

## The God Who Speaks in Whispers

I Kings 19:1-18

When you think of a God moment, what do you think of? Is it big? Is it dramatic? Does God show up in a huge way and does something that amazes everyone? There are certainly a lot of those moments in the Bible, and most people who have followed Jesus for a while have had at least one or two of them.

But what if there are a lot of God moments that we miss because we're looking for them in the wrong place. We're looking for something big. We're looking for something dramatic, but God is showing up in the quiet places. He showing up in the little things.

We're going to look at a story this morning that shows us that God sometimes meets us in our deepest, darkest places, and He doesn't show up with a roar, but with a whisper. He shows up with a gentle love that tenderly applies his mercy to our wounds and nourishes us with the strength we need.

Over the last couple of weeks we've talked about our need to be still and know that he is God, but this morning I want to talk about the stillness of God and how we can meet him in the quiet places and hear his whisper.

### **Elijah's Big Victory**

It's a story about the prophet Elijah and it happens in 1 Kings 19, but to fully appreciate what happens in 1 Kings 19, we have to understand what happened in 1 Kings 18. It's one of the prophet Elijah's crowning achievements, the defining moment that by itself would make him one of the heroes of the Old Testament.

It might sound a bit like a fairy tale, but it is a time of darkness in the land. The evil king Ahab reigns over the nation of Israel alongside his even more wicked wife, Jezebel. Under her influence Ahab has led the whole nation into idol worship, and have beheaded every faithful prophet she can get her hands on. Elijah has managed to escape the blade and feels like the only one in the whole country who has not turned his back on God.

God has responded to Israel's rebellion by sending a severe drought to fall on the land. King Ahab himself is out scouring the land looking for water. Then Elijah comes and confronts the King and challenges him to show up to Mount Carmel with all of his false prophets.

It's a huge showdown – 1 faithful prophet verses 850 false prophets. And a whole bunch of the people of Israel are there to watch this. Elijah challenges them to build an altar to their false god Baal and to prepare a sacrifice and to pray to Baal, and see if he will answer them and burn up their offering.

That's what they did. They build an altar, prepare a bull for an offering and then pray all morning to Baal to answer them. For hours they beg and plead. They dance around the altar. They even cut themselves trying to convince their phony god with their own blood.

Elijah, for his part seems to be enjoying the show. He starts to mock them and taunt them. "Pray louder. Maybe he's going to the bathroom. Perhaps he is taking a nap and you have to wake him up."

This goes on well into the afternoon and nothing happens. 1 Kings 18:29 says, *"There was no voice. No one answered; no one paid attention."*

Now, it's Elijah's turn. He builds an altar of twelve stones, one for each tribe of Israel. He digs a trench around the altar. He puts wood on the altar and lays out the bull to be offered. Then he has the whole thing soaked in water. He does this once, twice and then a third time. The trench is now a moat. The wood is sopping wet. Even a flame thrower couldn't start a fire.

Elijah prays a one sentence prayer and God shows up in a big way. Fire shoots down and burns up not just offering, but the wood, the stone, dirt under the altar. Then Elijah, showing some major testicular fortitude, calls on the people to seize all the false prophets and Elijah slaughters them all. Rambo's got nothing on this guy. He's one tough hombre. When we think of God moments and God showing up in a big way, this is the kind of thing we think of.

1 Kings 18 ends with God sending rain to bring the drought to an end. So, we might expect that Elijah would be brimming with confidence. 1 Kings 19 should be Elijah going on a victory tour, and finally putting Ahab and Jezebel in their place, but that's not what happens.

When Jezebel receives word about what Elijah did to all of her false prophets, she swears she will do worse to him. She sends a messenger, *"So may the gods do to me and more also, if I do not make your life as the life of one of them by this time tomorrow."* These are the gods, by the way, Elijah has just proven to be impotent and castrated before the whole nation. His response should be, "Bring it on, babe. Let's see what you got!"

