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### **A Still, Small Voice**

**Text:** I Kings 19:1-15

The Bible throughout its many pages provides plenty of drama. In the beginning the Creation itself is dramatic as the world comes into being from nothingness. Of course, the end of the temporal world in the book of Revelations is one big drama as well. The showdown between Moses and Pharaoh, and the subsequent parting of the Red Sea when the Israelites escaped from slavery into freedom is nothing if not high drama. And the Passion of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, is both a personal and a cosmic drama, for what happens in his death and resurrection is the very hinge on which both the beginning and end of the world swing.

Even if they are not quite cosmic, the stories of the prophet Elijah are similarly dramatic. They take place in the middle years of the ninth century BC in the ancient kingdom of Israel. Ahab is king and Jezebel, the daughter of the king of the Phoenicians, is his queen. Not at all content with accepting the religion and customs of her new nation, she browbeats Ahab into imposing upon Israel the worship of the gods of her people. It is into this scene that Elijah, without even being first introduced to the reader, is suddenly thrust. He appears before Ahab announcing that, because of Israel's idolatry, Israel will suffer a drought – "that there will be neither dew nor rain in these years."

So it came to pass in Israel that it did not rain, and it came to pass that because it did not rain that there was a famine. Elijah himself during the time was first fed by the ravens, and then miraculously by a foreign widow's unemptiable jar of meal and jug of oil. Finally as the drought

wore on and wore down the people of Israel the word of the Lord came to Elijah that he was to present a challenge to Ahab. That challenge was a contest that Elijah proposed. Four hundred fifty of Ahab's and Jezebel's prophets of Baal were on one side, and Elijah was alone on the other side. The test was to ignite a sacrificial bull laid on a pyre of wood, but without using fire. Each side would pray to the God they worshiped. The true God would be shown by which one was able to light the pyre and consume the sacrifice.

Now, as the story unfolds, the priests of Baal went first, and they danced from morning to noon imploring Baal, mutilating themselves in the process in the hopes of getting Baal's attention. But nothing happened. Finally it was Elijah's turn -- after he finished mocking his unworthy opponents. In a gesture designed to increase the stakes, he first poured water over the wood. Then he simply prayed, asking the Lord of Israel to answer him, "so that this people may know that you, O Lord, are God and that you have turned their hearts back." No sooner was he done praying than the fire of God fell upon the offering, and it and all the wood and even the stones and the water around it were consumed. But that was hardly the end, for Elijah immediately commanded the awestruck people of Israel to seize the prophets of Baal and to slay them. It was then, we are told, that the sound of rushing rain was heard, and soon Israel was drenched in life saving rain.

One would have thought that this would be the end of it, and the end of Ahab and Jezebel. Nothing could have been farther from the truth, for apparently winning isn't everything. Although Ahab, who is not a particularly strong character, seems to be left wondering what to do, Jezebel shows no such hesitation. She immediately declares that she will have Elijah hunted down and slaughtered just as he had slaughtered her clerical lackeys. So, Elijah, like so many of his spiritual forefathers and like so many prophets after him, immediately flees to the desert and

cries out in loneliness and despair. He wishes he could die; he believes he alone is left, the only one who still remains faithful to God.

Yet, his wish is not granted. Instead he is pushed forty days further out in the desert, a symbolic retreat from the advances made during the time of the Exodus when Israel, after forty years in the desert marched into the promised land. What we are meant to see is a hard reversal of Israel's fortunes – they had gone from nothingness in Egypt to fullness in the Promised Land, Elijah goes from there back to nothingness. Elijah seems to understand this for the further Elijah goes, the further his despair and loneliness become until finally at the end of his journey he cries out all his frustration, shouting, "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 slain your prophets with the sword; and I, even I only, am left and they seek my life to take it away."

