

“A Still, Small Voice”

1 Kings 19.1-15a

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Elijah is running for his life. He’s *terrified*. He wishes he were dead. *God* comes to his aid.

We’re picking up this story in the middle of the action. A lot has happened to set the stage. It’s the 9th century BC. The political map looks very different than what we are familiar with. After King Solomon died, the Kingdom of Israel split in two; there was now a northern kingdom that was still called “Israel” and a southern kingdom called “Judah.” These two Israelite kingdoms were surrounded by a variety of non-Israelite kingdoms. When this story opens, the northern Kingdom of Israel is ruled by a bad king named Ahab. Ahab married a princess named Jezebel, who was from the Phoenician city of Tyre. That marriage may have come about for political reasons, to create an alliance between Israel and Phoenicia, but it had enormous religious implications for the people of Israel. For Jezebel worshiped the Canaanite god Baal and his consort Asherah. At Jezebel’s request, Ahab built a temple to Baal in the capital city of Samaria. For those Israelites who were seeking to be faithful to the Lord God Almighty and to the laws that had been given to them by Moses, this was extremely objectionable. But it got infinitely worse when Jezebel started *killing* prophets who were faithful to the Lord God.

Now the irony is that at the same time Jezebel was promoting the worship of Baal, there was a drought. Baal was a weather god, believed to bring rain, thunder, lightning, and dew upon the land. But there was practically no rain for *three whole years*. The drought created a famine that was severe. What’s the point of worshiping a weather god if that god doesn’t give you *rain* when you need it!?!?

In the midst of all this drama comes a man named Elijah, a prophet of the Lord God Almighty, a man entrusted by God to speak God’s will to both commoners and kings. Elijah’s words weren’t always welcome in King Ahab’s court, but Jezebel hadn’t decided to kill him – yet. But then Elijah challenged the prophets of Baal and of Asherah to a public contest. There was one of him, and 850 of them! Each contestant, or group of contestants, built an altar and sacrificed a bull, then called upon their god to set fire to the wood. The prophets of Baal and Asherah pray to their gods – for *hours* – and absolutely nothing happens. But when Elijah prays, God responds *immediately*. Many Israelites witness this; they behold the impotency of Baal, and the mighty power of God. Elijah instructs the Israelites to capture all the false prophets, and then Elijah kills them all. That might seem like a strong reaction, but you need to know that the Law of Moses *commanded* the Israelites to kill false prophets and people who enticed the Israelites to worship other gods. Elijah was doing *exactly* what God’s Law told him to do.

Almost immediately afterwards, it starts raining again in Israel. The weather god was a fraud! Once people realized that, once people acknowledged the power of Almighty God, the rain came freely.

Now when Jezebel hears that the 450 prophets of Baal and the 400 prophets of Asherah are all dead, she is – not surprisingly – *furious*. She sends Elijah a death threat. She fully intends to kill him. He knows she means it, so he *runs*. Runs, *far*. The contest had taken place on Mount Carmel, in the north-western corner of Israel; Elijah runs through the *entire* country of Israel and across the border into Judah; he runs most of the way through that country, passes the town of Beer-sheba, at the edge of the desert, and keeps on going. He wants to be as far from that wicked queen and her minions as possible!

Eventually he pauses, under a shady tree. Where to now? Can he ever go back *home* again? Is there *any* home for him now? Ahead of him, for miles in every direction, all there is ... is empty desert.

He looks at his situation – and he gives up hope. He's ready to quit. He's ready to just ... *die*. He prays: "It is enough. Now, O Lord, take my life." Maybe he was just exhausted; maybe he was dehydrated. Maybe he was questioning whether he had really done the right thing, killing all those false prophets. He was just trying to follow God. But, sometimes, following God is hard. Sometimes it's *risky*. Sometimes you make enemies. Sometimes you just want to run away from it all.

But God is not done with Elijah. God does not just *abandon* people who have been faithful to him, who have worked *hard* for him. Elijah may have been ready to give up ... but *God still needs him*.

An angel tells Elijah to get up and eat. God has provided some bread and water. For Elijah, this was literally the bread of life and the cup of salvation. He eats and drinks, a bit, then lays down again. The angel calls to him a second time. "Get up and eat! Otherwise the journey will be too much for you." Elijah is on a *journey*. He thought he was just trying to run away. But the angel knows: Elijah is headed *somewhere*. He's got a *destination*. Elijah doesn't have a *clue* where he's going. But *God* does.

