

Storms in the Sky, Silence in the Heart

1 Kings 19:9b-21

⁹There he came to a cave and lodged in it. And behold, the word of the LORD came to him, and he said to him, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" ¹⁰He said, "I have been very jealous for the LORD, the God of hosts. For the people of Israel have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword, and I, even I only, am left, and they seek my life, to take it away." ¹¹And he said, "Go out and stand on the mount before the LORD." And behold, the LORD passed by, and a great and strong wind tore the mountains and broke in pieces the rocks 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 the sound of a low whisper. ¹³And when Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his cloak and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. And behold, there came a voice to him and said, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" ¹⁴He said, "I have been very jealous for the LORD, the God of hosts. For the people of Israel have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword, and I, even I only, am left, and they seek my life, to take it away." ¹⁵And the LORD said to him, "Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus. And when you arrive, you shall anoint Hazael to be king over Syria. ¹⁶And Jehu the son of Nimshi you shall anoint to be king over Israel, and Elisha the son of Shaphat of Abel-meholah you shall anoint to be prophet in your place. ¹⁷And the one who escapes from the sword of Hazael shall Jehu put to death, and the one who escapes from the sword of Jehu shall Elisha put to death. 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."

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, I remember an unusual day prior to my retirement. It was a Monday, a day that I attempted to shift from church concerns to family concerns. I took the day off. It was the first day in over a month. It was weird; it was alien. I spent several hours working on a wooden whistle for my grandson. I scrubbed the grates and the pans of our barbecue grill. I trimmed bushes. When the temperature became too warm, I quit my outdoor projects. I showered and then wandered around Walmart and Lowes. I didn't know what to do with myself. I couldn't decompress, especially realizing that I would return to work at 7:00 a.m. the following morning. Busyness, activity, deadlines, crises are a normal state of affairs. I needed to reflect more seriously upon the truth of the morning's first lesson. In spite of all that happens around us, and in us, God is present. God is both inside and outside – in the mountains and their thunder and in the quiet caves of our souls. To Moses God spoke through the mountains with a roar. To Elijah God spoke through the cave in a still, small voice. It is the same God, only different manifestations. God still speaks in various ways to us today. Thus, I have titled my message – "stormy skies, silent souls."

I. Stormy skies.

I have long been intrigued by our first lesson for this morning. Elijah is one of the pillars of the Old Testament, a man of power, dedication, and industry. When two men appear with Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration, it is not Moses and David representing law and promise, but Moses and Elijah representing law and prophets. Both men wrought tremendous victories and suffered stunning defeats. Moses faced down Pharaoh and led God's people to the Promised Land but he could not enter. Elijah stopped the rain for three years and defeated the prophets of Baal but could not turn the heart of one queen to the true God.

Queen Jezebel threatened Elijah and he ran for his life; I'm guessing he ran five days, constantly looking back over his shoulder checking for pursuit. He left his servant in Judah and crossed the southern border into the wilderness of the Negeb. He finally collapsed exhausted under a broom tree and fell asleep. Twice an angel brought him food and water, woke him, and told Elijah to eat and drink. Rested and refreshed he headed further into the wilderness toward Mt Horeb. He journeyed for forty days. He had a lot of time to meditate, to examine what went right and what went wrong. He had time to sort things out and prepare an evaluation and a response. I think God made Elijah travel forty days because he is more me than me! He needed to decompress before he was open to anything besides his challenges, responses, and the press of the urgent.

Elijah climbed Mt. Nebo and found a cave, a bit of heaven. A constant 65 degrees it was the most refreshing air conditioning ever. Who knows how long he had to sit there and think some more?

The word of God came to Elijah and asked, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" I think it is significant that God asked 'what' rather than 'why.' "What" asks for purpose and activity. Elijah's answer reveals the extent of his loneliness and sense of abandonment. "I have been very zealous for the Lord, the God of hosts," Elijah responded. "For the people of Israel have forsaken your covenant, and thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword, and I, even I only, am left, and they seek my life, to take it away." Loosely paraphrased he meant, "I can't hack it anymore. The burden is too great. I am tired, exhausted, and depressed." The sky is stormy and at this point, there is not much silence in the soul.

Had Elijah lost his faith? I don't think so; his nerve maybe, but not his faith. It may have weakened a bit but he still followed God's command to journey to Mt. Horeb. He still heard God when He called, and he still answered. However, I believe Elijah had been carrying his burden alone for far too long. "I, even, I, am alone." It was time for Elijah to give his burden to God.

Have you ever felt that way? I know you have; I have. Our lives are like a sine wave, ups and downs, peaks and valleys. We don't remain on the peaks for long and usually we don't remain in the valleys long either. Thank goodness! We are constantly moving. However, when we are in the valleys they can seem unbearable and terribly lonely.

What is your Queen Jezebel? What knocks you down? Maybe it is a health or financial issue. Maybe it is an emotional or relational issue. Maybe it is isolation or loneliness. Maybe it is an inability to get ahead or even catch up. Maybe you feel like Sisyphus, the founder and king of Corinth, who was condemned by the Greek gods to roll a huge boulder uphill. However, every time he reached the top the boulder rolled back down. Thus, he was condemned to an eternity of repetition, hard labor, and futility.