To Elijah it seems as if all hope is gone and the worship of God has been forsaken forever by the people that God had once chosen to be his people alone. All his life Elijah had fought seemingly alone to bring the people back to a holy way of life. Yet at the very pinnacle of his passionate witness when he has shown Baal to be nothing but a false and empty idol and the God of Israel to be the true God he receives a threat on his life. One can imagine that he may well have believed that by that demonstration of righteous and holy power that the people would have seen how wrong they had been and how right he was, and that they would have repented, would have turned back to God. But, instead, what has happened is that he has received a threat on his life. So he finds himself not only in a desert of physical barrenness but in a spiritual wasteland as well, for just as there is hardly a living creature in the Sinai desert, neither, apparently, is there a man or woman of God left in all of Israel.

Yet Elijah is not left alone and uncomforted in this spiritual wasteland; instead, out there

on Mount Horeb a divine drama within the drama of his struggles is played out. In technical terms, there is a theophany, a manifestation of God himself. But God shows himself in a startling and unexpected way. There is first a wind so strong that it breaks rocks on the mountain. Yet, God is not in that wind. Then there is an earthquake. Yet, God is not the shaking of the earth. Then there is a fire. But, although God caused the fire that burned the sacrifice in the contest with priests of Baal, God is not the fire. There is presented to Elijah a trinity of the most powerful forces of nature. But strangely enough, God does not manifest himself in any of these things. Instead, he manifests himself afterwards in a still, small voice.

I am sure that Elijah expected that God would appear in wind, earthquake, and fire to answer his prayer. If God had done so, it would have fitted in very nicely with the high drama of the last several weeks and with the way that Elijah expected everything else to happen. He had expected during his activity as a prophet in his contest with the priests of Baal that God would manifest himself in fire and rain, and certainly it was by fire and rain that God proved that he was the God of Israel and not Baal. But then things started going differently. He had also expected the nation to repent after that cataclysmic display and after he had slain all the priests of Baal. He expected things to change swiftly and powerfully and when they didn't he was forced to flee to the desert and cry out his despair. Even though he was obviously a man of great faith, he, like so many of us, wanted to see the fiery finger of God writing on the wall.

Yet when God finally appeared to him it was as a still small voice. It was something that Elijah did not expect. Elijah wanted power to reassure him that power could be fought against. He instead got a still, small voice. Yet, that still small voice was more powerful than any wind, earthquake or fire ever could be because it contained the Word of God himself. It is a voice that is startling, frightening, and comforting at the same time. Startling, because it is not what anyone

expects who thinks that God comes in wind, and fire; and it is frightening because it is after all the word of the creator of heaven and earth, a word that controls all the wind and fire that there is. It is also comforting because it is still and small and because such a voice controls the awesome powers of nature.

This is high drama, indeed. The action, the terror, the reversals of good and evil, all would be worthy of cinematic treatment if Hollywood weren't so cowardly about portraying reality, about portraying the nature of goodness and its real relation to power. We, because of Hollywood's treatment of good and evil are used to seeing goodness always vindicated by power and violence. Countless movies portray gentle and just heroes who will not fight back. Many years ago, I remember the cult classic "Billy Jack" which was just such a movie. Although an ex-Marine Billy was a pacifist because he had grown sick of violence; he wouldn't fight and he taught others not to use violence. Similarly, only a few years ago Mel Gibson in the *Patriot* portrayed a gentle colonial farmer who at the beginning of the Revolutionary War would not fight. But all such movies that portray injustice against the righteous and the non-violent reach a breaking point where the hero *does* fight back. When his friends were threatened, Billy Jack finally broke out into some pretty fancy kung-fu moves that took down all the bigoted rednecks who were harassing those friends. He did so to the cheers of the many pacifist hippies in the audience who screamed for even more blood. In *The Patriot* everybody cheered, at least everybody who wasn't English, as Mel took on the dastardly and sadistic British colonel who threatened our way of life. Apparently, peace is something to return to only after one was finished with the serious fighting.