Do you ever find yourself out in the middle of nowhere – either literally or metaphorically – not sure where you're heading, not sure what your purpose in life is, or if you even *have* a purpose anymore; looking back on your past, at the choices you made, questioning if they were the right ones? Floundering, lost, bewildered, *confused*? Thinking about giving up? Wanting to just *quit*?

You might not know where you're going. But I'd be willing to bet that *God* does.

Elijah does as the angel commands. He gets up, he eats, he drinks, he resumes his journey. Forty days and forty nights, through the desert, south, into the Sinai Peninsula, eventually coming to a very important mountain. A very *famous* mountain. Mount Horeb. Also called ... *Mount Sinai*. It was *here, on this mountain*, that God had given the Law to the Israelites. It was *here* where all those commandments and instructions that Elijah has been trying to follow had first taken shape.

Did Elijah *intend* to come here? I don't think so. I think God *led* him here. Elijah is the *only* Israelite, in the generations after Moses, to go to Mount Sinai. God *brought* him here ... for a purpose.

God asks him: "What are you doing here, Elijah?" Elijah responds, matter-of-factly: "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.” That’s all true. But God knew all that already. It doesn’t really answer the question. The question God is really asking is: “Elijah, why have you *run away*? Why have you practically *given up*?”

There come those times in our lives when we need a re-charge. A *spiritual* re-charge. Some kind of *experience of God* that will renew our weary spirits and revive our troubled souls. We’ve been through a lot, we’ve *suffered* a lot, we’re exhausted and depleted. Our cup runneth dry. It doesn’t matter if we’re getting enough *physical* nourishment if we’re not getting enough *spiritual* nourishment. We need – we desperately need – to drink from the deep well that can recharge our spiritual batteries.

This is what God is about to offer Elijah. “Go out and stand on the mountain,” God tells him. Stop hiding in a cave. Go up, show yourself to the world, stand where *Moses* once stood. Stand ... and *behold*. Behold the mighty *wind* – a wind that splits mountains and breaks rocks into pieces! Behold the terrible *earthquake* – an earthquake that splits the ground and sends buildings crumbling into ruin! Behold the roaring *fire* – a fire that burns and consumes all it touches! *Behold the mighty power of God!*

The mountain rumbles and shakes. The wind comes, and the wind and goes ... the earthquake comes, and the earthquake goes ... the fire comes, and the fire goes. The wording in the story suggests that Elijah is in a cave when all this is happening; he hasn’t ascended the mountain yet; he can sense God’s *power* all around him – but he does not yet feel God’s *presence*. Not until he hears ... something different. Something less dramatic ... and yet something *more*. “A still small voice,” the King James translators called it. “A gentle whisper,” says the NIV. “The soft whisper of a voice,” says the Good News translation. “A sound of sheer silence,” says the NRSV. “A sound. Thin. Quiet,” says the CEB.

It’s not *just* the voice of God. Elijah had been hearing that already. This was something *deeper*. Something that compelled Elijah wrap his cloak about his face and leave the shelter of the cave.

God repeats the question he asked before: “What are you doing here?” Elijah repeats his same answer, word-for-word. So ... is anything different? Did that “still small voice” *do* anything for Elijah?

The answer is yes, yes it did. Maybe Elijah doesn’t *feel* any different. But something has indeed changed, deep in Elijah’s soul. God gives Elijah a new set of instructions: “Go, return on your way, to the wilderness of Damascus.” God has a job for Elijah to do. Where is the wilderness of Damascus? North. Far to the north. Elijah is going to have to go back through the Judah. He’s going to have to go back through *Israel*. He’s going to have to go back to the place had just *run away from*, for fear of his life.

And – he’s going to do it. He’s really going to do it. He’s going to head back into *danger*. Why? *Because he just had an experience of God that recharged his spiritual batteries*. No more running away, trying to hide, giving up, wishing he were dead. He’s ready to keep on going. Keep on *servicing* his God.

There come those times in our lives when we need a recharge. Those times when we need to drink from the deep well that can renew our souls. Where do *you* go, when *you* need a recharge?

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