Someone once told me that riding a motorcycle is actually riding from one accident to the next. I have seen enough cases to back up the veracity of that comment. How do we mark our lives, from one victory to the next, or from one catastrophe to the next? How we answer the question probably says a lot about our personality and life's experiences. I would probably say Elijah was the latter, from one calamity to the next. There are storms in the sky; how do we find silence in the soul?

II. Silence in the Soul.

Elijah found refuge in a cave. It was cool and the shadowed interior echoed the gloom in his heart. How long did he sit there in the cave before God spoke to him? "Listen Elijah," God said, "see if you can hear me calling to you." The Lord passed by and a great wind shook the mountain, knocking about boulders and flinging dust. After the wind there was an earthquake and after the earthquake an enormous fire. God had appeared in these forms in the past; think of the burning bush that was not consumed, the mighty east wind that divided the waters of the sea, or the earthquake as God appeared on Mt. Sinai before the people of Israel. However, this time God was not in these.

Standing in the back of the cave Elijah heard a whisper, a still, small voice, and he recognized it as God. He walked to the opening of the cave and covered his face with his cloak, perhaps fearing to see God face-to-face. God asked again, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" And Elijah repeated his answer, "I am zealous for the Lord, but your people have turned their backs, killed your prophets, and {poor, miserable me} I am alone."

"We need to find God and God cannot be found in noise and restlessness," said Mother Teresa of Calcutta. "God is the friend of silence. See how nature – trees, flowers, grass – grow in silence; see how the stars, the moon, and the sun move in silence...The more we receive in silent

prayer, the more we can give in active life. We need silence to be able to touch souls. The essential thing is not what we say, but what God says to us and through us. All our words are useless unless they come from within – words which do not give the light of Christ increase the darkness.”¹

Mother Teresa’s quote leads nicely to what I want to say next. Our text shows us that God is way out in front of us. He knows our troubles before we do. He asks Elijah what is wrong to prompt him to clarify it in his own mind. Then God reveals His plan. “I know the situation,” says God, “and I want you to anoint Hazael over Syria and anoint Jehu over Israel. They will be my instruments of cleansing. Then I want you to anoint Elisha as your replacement. It is no longer your fight, my faithful servant. One more thing. You were never really alone. Besides you I preserved seven thousand faithful people in Israel. You just did not recognize them.” Impressed by God’s mountaintop display of power, soothed by God’s comforting presence in the cave, and now inspired by God’s new instruction for his prophetic ministry, Elijah departed his Horeb sanctuary and ventured back into the world.

We must listen also! God is way out in front of us and He has a plan when life’s events seem to be rotten. The worst thing that could happen would be to die eternally in sin. God had a plan to rescue us. He placed us under the law, under a pedagogue until we could be set free by faith. He kept us under the law until Jesus Christ died for us and rose again. Christ is way out in front of us when He promises to return in judgment and receive all who have died in faith. He is way out in front of us when He said He goes to prepare a place for us so that we can be with Him.

I find something curious in the powerful wind, fire, earthquake and the still, small voice. God could have been in the mighty demonstrations of fire, wind and earthquake. However, He makes a big point: “I can work large or I can work small. I can make a scene or I can work behind the scenes. My weakness is greater than your strength; My foolishness is wiser than your wisdom. My strength is manifested in weakness. There is strength in a whisper.”

One day I walked around the church parking lot spraying weeds. Delicate grasses and flowers had pushed up through the asphalt in places. Left unchallenged they would quickly break up the parking lot. There is strength in a whisper.

The natural illustrations, examples of God’s work are out there, but ultimately, we must apprehend all this by faith. We are preparing ourselves now for future situations. Unless we are incredibly fortunate, we will face challenges. I have seen the pain. I have witnessed the

¹ Quoted in James Roose-Evans, *The Inner Stage* [Cambridge, Mass.: Cowley Publications, 1990], 130.

discouragement. I have observed the surrender. I have felt the helplessness. We need to learn to listen to God, right now, at this time, rather than waiting for the need to arise. Then it may be too late. Learn to identify God's voice in the cacophony of life. Learn now to identify God's voice in Scripture. Learn now to identify God's voice in the hug of a friend.

A Midwesterner from the farm was visiting his college roommate in New York City. Walking near Times Square one day, the farmer remarked, "I hear a cricket."

"You're crazy," his city friend replied. "It's the noon rush hour, and in all this traffic noise you heard a cricket? C'mon man!"

"No, I did hear a cricket," the visitor insisted. Focusing more intently, he walked to the corner, crossed the busy avenue and looked around. Finally, he approached a shrub in a large cement planter. Digging beneath the cover of the mulch, he found his cricket.

His friend could not believe what he had seen. But the friend from the farm said, "My ears are no different from yours. It simply depends on what you have learned to listen for. Here, let me show you."

He then reached into his pants pocket, pulled out a handful of change, and dropped the coins on the sidewalk. At the sound of the money hitting the pavement, every head along the block turned.

"You see what I mean?" the visitor said, as he began picking up what was left of his coins. "It all depends on what you are listening for."² For what are you listening, and to whom? Amen.

May the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

Sola Dei Gloria!

² As told by Donald J. Shelby, Santa Monica, CA, *Hear, Here!*, 8 September 1991, 1-2.