

God's Voice Sermon

Lauren Boyd - June 20, 2010

Do you ever feel really successful and smart and then turn around and feel just the opposite? You know, you're a powerhouse at the office – closing big deals and then you get home and can't seem to do anything right?

That's part of the problem for a very powerful prophet in the Old Testament. Nikki just read part of the passage for today. She read the vulnerable, whinny, kind of pathetic side of this prophet named Elijah. Before we talk about the end of the story – when he's at the end of his rope, let's look at the story that leads up to this.

During the reign of the first kings of Israel, prophets were very powerful. After Solomon dies, the kingdom is split into two – the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah. Elijah is a prophet involved with both the political and religious history of the northern kingdom during the reign of King Ahab. King Ahab makes an alliance with his Phoenician neighbors by marrying Jezebel. This isn't the Jezebel in the Dolly Parton song. This is a much more dangerous Jezebel. Jezebel and King Ahab decide the Israelites will worship both YHWH and her god, Baal. For those of you who were in Dr. Mark George's Lenten Sessions – you know this isn't going to end well!

In the book I Kings, the prophet, Elijah, appears on the scene to set up an overwhelmingly impressive demonstration of YHWH's superiority over Baal. YHWH is the name for God in the OT and Baal was a false god that many of these people worship. In fact, Elijah's name means The Lord is God! Listen to what happens in chapter 18, Elijah throws down the gauntlet to the Baal worshipers. He tells them to prepare a bull for sacrifice and ask Baal to light the fire. Whichever God lights the fire of the sacrifice is the one to be worshiped. So here's Elijah by himself and 450 Baal worshipers getting ready for their perspective god to do his thing. Baal worshipers cry out to Baal and nothing happens. Long story short, YHWH does set the sacrifice on fire despite Elijah bathing it in water! Then Elijah has all the Baal worshipers killed. I know, it sounds harsh, but don't judge – it's the Old Testament back 8 centuries before Christ. Remember, we did things very differently in this country just 200 hundred years ago, so cut the OT some slack.

What is striking in this story is Elijah's confidence and resolve in the face of all these Baal worshipers. He shows no hint of fear or doubt in his contest with Baal's prophets and is even so bold as to openly and sarcastically mock them, despite being drastically outnumbered and then has them killed! Elijah experiences unbelievable power from God and that's what makes the next chapter so fascinating.

After all of that, Jezebel, the Queen, sends a messenger to Elijah that says, "may the gods deal with me, be it ever so severely, if by this time tomorrow I do not make your life like that of one of them." Basically, she wanted him dead! Elijah ran like a little girl! Really, you're afraid of her? This Elijah who defied a king, who defeated 450 prophets of Baal and 400 prophets of another false god, who took on an entire nation single handedly, who survived by ravens feeding him at a brook, who resuscitated the dead son of a widow by the power of God, this same Elijah runs at the threat of one woman!

Afraid for his life after hearing of Jezebel's desire to eliminate him. Elijah flees to the wilderness and asks, four verses in, to die rather than face her wrath. Elijah, who earlier stood tall against 450 rivals, now desires to opt out of existence altogether. He later sequesters himself in a cave on Mount Horeb.

So – here's the scripture again – that Nikki read... ⁹At that place he came to a cave, and spent the night there. Then the word of the Lord came to him, saying, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" ¹⁰He answered, "I have been very zealous for the Lord, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away." ¹¹He said, "Go out and stand on the mountain before the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by." Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake; ¹²and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence. ¹³When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. Then there came a voice to him that said, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" ¹⁴He answered, "I have been very zealous for the Lord, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away." ¹⁵Then the Lord said to him, "Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus; when you arrive, you shall anoint Hazael as king over Aram. ¹⁶Also you shall anoint Jehu son of Nimshi as king over Israel; and you shall anoint Elisha as prophet in your place. ¹⁷Whoever escapes from the sword of Hazael, Jehu shall kill; and whoever escapes from the sword of Jehu, Elisha shall kill. ¹⁸Yet I will leave seven thousand in Israel, all the knees that have not bowed to Baal, and every mouth that has not kissed him."