### **Elijah Gets Depressed**

But that's not what happens. Listen to 1 Kings 19:4, *"But 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 away my life, for I am no better than my fathers.'"*

Elijah enters this major depressive state. He just went toe to toe with hundreds of false prophets and came out on top, and now he is running scared for his life from one nasty woman. I'm sure there is a joke in here somewhere about a man who takes on 850 men, but is scared of one woman.

We learn something very important about human nature here. Sometimes we discover our greatest weakness after showing our greatest strength. In three short verses the entire story

has changed from one of triumph to one of surrender. Elijah is snatching defeat from the jaws of victory. In fact, before he hides into the wilderness, the prophet dismisses his personal servant in Beersheba, which is the last border town you hit before leaving the country. Elijah is giving every appearance of a man who is giving up.

### **God Sends an Angel**

Two things happen at this point. The first is Elijah falls asleep. He has to be exhausted. He's just spent an entire day in spiritual and physical battle. He has been confronting not only the forces that threaten his nation, but a fearful enemy that could threaten his life. He then runs for his life on a journey of about 100 miles. His stress levels have been pegged for hours on end, and there is the death warrant hanging over his neck.

The second thing is that God sends an angel to care for Elijah. Verses 5 and 6 say, *"And he lay down and slept under a broom tree. And behold, an angel touched him and said to him, 'Arise and eat. And he looked, and behold, there was at his head a cake baked on hot stones and a jar of water.'"*

How long has it been since Elijah had eaten anything? Just on a purely, physical, human level two things we need when life is at its most intense, is rest and nourishment. A good night's sleep and a good, meal can do a lot of good, and yet a couple of the things that we most neglect when life gets crazy is proper rest and good nutrition. We drain ourselves performing at high levels for hours, and then we shovel junk into our pie holes, and wonder why we feel lousy?

At a basic physical level we have a biological need for stillness. We need it for health, emotional and mental health, as well as physical. But that's just a minor takeaway from this story.

There is a kind of exhaustion, and a kind of stress that you cannot sleep away or eat away. Sometimes, we run to the kitchen and try to eat ourselves happy again. It feels so good going in, but always leaves you feeling empty. Sometimes, we try to sleep our emotional exhaustion away. You get to a point where you can sleep for days on end but get no rest. This is because the need is deeper and the answer is spiritual.

### **God's Response to Mental Health Issues**

Let me make a couple of observations here about God's response to our mental health. Elijah finds himself in a very dark place. I don't know if we can diagnose him with clinical depression, but he's at a very low point.

**God doesn't condemn Elijah.** He doesn't show up with a lecture or rebuke. He shows up with a tender touch and with physical, spiritual, and emotional nourishment. God comes to us at our lowest point. You will never find yourself at a point so low, that God will not meet you there.

Also notice how **God provides practical, short-term help**. He provides food, and he provides rest. Notice in our text, how after the first meal that the angel provides, that Elijah is allowed to lay down and rest again. God doesn't rush him. He doesn't push him until he is ready.

**God also redirects our running**. Elisha ran to get to this hiding place. In fact, he ran some 100 miles. That's pretty impressive, but he wasn't the direction that God wanted. So after tending to his needs, God puts him on the run again, but in new direction with a new purpose. Some of us, most of us, have come up with self-destructive coping mechanisms, and often these become our default go-tos when times get tough. We run to them. Again and again. But God wants us to run to Him, and run with Him, to go the direction He is going. God will take all this energy that we're expending in an unhealthy way, and he'll refocus it in a positive direction.

### **No Ordinary Angel**

This is no ordinary angel tending to Elijah's needs, and this is no ordinary food He's feeding to Elijah. Verse 7 reads, *"And the angel of the LORD came again a second time and touched him and said, 'Arise and eat, for the journey is too great for you.'*" In other words, you're going on a trip, and there's no way you're getting there on your own. Verse 8, *"And he arose and ate and drank, and went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights to Horeb, the mount of God."*

First, let's talk about this angel. There are many appearances of angels in the O.T. and they carry out God's business in a variety of ways, but on certain occasions, special occasions, we see this angel of the LORD. Not just AN angel of the LORD, but THE Angel of the LORD. This is somebody special.

