



1 Kings 19:9-18 - And the word of the LORD came to him: “What are you doing here, Elijah?” ¹⁰ He replied, “I have been very zealous for the LORD God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, broken down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too.” ¹¹ The LORD said, “Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by.” Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake. ¹² After the earthquake came a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper. ¹³ When Elijah heard it, he pulled his cloak over his face and went out and stood at the mouth of the cave.

Then a voice said to him, “What are you doing here, Elijah?” ¹⁴ He replied, “I have been very zealous for the LORD God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, broken down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too.” ¹⁵ The LORD said to him, “Go back the way you came, and go to the Desert of Damascus. When you get there, anoint Hazael king over Aram. ¹⁶ Also, anoint Jehu son of Nimshi king over Israel, and anoint Elisha son of Shaphat from Abel Meholah to succeed you as prophet. ¹⁷ Jehu will put to death any who escape the sword of Hazael, and Elisha will put to death any who escape the sword of Jehu. ¹⁸ Yet I reserve seven thousand in Israel—all whose knees have not bowed down to Baal and all whose mouths have not kissed him.”

God's whisper drives away doubt



It sounds counterintuitive, but sometimes speaking softly – even in a whisper – can get people’s attention more easily than a shout. I’ll invite you to come and sit in these same pews at 10:15 on a Wednesday morning and watch as dozens of children flood into the sanctuary for our early learning center’s weekly chapel service. They march in, standing in nice lines, holding a pretend “bubble” in their mouth to keep them from talking, and take their seats. But then it happens – a little one starts squirming and crying; a preschooler wants to show off his cool dinosaur t-shirt to his friend across the room, and soon enough, the decibels rise. The noise multiplies as other kids see that those pretend bubbles in their mouths aren’t stopping anything, and the chatting starts. Most often, I’ll try to project my voice and shout over the top of them – sometimes that works, but sometimes they all rise to the occasion and get even louder. But every once in a while, as counterintuitive as it sounds, I’ll try to speak just above the level of a whisper, and it’s amazing to watch the heads turn, the eyes focus, and the mouths close. Sometimes, a whisper can speak louder than a shout. A whisper can convey a powerful, effective message.

That’s the message God’s prophet Elijah learned in our Old Testament lesson for today. But Elijah wasn’t learning the fine points of public speaking, diction, and decibel level in response to a noisy crowd. Elijah was facing down a different kind of noise – the uproar of unbelief from the world around him and the din of doubt from inside his own heart. He’d been a faithful prophet of God, but the word of God he proclaimed didn’t seem to be working. One of Israel’s worst and wickedest kings was thriving on the throne and King Ahab had found a wife to match – Jezebel. Elijah had been doing the Lord’s work in the world, but a quick glance at Israel at large seemed to match what was happening in the throne room – unbelief, idolatry, and wholesale rejection of God. By all outward appearances, the word of God was falling flat; failing to live up to the power of the God who promised to accompany it.

From the moment we meet him, everything in Elijah’s life and ministry is a stunning demonstration of God’s power and providence for his prophet and his people. Elijah predicted a drought, and God brought it about. God commanded ravens to deliver bread and meat to Elijah, so he’d always have something to eat. God blessed Elijah’s work with the widow of Zarephath – so she had limitless oil and flour during a famine...and had her son raised from the dead and returned to her arms. God showed Elijah his power in stunning clarity. During a showdown against 450 prophets of the false god Baal, Elijah watched as fire from heaven rained down and consumed a waterlogged altar, the stones, and all the water around it. After that, all the people rallied together, putting to death the false prophets and proclaiming, **“The LORD – he is God! The LORD – he is God!”**

But not everyone appreciated the great things God was doing for his prophet. The evil queen Jezebel put out a death warrant on Elijah, so he ran away. He came crashing down from the mountain top experience and fled. He went and hid in a desert cave – despondent, depressed, despairing. It’s interesting how quickly it happens – the transition from mountain top to valley low. It’s equally fascinating how easily the devil can turn our attention away from the gracious acts of God in our lives and laser focus us on all the things God hasn’t done for us – at least according to our idea of what God should do. Think about what Elijah had just witnessed – bright burning proof that he wasn’t on the wrong team; smoldering substantiation that God and his word are powerful. Elijah had faith in God’s power, but he doubted when God’s plan and purpose did not match his own. And so, attending his pity party of one,



God's prophet Elijah – one who had personally seen and experienced God's power and providence first hand - said to the Lord, **"Take my life; I am no better than my ancestors."** In other words, *"What's the use?"*

