

THE VOICE OF A POWERFUL GOD

I Kings 19:1-18

June 23, 2019

The Elijah we meet at the beginning of this chapter is a man who has just won a great victory for God. Only yesterday he challenged-- single handedly-- the forces of evil, and struck a blow for God against Baal that was unprecedented in all of scripture. He had challenged the waffling Israelites that their new-found lover, the fire-god Baal couldn't even produce fire, but Yahweh, the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob could. At the end of his day's work, Ahab, King of Israel, was terrified, the people were stirred up to a complete change of face, and 450 priests of Baal were slain.

However, that was yesterday. Today, it seems, Elijah's success was not so complete, after all. There was still Jezebel to be reckoned with. She rallied her defeated forces, she whipped 'round her wavering lieutenants, and soon she was in a strong enough position to deliver her ultimatum to Elijah:

So may the gods do also to me, and more so, if I do not make your life as the life of one of them by this time tomorrow.

"Then Elijah was afraid." We see the man who had just spoken as if he had only to raise his hand and God would send consuming tongues of white-hot fire to obliterate his enemies now floundering and sinking into despondency.

Elijah wasn't the first man in Israel to break down in this way when he came hard up against the mystery of the power of evil to persist. When Moses, at the height of his career, faced the same mystery, he smashed the two tablets of stone in pieces on the mountain and vowed that he would be done with the whole business of serving God. King David, in his battle for the Lord, found himself so

hated by his enemies, that he wrote, “Oh, that I had wings like a dove, For then I would fly away, and be at rest.”

Elijah was so shattered in spirit he wanted to die.

He himself went a day's journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a broom tree; and he asked that he might die, saying, 'It is enough; now, O Lord, take my life, for I am no better than my fathers.'

Elijah felt he could no longer go on working for God on the battlefield of earth, where the odds against him were so great. Elijah was no better than his fathers, who were dead, only bits of dust, and no good anymore to anybody. And he wanted to be dead, too.

But God taught Elijah that God was—and remained—the victorious lord in the midst of all this apparent failure. In spite of this set-back, in spite of Elijah's fear, in spite of all outward appearance to the contrary, God remained the calm and unembarrassed master of the situation in his life and in the life of the people.

God took Elijah firmly in hand, and sent him on a journey of forty days and forty nights. Now, besides being a prodigious, ascetic pilgrimage, equal in scope to that of Moses and Jesus Christ, note what else a forty day journey does. It puts Elijah out of touch—for many weeks—with political and religious problems which he had thought he alone could solve. Maybe he wasn't such an important cog in the scheme of things as he thought. God was so much in control of things in Israel that he could well afford to give even Elijah some time off.

And look at the way God took care of him. Elijah was at the end of his rope, weary physically, and emotionally, and wanted nothing more than just to sleep. but then, in due time, an angel awakened him with food.

On the strength of that food, he was able to travel the 40 days and 40 nights to Mt. Horeb—which is also called . . . Mt. Sinai. Here was the very mountain on which God had made His covenant with His people. Here was the mountain on which God had spoken to Moses. This was the mountain of the strength and power *of God*.

When he arrived at Mt. Horeb, Elijah was led to a cave. Perhaps it was the same cave in which God had given Moses the vision of His glory (not His face, you remember, but His back) as He hid Moses in the cleft of the rock.

Then the Lord came to Elijah: “What are you doing here, Elijah? Now, we could take that question a lot of ways: 1) as judgment or 2) it could be read tenderly, as in, the Lord asking Elijah how He can help. I think, in his depression, Elijah hears it as a judgment, and responds defensively.

*I have been very jealous for the Lord;
for the people of Israel have forsaken
Your commandments, and thrown down Your
altars, and slain Your prophets; and
I only am left—just me—and they seek
my life, to take it away.*

Elijah may not be as despairing as he was when he lay down beneath the broom tree, but don't you hear that he's still fighting for his life—his worth, his ability, his place in the world; for his success in a life with God? ‘I only am left—just me—and they are looking to kill me, too.’

“Go forth, and stand upon the mount before the Lord.”

What an invitation! It's a privilege God had only given to Moses in all the history of Israel. At once comforting, and yet awe-some.

And behold, the Lord passed by, and a

*great and strong wind rent the mountains,
and broke the 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;**
and after the earthquake, fire; **but the Lord
was not in the fire.**
And after the fire, there was a voice of
a gentle stillness.*

As you and I and this congregation look for God to be among us, we might be apt to lay too much stress on the importance of vigorous and showy activity in advancing the Kingdom of God. We are apt to believe that spectacular ways of doing things are really more effective than ways that are less outwardly impressive. We are prone to believe in the whirlwind, the earthquake and the fire when we set about advancing the Kingdom of God and doing His work on earth.

Moreover, and this is especially important—you and I tend to think that God is not there in our midst, working mightily, unless we see things happening on a large and visible scale. We long for visible, quantifiable signs that God is at hand with His mighty and world-shaking energy.

God does, of course, make concessions to our human longing for visible, even spectacular, signs of His Kingdom. He used the whirlwind and earthquake and fire in the face-off at Mt Carmel. And the New Testament does speak of the Kingdom as finally breaking in upon this world in the upheavals and signs that involve the whole earth in wonder and fear. God can and does—at times—use splashy, visible, big means like rooms which rock with the emotion of tongues as of fire, or mass-decision-making for Christ, or impressive, inspired programming, or personal experience with God that can only be called miraculous.

But while all this is true, He wants you and me always to know that even in the times of stillness and silence, those latent times when nothing much is going

on, His strength is still there. God wants you and me to remember that at Horeb, the ancient place of God's strength, He was not in the earthquake or wind or fire. The manner of the Lord's coming Kingdom is not the manner of the coming of this world's kingdoms. His works and His greatness often come and strengthen and solidify our wavering faith through the voice of quiet stillness. The Lord is in no turbulent hurry to prove that He is God. But He does want you to rest assured, yes?

This passage about Elijah may be meant to give some comfort to folks like you and me, and to congregations like ours, who in the service of Christ, have seen very little whirlwind success following our efforts, and who, after much zeal and toil have failed to produce any convulsive revolution-- either in the Church or in society. Sometimes we are apt to be despondent when this is the case, especially when we see that elsewhere others can still produce mighty and spectacular evidences of God's working on a massive scale.

The fact is, we don't need to be jealous. Yes, such success can and may be a sign that God is, indeed, vigorously at work. However, I don't think we should take it too hard if our experience is different. The question is, have we tried? Have we loved the Lord and cultivated our connections with Him? Have we been jealous for the Lord by breaking down walls that divide one from another, and have we sought to bring human beings together, bearing one another's burdens? And do we still think it is I, even I only, who is left?

Well, after the wind and the earthquake and the fire produce their spectacular displays, the Lord remains a great, non-anxious, solid, strength with you and me in a voice of gentle stillness.

And you know what it says. It says, "I will leave seven thousand in Israel who have not bowed to Baal." *Seven* thousand. *Seven thousand*. A perfect number. A strong number. A number that speaks the strength of God, the working, steady, solid, unfailing, and unending strength of God Almighty. In other words, we are not alone. For all the wind and earthquake and fire, there are

others like us who also rest confidently in the quite but strong ability of God.
Elijah, Jesus Christ, little churches throughout this land, unnamed, anonymous
saints of the Lord; you and me.

Amen.