Sunday, November 22, 1987
ELIJAH
I Kings 19:1-4,9-14

One of the most puzzling aspects of our human nature is how we can vary in our moods from enthusiasm to indifference; from having lots of courage to cowardice; from being high on some idea or intense in our commitment, to being low; from being strongly in favor of a proposition and then turning against it; from intense love for another person and then having that love dwindle to nothing or even turn to hate.

There is an up and down, a certain fickleness in our nature, and it is often difficult to control. One day we are elated, supremely happy, and confident, and a few days later, or even later that same day, we are depressed and defeated.

In our spiritual experiences, we can feel that God is very close to us and be confident of God's presence in our lives, and then not long after, have the feeling that God is absent or far away. We vary from the conviction that God is for us to the opposite conclusion that God is against us; from the belief that there is a God who is in ultimate control of creation to doubts that God exists. The moods in our nature are variable.

And it's not something that happens only in this day and age. Prophets, spiritual leaders, people we think of as "saints," the heroes and heroines of the Bible — all speak of the same experience.

Elijah, that giant among the Old Testament prophets, is a prime example. What a moody man he was. One day he had the courage to challenge the King of his country in the name of God, and then not long after, he was so depressed, discouraged, and convinced that God did not care, that he hid in a cave.

Elijah had good cause for being 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, the King had married a foreign woman named Jezebel. Queen Jezebel was no sweet, golden-haired princess who had been carried into her marriage with high romance. It was a marriage for political purposes.

Jezebel had brought with her to Israel her pagan religions in the form of Baal and Ashtoreth worship. These religions found their 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 the ten commandments without compunction.

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

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 to the whole country." Then Elijah disappeared into the crowd. However, the King labeled him as a fanatic and quickly returned to his old ways.

After his confrontation with the King, Elijah waited 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 Elijah to confront the King. Speaking on behalf of God had been an exhilarating experience. 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 despair. As the prophecy of severe drought came true and ordinary people began to suffer, Elijah grew more depressed.

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

God also remembered Elijah and told him when the drought was at its worst to again confront Ahab and Jezebel. When he was once again in 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 commandments of God and worshipped Baal."

Israel was at a crossroads. Other kings had introduced idolatry into the Jewish religion, but Ahab and Jezebel were going much further. They wanted to wipe out all worship of the one true God.

Elijah issued a challenge to the King, Queen, and all the false prophets of Baal. It was to be a public contest. Elijah said, "Assemble all Israel on the slopes of Mt. Carmel, and with them the 850 prophets of Baal that feed at Jezebel's table."

A large crowd gathered. Elijah asked the people—"How long will you go limping with two different opinions? If the Lord is God, then follow God. If Baal is God, then follow Baal." We are always having to choose, even in our time, between the false gods and the true God.

Elijah then challenged the priests of Baal, "Call on your god and let Baal answer by sending fire to light the wood on your altar. Then I will call on the Lord God, and the one who answers by sending fire will be followed as the true God." And the priests of Baal began their call.

(HERE THE CHOIR WILL STAND AND SING THE "BAAL" CHORUS.)

People still cry out to false gods, and there is no answer.

The worship of Baal goes on in our time under other names — nature worship; making our human experience the measure of all things; not taking into account the historical witness of countless people before us.

Then Elijah said to all the people, "Come near to me," and they all came close. And Elijah built an altar in the name of God, and he piled it high with wood. To make it even more difficult for a fire to start, he had people pour water over the wood three times so that it was well soaked. There was so much water that it filled a trench that had been dug around the altar.

Now Elijah prayed, and the fire of God came and consumed the wood and the stones and licked up the water that was in the trench. And when the people saw it, they fell on their faces and said, “The Lord is God! The Lord is God!”

The contest was over, and soon after, the drought ended. But there were other problems. Ahab, who had been publicly humiliated and in a despondent mood, returned to his wife Jezebel.

He reported what had happened and that all of her priests and prophets had been killed. She did not take the news with quiet resignation. Her first thought was vengeance.

She sent a message to Elijah, which said in effect, “By this time tomorrow, you will be dead.” If you don’t like the message, then try to kill the messenger.

Elijah fled for his life. He thought he had won, and now he was sure he had lost. He said, “O God, I’ve had enough of this. Take away my life. I’m no good.” He was so discouraged that he went and hid in a cave.

Elijah’s problem is one we’re all familiar with. Who among us has not known despair, discouragement, and depression? We work hard. We think we’ve been doing all the right things. We’ve done our best, and for what? Life has lost its meaning. Like Elijah, we have our “cave” moods. We want to hide from the world and its problems. We come to feel that we’re all alone in this world and that no one understands our discouragement. We feel disconnected from everything and everyone. We are truly in a cave.

However, the good news is that those times when we are at our lowest point are precisely the moments that we can begin to sense the power of God. In the emptiness, in the nothingness, there is also God. Sometimes it is only when we are completely empty that we are ready to be filled. It is when we are totally silent that we can sense God’s presence.

That was Elijah’s experience. When he felt most alone, completely defeated, then from deep within, he remembered the words of the Psalmist—"O rest in the Lord, wait patiently for God.”

(HERE THE SOLO IS SUNG IN THE SECOND SERVICE, “O REST IN THE LORD,” AND THAT ENDS THE SERMON.)

(Alternate ending for the 9:30 A.M. service.)

Then Elijah heard a voice summoning him from the cave, and he was instructed to go up on the mountainside. There he experienced the strong wind, but God was not in the wind. After the wind — an earthquake, but God was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake — a fire, but God was not in the fire. And after the fire, a still, small voice.

So it is that God frequently comes to us not in the spectacular or the sensational, but in the still, small silences when we are most afraid and feel most alone. Amen.