If you're anything like me, you've probably found yourself standing next to Elijah in that cave in the Sinai desert. *What's the use?* You look at the godless agenda of the world and you have to wonder with Elijah, *why isn't God doing anything?* You go to work every day never seeming to get ahead, because you work honestly and you ponder with the prophet, *how is this fair?* You look at your family, your marriage, your friendships and they don't seem to be all that you think they should be, so you wonder, *where is God when I need him?* And maybe, the underlying temptation beneath all of these is this, *why isn't the gospel working?* What happens then, when the gospel "stops working"? *Nobody cares, nobody listens, people are just gonna do whatever they want anyways. Nobody appreciates me, Lord, I'm all alone.* Kind of a depressing thought on your installation day, right, Miranda? What happens when the word of God you share with those kids doesn't appear to bear any fruit, and their parents are just as disinterested? Or how about those of you who aren't called workers, what happens when God's plans and purposes don't match your own? When you don't *feel* forgiven; when you're the ones trying to put the pieces of marriage or family back together and it doesn't seem to be getting anywhere? What happens when you feel all alone?

That's where the Lord met Elijah and asked him, **What are you doing here, Elijah? He replied, "I have been very zealous for the LORD God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, broken down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me, too.** In other words, *"Lord, I'm doing my part so it's about time you lived up to your end of the bargain. I'VE been zealous for the Lord. I'VE been faithful to my task, what about you, God? Do you think you maybe sat around too long and allowed your people too much time with those idols, and don't you think you should maybe bring them the punishment they deserve?"* When the gospel doesn't seem to be working, God would have us look and listen again.

The LORD said, "Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by." Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake. And after the earthquake came a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper. The Lord Almighty makes his presence known – not in a mountain moving windstorm, or an earthquake, or a rip-roaring fire – but in a gentle whisper. Would it surprise you to learn that God still reveals himself most fully in a gentle whisper? In the still, small voice of the gospel – a seemingly weak, unimportant, irrelevant thing – God pulls back the veil and unleashes the power of his presence, his providence, and his promise.

In Old Testament times, when God provided the very kinds of proof that skeptics and doubters demand – when the Lord showed up and left the scorch marks behind – it didn't ultimately result in the things God desired. It might sound odd to say, but it's true. Remarkably, people did not trust in him or love him or obey him in any lasting way. They remained breathtakingly stubborn and hard hearted. Our faith and our love – the two things that God says are all that matter – are the things he doesn't win by



brute force. The pyrotechnic displays of raw power only made ancient people cringe and run away. But how does Jesus change hearts and gather a following? The same way God's always done it – through his word of promise, the still, small voice of the gospel calling and inviting. *“Come unto me you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest...Take heart, your sins are forgiven...There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus...In my Father's house are many rooms – I'm going there to prepare a place for you.”*

How does God shatter hearts of stone, reveal his grace, win hearts to faith, and preserve people as his dearly loved children? Not through the law – judgment and punishment – but through the gentle whisper, the still, small voice of the gospel. How does God put you to work as Christians living in an un-Christian world? With what tools does God send you out as a public minister of the gospel? He places in your hands and on your lips the only tool that will work – the gospel. Admittedly, in the eyes of the world, it appears alarmingly weak and inefficient, and the message it proclaims is downright offensive – *the Son of God, crucified and risen for me?! But in that simple gospel message is the very power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes.*

Elijah sat despairing in that desert cave, but learned all over again that God is faithful to his promises. The Lord assured his prophet, **“I reserve seven thousand in Israel – all whose knees have not bowed down to Baal and all whose mouths have not kissed him.”** Even when you don't think it, even when it doesn't look like it, even when all the external evidence screams to the contrary – the gospel is working. Could the Lord who had shown Elijah so much proof of his love now fail to deal with this new crisis in his life? When you feel alone; when you're tempted to think the gospel isn't working anymore; when you want to give up and give in because you think your labors are all in vain, remember all the proof and promise your God has already given to you. In the waters of Baptism he put his name on you, marking you as his own possession for time and eternity. In the bread and wine of his Supper, over and over again in the still, small voice of his gospel – your Savior points you to his cross and empty tomb – salvation won, forgiveness complete, eternity guaranteed. Do you really think he's going to let you go off alone, or call you to a useless task? When you're tempted to grow impatient with the fellow sinners who make up this visible church; when you're irritated by the church's slow growth or constant lack of resources, stand with Elijah at the entrance to that cave and learn all over again. The Christian answers doubt with faith. God promises that his Word is powerful and it will never return empty, and that your work in his name is never useless. The Savior God wants to win us all over again with his love and grace revealed in the gentle whisper of the gospel – the whisper that shouts down despair, the whisper that trumpets your salvation, the whisper that drives away doubt. In a world filled with noise and clamor – find your peace, your assurance, your purpose in the gentle whisper of God's love for you in Christ.

Amen

To him who is able to keep you from falling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy – to the only God our Savior be glory, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore! Amen. (Jude 24-25)