But in the Elijah story the truly unexpected does happen. There isn't a revelation of goodness in any increase of power and violence; the revelation came in what was small and

weak. As Christians living after God's revelation in Jesus Christ, we, of course, shouldn't be surprised to read this When God's Word was revealed to men and women, when the Word spoken by the still, small voice became flesh, we saw it and heard it as something that would not extinguish a flickering flame, nor crush a broken reed. It was so modest, in fact, that one Gospel writer, Mark, portrayed Jesus as largely keeping his Godhead pretty much a secret throughout his ministry, a secret that could only be penetrated by the modesty and humility of faith.

Well, I say we who believe in Christ shouldn't be surprised that God spoke to Elijah in a still small voice. But, in fact, we often are surprised. Like Elijah we come to where God dwells after a rough week and we want God to be revealed to us in something exciting. We want God to overwhelm in brilliant flashes the demons and enemies of our stress, and the petty but annoying slights that we have had to bear all week long, and especially all the several idiots that we have had to put up with.

We *should* know that God's Word is spoken in a still small voice, but we nevertheless want a grand booming voice that will shatter rocks.

Yet, the voice that controls the wind and the waves and that casts out the demons is a still, small voice. It is so quiet that you cannot hear it until all other voices are quieted.

Now, this is something very important for us to think about as we come to worship. For like Elijah we want something grand and impressive; we want something noisy, something so noisy that it will drown out our pains, and stresses, and disappointments – and all the idiots. We want something that will smash the enemies of the week. Yet, we should remember what the psalmist sang: "The heavens are telling the glory of God and the firmament proclaims his handiwork...Yet, there is no speech nor are there words; their voice is not heard; yet their voice goes out through all the earth and their words to the end of the world." The sublime and grand

heavens know better than we do, for the word they speak is a quiet one, and they know that God is best praised by that Word.

Quietness is crucial. That is something that the Quakers have long known in their worship as they sit quietly until the Spirit moves one of them to speak. That is why as we gather each Sunday, we are bid to keep quiet. It is not a question of staid formality or of oppressing the exuberance of children, as if we were in a library. It is a question of listening to something that never speaks very loudly, but that is so important that a whole world exists because of it. The quietness is crucial as we listen to the Scriptures, too. We are bid to “*listen* for the Word of God” for even reading along can sometimes create a distraction that keeps us from really hearing.

All that has to do with a quietness that is a lack of physical sound. But the most important quietness goes even deeper. There is a prayer of illumination that begins with begging God to “quiet in us every voice but your own.” It is a wise thing to pray for. Often the greatest obstacle to our listening and hearing the still, small voice is not outside noise, but the inside noise of our own selves, our own self-images, whether they are images of self-importance or self-pity. To hear God’s Word, our own words about ourselves are the things that have to be quieted. Much of worship is meant to do precisely that even as God’s Word is spoken. If we pray together, in good part it is so we don’t have to hear ourselves praying and end up listening to ourselves. If we sing together, it is to drown out the grating noise of the songs of our own self importance. If we truly pray for others, we will also achieve enough quiet inside ourselves to hear God’s Word to us.

There is something paradoxical about being silent like this, about learning how to quiet our own selves. It is paradoxical because in being quiet to ourselves we don’t actually lose ourselves at all, nor do we lose fellowship with others. The quietness doesn’t cut them off. Rather, because once we can hear God’s own small Word inside us, the Word through whom all

things were made, and that is the light of all people, we can actually become the full persons God created, and we can become also brothers and sisters with all people. What most often divides us from others, including God, is simply ourselves. To quiet those selves to listen to the one who loves us all, is to gain the whole world, not lose it.

This was something that Elijah himself discovered. At the point that he was driven into the wilderness, he thought he alone was left. Yet when he finally heard that still small voice of God, what it told him was that he was not alone, that God had saved seven thousand faithful men and women in Israel. It was then, and only then, upon hearing that word, that Elijah was able to leave the desert of loneliness and despair.

So let us then listen, let us quiet in ourselves every voice but God's own. If we do we will not lose the world but gain it. For we will discover all the others who listen, too, and with them, and with the gentle and good Lord who speaks his Word to us, we will discover the way out of the desert of hopelessness and despair.