This is one of those passages that could be preached 1000 different ways. I want to point out a few cool things, but then move on to what really hit me and hopefully will speak to you too.

So in the OT, God speaks to his people in dramatic ways! God speaks through earthquakes, massive wind or fire. The word of the Lord came to him and said, "Go out and stand on the mountain before the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by." Then all of the dramatic things happened, but the Lord was not in those things. BUT AFTER the fire, there was "a sound of sheer silence." A voice came to Elijah out of the sheer silence. Many people preach about this phrase. Songs have been written about the "sound of silence" or the "still small voice." The words translated 'a sound of sheer silence' can have more than one meaning 'still small voice' and 'gentle whisper'. Although the wind, earthquake and fire were the symbols thought to indicate God's presence in Moses' time, this sound of sheer silence is specific to Elijah.

Here are 3 things we can learn from this passage:

- 1) We are not alone!
- 2) God is a personal God who knows our name!
- 3) And – God can do amazing things THROUGH us if we listen and obey.

1)We are not alone!

As you've heard, Elijah is complaining to God that he is God's last hope, he's all alone, woe is me. Before hearing God's voice, he asks for his own life to be taken – he is that distraught. It is sad that Elijah feels this way. That he feels all alone, on his own, with no partners in ministry, no allies and even though he had just shown the Baal worshipers that YHWH is Lord and all powerful! He is afraid, seems to have no direction and is hopeless. In verse 22 Elijah says, "I alone am left a prophet of the Lord." His answer doesn't change even after he has experienced the passing by of YHWH, indicating that he has not understood the message of the "sound of sheer silence."

According to the mid-twentieth century existentialists, the cold, hard fact of human existence is that we find ourselves adrift in an indifferent, even hostile, universe, shouldered with the added burden of having to summon the strength to continue on nonetheless. This is certainly how Elijah felt. 'I alone am left,' he says in verse 14, 'and they are asking my life, to take it away.'

Huddled in his cave, convinced of his unique status as the last remaining person of faith, Elijah's primary temptation is to think that he has to go it alone, that it is all up to him." He seems to overestimate his purpose in God's plan. Hey, WHAT ABOUT GOD? Have you forgotten someone while huddled in the cave? What about God? What is with this illusion or disillusionment that we have that we are all alone? Sure Elijah feels desperate even suicidal without God involved in his life! "This illusion presents itself to us when our concepts of reality do not include the dynamic presence of God, which empowers us to trust in the resources of divine grace – which specializes in making the impossible possible."

Have you ever heard the line "God helps those who help themselves?" Do you know where that is in the Bible? Yea, it isn't. This saying is usually attributed to Ben Franklin, quoted in *Poor Richard's Almanac* in 1757. Actually, it's apparently from someone else in 1698. Whatever the original source of this saying, the Bible teaches the opposite. God helps the helpless! Isaiah 25:4 declares, "For You have been a defense for the helpless, a defense for the needy in his distress, a refuge from the storm, a shade from the heat..." Romans 5:6 tells us, "For while we were still helpless, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly."

Is Elijah helpless? Are you? Probably not, but we aren't meant to go through our trials, our problems, our disasters alone! God is here for us, just like He was there for Elijah. God made his presence known, but Elijah was still so wrapped up in his grief, his fear that he couldn't hear what God had to say. What God had planned for Elijah's future.

Maybe God is reaching out to you this morning. It could be that you're facing abundance or adversity or a dull routine. You may feel you're having to make all the important and mundane decisions on your own. If you fit into any of those categories, listen to what God has to say to you in this passage.

AM. I AM HERE. LISTEN FOR ME, FOR YOU ARE NOT ALONE.

2)God is a personal God who knows our name!

