***THE STILL SMALL VOICE OF GOD***

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Texts: Psalm 42:9-11, **1 Kings 19:1-15**, and Romans 12:9-12

At a Christmas Eve candlelight service thirty years ago at Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church in Richmond where I served as Associate Pastor, the Gothic sanctuary was softly lit with candles, Christmas greens marked the season, and a beautiful organ prelude created a peaceful atmosphere in which to celebrate Jesus’ birth. We had decided to begin the service with a Call to Worship from the back of the sanctuary and then process in with the choir. I had the Call to Worship. I also had a cold that had driven my voice a couple of octaves below its normal level. So in that quiet, glowing holy space the congregation heard, “Comfort, comfort ye my people, says your God.” With no living person visible at the front of the church when my voice from the tomb came booming out, one of the members told me that she sat straight up in the pew and thought, “It is the voice of God!”

Is that what you imagine the voice of God to be like – a booming bass, octaves below any human voice – like the voice of the Wizard of Oz before he is revealed to be something less? It is the kind of voice you can imagine a frustrated God using to put an impertinent Job in his place with his demand:

*Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding. Who determined its measurements – surely you know!*

To which a humbled Job can only murmur:

*I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know - w*hich is the biblical equivalent of “My bad.”

The psalmist describes the voice of God as a powerful voice thundering over the waters, a voice full of majesty, a voice breaking tall trees and shaking the wilderness like a thunderstorm, a voice that leaves all creation trembling in awe. Is that the voice you imagine when you think of the voice of God? Or is it more akin to the warm, welcoming voice of God portrayed by George Burns in *Oh God!* or Morgan Freeman in *Evan Almighty* or Octavia Spencer in *The Shack*?

Apart from the conjecture of the psalmist, Scripture offers no clear description of the voice of God or the appearance of God. In fact, in Hebrew tradition anyone who might look upon the face of God would immediately die, for God’s glory is too great, God’s appearance too wonderful for human eyes, ears, and minds to comprehend. So, God appears in the cloud on Mt. Sinai or speaks from a cloud at the Transfiguration. Angels serve as messengers from God; prophets are inspired by God; kings are chosen by God. But God’s voice and appearance remain a divine mystery, albeit a mystery that still leaves no room for doubt about who is present and speaking in human encounters with God.

The prophet Elijah was one of those who had encountered God and heard the voice of God speak to him; he had carried the word of the Lord – however unpopular it might be – to the powers that be. He had called on the name of the Lord in his battle with the prophets of Baal and had seen the Lord deliver with a show of force that left no doubt about who the King of kings, Lord of lords, and God of gods was! But in so doing, Elijah had made some enemies, and among them were King Ahab of Israel and his wicked wife Jezebel. How bad was she? To this day, no one names their daughter Jezebel; no one even names their dog Jezebel for fear the dog will live into its name and bite them! So when Ahab, the first Whiner in Chief, complained to his wife about all that Elijah had done to him – chastising him for taking his neighbor’s vineyard, defeating the priests of Baal, and generally upbraiding him for his lousy rule – Jezebel decided to take the fight to the prophet. She sent a message to Elijah that was really a death threat:

*So may the gods do to me, and more also, if I do not make your life like the life of one of the prophets of Baal (who Elijah killed) by this time tomorrow.*

Now one might think that coming off his victory over the priests of Baal, Elijah would have responded, “Bring it on, Jez!” After all, he was the prophet of the Lord! God was with him. He stood toe to toe with the prophets of Baal and destroyed them, even taunted them by suggesting Baal was not responding because he was asleep or on vacation; surely God would come through for him in a confrontation with Jezebel! Yet when he received the death threat from the queen, Elijah turned tail and fled the country. Out into the wilderness he went, away from Jezebel and whoever she might send after him to carry out her threat; there you can imagine his prayer being something akin to that of the psalmist:

*Why must I walk about mournfully because the enemy oppresses me? As with a deadly wound in my body, my adversaries taunt me, while they say to me continually, “Where is your God?”*

Elijah’s actual prayer, quoted by the writer in 1 Kings is even worse: *“It is enough, now, O LORD, take away my life*.”

