

Sunday May 9, 2021
 Lesson 10: God in the Quiet Sound
 Scripture: 1 Kings 19: 9-18

Context:

As our series continues to dive into all the ways God is revealed in holiness, we look at the different ways God interacts with humanity. Today's lesson comes from the Old Testament in the book of First Kings, a history of the leadership of Israel between kings, prophets, and priests. Our scripture lesson focuses on how God speaks to the prophet Elijah and how the voice of God speaks to us today in the most surprising places.

The context of the passage is set with Queen Jezebel being informed of a showdown between her prophets of Baal and Elijah. After God won the battle, Elijah commands for the priests of Baal to be killed and thus they were slaughtered in the Kishon Valley. The word was sent to Queen Jezebel and in a rage, she sent a messenger to tell Elijah of his impending death.

As such, Elijah flees to a cave and hides for his life. His encounter there is not so much about God's absence or presence as much as it is about Elijah's attempt to relinquish his prophetic office and God's insistence he continue.¹ God will take several means to get Elijah's attention and to remind him of the mission God has given to him.

Like last week where we looked at Moses and his encounter of God at Mt. Sinai, God decides to have a conversation with Elijah and physically come near him. This case is different though. Not until the middle of the text do we see Elijah respond.

God first sends a strong wind; but God is not in the wind. God then has the earth quake, but God is not in the earthquake. God has a firestorm, but God is not in the fire.

Finally there is a sound. It is thin, quite. There is no elaboration if it sounds like music or is a hum. It is a "thin, quiet sound." This is what prompts Elijah to come out of the cave with his face wrapped in his cloak. And thus, God and Elijah go back to a conversation with God giving Elijah the command to go to Damascus and anoint a king. God promises to send those who will continue to use the sword to bring order to the land. And those who worship Baal will not have the final say about who is to be worshipped and venerated.

This theophany (manifestation of God) is different than others such as the one at Mt. Sinai. There is a strange divide in the course of events. The contrast is between the fireworks of God's theophany and the quiet calm that followed, not between God's presence and absence.² It is the thin, quiet sound Elijah is drawn out to be addressed by God and enter into dialogue. He still has questions, and yet God has made it known God will employ whatever means to reach him. God will speak to Elijah one way or another and God will seek to continue the mission for God's people.

¹ Richard D. Nelson, "First and Second Kings," *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2012), 123.

² *Ibid.*, 124.

Application

Often when we read this passage we focus upon the most obvious aspect to leap out to us. We rush to discuss how God spoke to Elijah in the small, thin space. Sometimes it has been conflated with silence; although the text makes clear there was a type of sound (also depending upon the translation of the text). Thus, Christian teaching and preaching on this text often focus upon hearing God in the stillness of the night or day.

While there is certainly something to preach upon with hearing God in small, quieter ways than cataclysmic events, there is something else going on in this text. Within the revelation of God, we also look at the nature of the prophet Elijah. Elijah had fled to this cave after having threats upon his life.

It is always important to never project feelings onto a character in scripture. We never will know what they were thinking or feeling. Even their words, with different tones, can be interpreted in different ways. What we can look at is their actions and see how God speaks to them in situations.

In this case, God has chased Elijah down after he flees for his life from the infamous Queen Jezebel. When one hides in a cave in the desert, there is probably the inevitable conclusion the person has gone there not to be found or discovered. Unless one is a desert father or mother in the early church, situations like these are not ideal even for the most devout saints.

Yet Elijah cannot even get away from God. God knows exactly where Elijah is hiding and goes to have a conversation with him. God pulls out all the theatrics to make a point to Elijah of how God will speak in whatever way God pleases to speak and show up. The bigger point is how God has called Elijah to a task and will not relent until Elijah responds to God.

I have had the privilege in ministry to serve in various capacities where I listen to people and their call stories. Most call stories involve at least one moment of hesitation, even in the most confident of candidates who know they are called. It's where all the questions flood in. "Do I have what it takes?" "What if this is not for me?" "Do I have the gifts to lead in this capacity?"

I have even heard the same when laity speak of their own vocations whether they discuss their jobs or roles in the church. "I can do it, but I don't love the job." "I wondered if I would be able to get through the classes." "I've never served or done something like this in ministry; shouldn't a clergy do something like this?" The same questions pop up.

And like Elijah's encounter, God shows up in different ways to remind people that God has indeed called them in both their vocation and in their calling as a disciple of Jesus Christ. We don't have to be an ancient prophet in politically unstable Israel for God to seek us out as the one God is calling for a particular mission. God has all sorts of missions for the kingdom and needs those who will labor in ministry and life.

In all of these different call stories, I have heard the people name how God's call showed up in various venues. Sometimes it was a quiet walk. Other times it was a confirmation mentor or pastor and a holy conversation. In other cases, it was a powerful moment in worship like attending a service of death and resurrection or a meaningful evening at a camp chapel. And in other cases, it was more a journey where God kept showing up and asking, "Have you heard me calling?" God showed up and spoke,

waiting for the individual to finally say “Yes Lord!”

Where have you heard God call you in mission and ministry? Why do you think God speaks in different ways to get our attention? How has God called you to serve in ministry whether you are clergy or lay? What are ways you can listen to God better on your walk with Christ?

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