SO what does the still small voice or the sheer silence say - the word of the Lord says, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" Elijah is named. This is no general statement about prophets who proved faithless, or about believers who grew doubtful, or about men of courage that played the coward. Oh No! The word of the Lord says, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" It is a mark of God's Spirit that when he speaks to us, *he speaks to us personally*. Just take a case or two. You remember Jesus Christ going through Jericho, preaching as he went. He meant to call that tax collector who had climbed the tree. In what way did Jesus do it? He says, "Zaccheus" It was not a general observation about people up in trees that were to come down; but "Zaccheus"—that is the man. "Zaccheus, make haste and come down, for today I must abide in your house." The personal call did it. And Mary, when she did not know her Master was in the garden, and thought he was the gardener—what was it that opened her eyes to know her Lord, and made her say, "Teacher"? It was no word else except that he said to her, "Mary." The tone in which he said it, and the name—the old familiar name, *Mary*—*that* did the work. And when the Savior meant to break Simon Peter's heart, and yet to assure him that he was forgiven, how did he speak to him? Three times he said to him, "Simon, son of Jonas. Simon, son of Jonas, do you love me?" This is how God speaks to us.

But when God speaks with the still small voice, He says – I know you. I love you. There is a wonderful song called "He Knows Your Name." In fact, my father sang it to Miller when he baptized him in this very sanctuary. The song says, "I have a Father, he calls me his own. He'll never leave me no matter where I go. He knows my name. He knows my every thought. He sees each tear that falls and hears me when I call." On this Father's Day, you may be able to think of your father and know the lyrics of this song are true for him. You may know they are not. BUT rest assured that our God the Father knows us and calls us by name.

3)AND -God can do amazing things THROUGH us if we listen and obey!

The rest of chapter 19 is God giving Elijah instructions. Dude, your life isn't over! I have SO many plans for you. I have plans for you that you can't even see or understand that can change the course of history. Get back on the horse, listen to me and do my will!!! Ok – he didn't say DUDE, but God says – you're not alone. Actually there are seven thousand other faithful Israelites that are still living. From this remote encounter between Elijah and God will come major events, for instance, the call of another prophet, the anointing of two kings and the demise of Jezebel! AMEN!

God effects providence not only through singular, awe-inspiring events, like those described in chapter 18. God also effects providence over time through us in seemingly simple tasks. God doesn't just call the spectacular few to do His will and His work. All of us have significance in God's redeeming work, IF we listen for God and obey Him even when we can't see the end result, PARTICULARLY when we can't see the end result. We are to live by faith not by sight.

We have a parishioner, who is here today, who started an adoption process with China in December of 2006. She had hoped and prayed for her little girl, but no little girl came. She kept trusting and continued with her life here in Denver. She dated, worked hard and hoped for future. In January, we had a heart to heart. She had broken up with her boyfriend, had a really difficult situation at work and didn't think she would ever get that little girl. We talked about several options and parted ways. She did a lot of praying and decided to apply for and be open to a child with disabilities. 24 days later she was matched with her son!!! Her son, Reid, had a hole in his heart, but he's fine now. He'll be two in October and here in September!!!

You may not see God's plan quite this clearly, but God has plans for you, for a future with hope.

Before we close I want to say just a quick word to anyone here who feels like they are where Elijah was. Who feels that "I've had enough." Do you ever get tired or depressed or afraid? Or do you ever feel like you've blown it and wonder if maybe God's not going to use you the same way anymore? I invite us to do what Elijah did and be still and listen.

Let us pray.

Heavenly Father, everyone of us knows - in our own small way - the ups and downs of Elijah, there are those moments when it seems like you're answering prayer and we can see your hand at work in our lives and things are happening and then there are those moments when we just get scared and run and we feel useless and inadequate.

We're so grateful to know Father that you still see and you still care and so we pause right now to listen once more for that still small voice and to remember that your mercy and your grace are still deep enough and wide enough to be fully sufficient for us.

We are listening to you right now God just as Elijah did.

SONG – Be Still and Know

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Feasting on the Word

Year C, Volume 3 Pentecost and Season after Pentecost 1 (Propers 3-16)