How is it that a prophet of the LORD who had seen the power of God so vividly at work in his life could so quickly despair, flee, and ask to have his suffering end in death? Did he fear that the royal powers of Ahab and Jezebel were greater than the power of God? Did he forget all that God had done for him and through him? Did he not trust God to save him? Or might it be that there in the wilderness we come face to face with the reality of who the prophets were, even a great prophet like Elijah – not super heroes but ordinary men and women called by God to be the instruments through whom God would do extraordinary things in extraordinary moments – human beings with all the fears and doubts that haunt us in times of stress and distress?

In his book *The Soul of America*, Jon Meacham suggests that the opposite of fear is not courage, but hope.[[1]](#endnote-1) There in the wilderness Elijah had lost hope that God was still at work through him. He was tired of the fight and just wanted it all to end. We hear something of the same sentiment in the story of Jonah who, after Nineveh repents and is saved, sulks under the shade of a bush at the edge of town and when the bush withers, tells God that he is better off dead. We hear it from the voice of Job’s loving wife who suggests to him after all the disasters that have befallen him, “*Why don’t you just curse God and die!*” And maybe such thoughts have crossed your mind at some time when fear crept in and hope slipped away. We live in a time when fear is used as a club to drive people to despair, when threats of violence or deportation or military force are intended to crush hopes and force compliance with the powers that be. Elijah understands – he has been there, desperate and despairing and trying to get away from it all. But the repeated hope-filled promise of God is this: you are not alone. I am with you!

In that god-forsaken wilderness place God found Elijah and sent an angel to give him food and drink. God came to him and sustained him in his time of need and then guided him through the wilderness to Mt. Horeb which is the northern tribes’ name for Mt. Sinai, that place where Moses spoke with God and received the Ten Commandments. God never abandons us, never forgets us, never gives up on us. “*I am with you always to the end of the age,*” says Jesus. It is that promise that gives us hope, that promise that gives us courage to combat our fears, that promise that gives us strength to keep on keeping on even when the keeping on is really, really hard. As Senator Cory Booker so well states it in his book *United*, “*Hope is the active conviction that despair will never have the last word*.”[[2]](#endnote-2)

Despair did not have the last word in Elijah’s life. There on Mt. Horeb the LORD came to him, perhaps not with the consolation and comfort he had hoped for, but asking: “Elijah, what are you doing here?” Elijah’s response is probably close to what we might say in such circumstances, “Look, I’ve done all that you asked, and I am tired and I am hiding because these awful people of yours are trying to kill me.” Elijah has failed; he has not turned the people back to God. They are as difficult as ever, and he is ready to hang it all up. Then God does a strange thing; God invites Elijah to come out of his cave and wait on the mountain, for the LORD to pass by. It is an opportunity for a rare glimpse of the glory of God and reassurance that God is with him.

So Elijah exits the cave and waits, and what he waits for, I suspect, is one of those awesome experiences of the voice of the Lord – some awesome moment when he will be overwhelmed by the power and glory of God. He does experience some powerful forces there –wind so strong that it shatters rocks, an earthquake that shakes the whole mountain, and then lightning blazing all around him. But God was not in any of those earth-shattering phenomena. God was there in the aftermath of the spectacular, in the sound of sheer silence. And it was there, in the silence that Elijah encountered God who sent him back to work, reinvigorated.

It is not only in grand and glorious events, but in quiet moments amid the sounds of silence, that God’s voice can be heard, sometimes in just a whisper. In the middle of the night young Samuel heard God calling his name in a whisper so soft that he thought it was old Eli calling him. Israel expected the Messiah to come roaring in with an army of angels and trumpets blaring; instead God arrived with the cry of a baby in the dark of a silent night in Bethlehem. God sometimes surprises us, for that tiny child was and is the hope of the world. In his ministry, he spent less time yelling than talking and listening. Across his life, he took time to get away to a quiet place where he could pray. Again and again we hear him say, “Do not fear” which means, “Dare to hope.” Even if Jezebel is chasing you, do not be afraid; dare to hope. Even if the world is crumbling around you, do not be afraid; dare to hope. Even if you or the world are having a terrible, horrible, no-good, very bad day – especially if you are having such a day, do not fear, but dare to hope – hope in God. As Paul says, “Rejoice in hope. Be patient in suffering. Persevere in prayer.” For, you are not alone. God is with you, with us, always. Amen

1. Jon Meacham, *The Soul of America*, Random House: 2018, p.16 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Cory Booker, *United*, Ballantine Books: New York, 2016, p.57 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)