Now remember, angel simply means messenger. In Exodus 23, God tells the people of Israel that the angel of the LORD, the angel of Yahweh will lead them to the Promised Land. God says they must obey the angel of the LORD because "my name is in Him." Sometimes, the angel of the LORD speaks as if he is a messenger from Yahweh, but other times he speaks as if He IS Yahweh.

Most Bible scholars believe that the Old Testament appearances of The Angel of the LORD are special appearances of Jesus before he was born. It's like the Son of God is making a cameo before his big reveal. So this sets up this very intimate, divine encounter for Elijah.

Second, we're not told what this second meal consists of, but it is quite the meal, because Elijah is able to journey for forty days and forty nights on foot just on this one meal. Talk about a superfood. If you could put this in a pill and sell it as a supplement. Obviously something miraculous is going on here, and God supernaturally sustains Elijah for an incredible trip.

### **Destination: Mount Horeb**

Now where is God sending him? To Mount Horeb. That may not ring any bells for you, but this well. Mt. Horeb is another name for Mount Sinai. God is taking Elijah to the same place where Moses had a very intimate encounter with God. We're not exactly sure of the location of Mt. Sinai, but one very popular candidate is journey of 260 miles.

By way of comparison, you could run the Badwater Ultramarathon. This 135 mile course was conceived as race from the lowest to highest points in the United States. You will climb 14,600 feet in elevation gain as you race from Death Valley to the summit of Mt. Whitney.

There is the Marathon des Sables which takes you 154 miles in six days across the Sahara desert in temperatures regularly over 100 degrees.

You could compete in the Jungle Ultra which starts in the cloud forest in Andes Mountains dropping you 10,500 feet into the Peruvian jungle and running 142.6 miles through untouched Amazon rainforest crossing 70 rivers and streams and contending with 100% humidity and whatever creatures you come across

As impressive as it is that Elijah could run 260 miles, there is some fun with numbers going on here. Any of the possible candidates for Mount Sinai would require a journey of a few days, but not several weeks, even in treacherous terrain. If you run the numbers and calculate how far the average person can walk in a day, even assuming that Elijah is an old man, and considering that he might have to spend some time hiding from Jezebel's assassins, you would find this journey for Elijah wouldn't require 40 days and 40 nights.

So, what's going on here? Numbers in the Bible are used not just for their mathematical precision but their theological weight. There's no chicanery going on here. It was common in ancient writings to use numbers not only for the literal value, but also their symbolic weight. We do the same thing sometimes in our speech. "That meeting was sooo boring. It lasted a 100 years. This hotel is so nice. How much did this room cost? A million bucks? Numbers used, not for their numeric value, but their symbolic weight.

40 days and 40 nights is a figure that carries some theological heft to it. During Noah's flood, it rained 40 days and 40 nights. Goliath taunted Israel for 40 days. Moses spent 40 days and 40 nights on Mount Sinai with God. In the New Testament, Jesus was tempted in the desert for 40 days. Jesus ascended into heaven 40 days after his resurrection. Some of these were likely a literal 40 days, but 40 days and 40 nights is also way of telling us that God is doing something important and it takes some time.

1 Kings 19 is telling us not only is this a long journey. It's also telling us that it is a divine journey with a divine purpose. We have to be careful reading Scripture with modern expectations. We

come off as overly pedantic. We can be like Spock in Star Trek insisting on numerical precision while completely missing the point.

### **God Speaks in a Whisper**

Finally, Elijah gets to Mount Horeb, and what does he do? Verse 9, *“There he came to a cave and lodged in it.”* Anyone else here ever have times in life you just want to crawl into a cave and stay there? I know I do. Sometimes I think I can go into my cave and never come out. Sometimes it’s a metaphorical cave, but there are times I fanaticize about a real cave. If I could, I would just hide there.

Here’s the thing. We can’t stay in the cave. So, God speaks to Elijah, *“What are doing here, Elijah?”* Why did you come here? What are you hoping to accomplish. Elijah didn’t just go to any mountain. He went to Mt. Horeb, Mt. Sinai. This is a place loaded with meaning and expectation. This is the place where God met Moses one on one. This is where God spoke aloud to all his people. This is where God handed down his law, his covenant with his people.

