attention you may even hear God calling you to come out and get back to work. Actually, caves aren't all that bad if you come out renewed and revived. It's only when you want to stay there all the time that you have a problem. Remember that like Elijah, you need to go back to what and where and who you were. Amen.