This is where we get a little better picture of what’s going on in Elijah’s head. Listen to verse 10,

*He replied, “I have been very zealous for the Lord God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, torn 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.”*

I would summarize it this way, “I’m the only left and I’m fighting a losing battle.” So, God gives Elijah an assignment. Here’s what happens in verse 11 and the first half of 12:

*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.*

All of these phenomenon, the wind, the earthquake, the fire are all marvels through which God has revealed his glory in the past. Even here at Sinai, the whole mountain quaked as God manifested himself in a storm of thunder and lightning, even as He appeared in the Israelite camp below as a pillar of fire. But not this time. He wasn’t in the ripping wind. He wasn’t in the ground shaking quake. He wasn’t in the roaring fire.

God shows up in a way that Elijah least expected it. Verse 12 ends with this, *“And after the fire came a gentle whisper.”* Literally, it says a thin silence. The King James forever altered the English lexicon with this translation, *“a still, small voice.”* We don’t know what it was about that still, small voice, but Elijah knew God was in it. Perhaps it simply whispered. “Here I am Elijah, come on out.” Maybe there was simply a presence, an otherworldly sense about it. His skin tingled. All of his little hairs stood straight up as he was covered in gooseflesh. Maybe, when God chooses to reveal himself, you just know it.

Elijah comes out his cave where he's been hiding. He pulls his cloak over his face, either to protect himself from the elements, or from the presence of God. Elijah stands at the mouth of the cave, and God asks him the same question as before, *"What are you doing here, Elijah?"* His reply is the same as before. *"I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too."*

God sends him back, *"Go back the way you came,"* God says in verse 15. He is to anoint a new king over Aram, a new king over Israel, and he is to anoint Elisha to succeed him as prophet. Ahab and Jezebel's days are quickly coming to an end. God also reassures Elijah in verse 18, *"I reserve seven thousand in Israel –all whose knees have not bowed down to Baal and whose mouths have not kissed him."*

Here's what God is telling Elijah. "You're not the only one. You're not in this alone." 7,000 might not sound like a lot in the whole nation, but when you feel all alone, knowing that someone else is with you, can make all the difference. Maybe you need this same assurance this morning. You are not alone.

Sometimes, all we need to heal, to continue, to grow is the quiet voice of God. All we need is to hear him. But for that we have to be still. We have to listen.

Think about this. Some of the most intimate moments that you share with your spouse, that you share with a child or a best friend, are in the quiet, still moments. They are shared in whispers, they pass as a fall leaf drifting on an autumn breeze, in words not dared shared loud enough to be heard by another.

I'm not saying the loud, boisterous moments aren't essential. They are. But the deepest relationships always have these still, quiet moments woven in. It is not always the loud or brash experiences that keep us close. It is the shared stillness that binds us and knits our souls together. It is our most visceral connection.

True intimacy requires stillness. It's there in the stillness we find tenderness and affection. It's in the stillness that we share our deepest selves. It is in the stillness that we are at our most vulnerable, and thus most able to fully love and be loved.

**True intimacy with our Creator requires stillness.** We must still, because the divine lover of our souls often shares himself in stillness. If we want to know God more fully, if we want to experience his tender healing on our deepest wounds, if we want to be lifted out of our darkest places, we have to learn to listen for His still, small voice. We have to listen to quiet, divine whisper.

God will meet you there in your deepest darkest place. He will meet you not with glaring disapproval, but with tender nourishment. He will reach out, not with finger pointed in condemnation, but with a healing touch. He will whisper the words you most need to hear.

But learning to hear his voice can be so hard for us who live frantic, hectic lives. It goes against our very nature, especially for those of us who strive to excel at multitasking to seek stillness. Stillness is not our sweet spot. Some of us are good at seeking intimacy in almost every place except for the still, small voice of God.

But we need to stop. We need to be still. We need to be quiet. And we need wait. We need to wait and listen. Then we wait and listen some more. He will come. He will speak.