

“The Flight of Elijah”

Security, Peace and Fear – part #3

I Kings 19:1-18

This is the third week of our series on Security, Peace, and Fear. The past two weeks we have been following the story of the great prophet Elijah. He has prophesied against the evil King Ahab and his queen Jezebel, has miraculously provided for a widow and her family, and called down fire from heaven in order to defeat 450 false prophets of the pagan God, Baal. Sounds like a great resume, doesn't it? No wonder this prophet is so famous!

The interesting thing about Elijah's story to this point is, it is very full. I mean, adventure, excitement, battles, miracles. At the end of chapter 18, Elijah is leading the way, running in front of the king's chariot, waiting for the rain to fall, ending the drought, and everything seems to be going right. They ride off into the sunset. Cue the music and the closing credits, right?

Not quite. Have you ever had a so-called “mountain top experience,” and then woken up the next day feeling rather “blah”? It's like all the energy got sapped out of you, and the euphoria has made you even more vulnerable than before. When I was in college marching band, we got the once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to play in the Rose Bowl. This is how January 1st, 1996, went for me: wake up at 5 AM, leave the hotel in full uniform, march 6 miles in the Parade of Roses. Take the bus back to the stadium, eat a quick lunch, and play for 4 hours at the football game. After the game, eat dinner, take a quick shower, and take a red-eye flight back to Chicago. At 9 AM local time, land, sleep all day, and then, at 8 AM the next morning, go to a physics lecture. I literally have no memory of

January 2nd other than sleeping, and that week, I got sick with a nasty cold. What a roller coaster!

We all have moments in life like Elijah, where we go from a victory to defeat in a matter of days, even moments. Maybe you got a new job, but had to move to a new town and it was overwhelming. Maybe you had a great day with your family, and then your grandfather passed away the next day. Maybe you had just finished an important health goal, like losing weight or running a 5k, and you get diagnosed with a long-term illness. Whatever it is, there is always something that threatens to rock our security when everything had just seemed to be working out.

If you're having a bad day, 1st Kings 19 is a good place to find someone to commiserate with you. Let's read the first part of this chapter.

I Kings 19:1-5a

Wow, what a change. Elijah went from the mountaintop victory to having a murderous queen after him. No wonder he ran away. I would, too! What is most interesting about this passage, however, is his last sentence. “I'm no better than my ancestors. I wish I were dead.” The powerful Elijah, who has just witnessed firsthand the power of the Almighty God, is having a serious moment of crisis. At first, I would like to say to him, “This is silly! Ridiculous. Elijah, how can you be this way, when God just delivered you from an angry king and 450 prophets? You can't be serious!”

But he is. If nothing else, this passage tells me that we are most vulnerable right after a significant, spiritual victory. Church, learn this. No matter what kind of day you are having, if the devil can get your focus off of the Lord Almighty, he will. The world will throw everything it can at you, because it is so easy to let our

guards down and forget. God never left Elijah. Elijah turned away and gave into his fears and depression.

But as always, God has a plan. Let's read again.

I Kings 19:5b-9a.

God sends an angel to revive Elijah's spirits. Do you know what an angel is? A messenger. It's literally the same word as the messenger of Jezebel who conveyed the threat to Elijah in the first part of the chapter. The contrast could not be any more stark. An angel of the queen brings the threat of death. An angel of the Lord bring life and rejuvenation. God knew what lay ahead for Elijah. And God provided.

This is one thing that we often forget. When we are depressed, scared, and anxious, we think, “I'm all alone. No one cares. No one is there for me.” Yet God has never left us, and God always sends someone at just the right time. The question is, will we receive the help and advice that they offer us? Elijah could have ignored the angel, rolled back over and went to sleep. But he didn't. We, too, need to open our eyes when God sends an angel to us. Someone who will pray with us. Invite us out for coffee. Spend some time walking together. And frankly, we need to be those angels to people in need, too.

So Elijah is nourished and travels forty days and nights to God's mountain. He finds a cave and hides. The story is set up for another amazing, mountaintop spectacle. Or is it? Let's read on.

I Kings 19:9b-13a

Remember, Elijah saw fire from heaven. Yet, somehow, when God reveals that God is about to pass, God is not in the loud, amazing, powerful forces. Elijah doesn't move until he hears the “gentle whisper.” Other translations call it the

“still small voice,” or the “gentle breeze.” My personal favorite is “the sound of sheer silence.”

Our world is loud. Very loud. Try this experiment some time: go outside your home for 20 minutes and record all the human-made sounds you hear. Cars. Airplanes. Fans. Doors. Voices. Gunshots. Screaming kids. OK, some of those noises aren't too bad. But how often to get appreciate silence? I will go deer hunting in a few days. Even in the middle of the Huron National forest, in Mikado, Michigan, deep in the woods, it's not silence. It's close, but noise surrounds me. And that's just outside. Inside, our lives are filled with noise, expectations, demands. Our family, our jobs, even our church.

I confess, it is hard for me to fast from the noise. To let go of everything that weighs me down and just wait on the Lord. Psalm 27:14 commands us to “Wait for the LORD; be strong and take heart and wait for the LORD.” A preacher once told me, this is one of the most important parts of prayer. Just sitting still, not talking, but waiting, listening for God. She said, take a notebook with you when you do this. When a thought comes into your mind, write it down quickly, and go back to the silence. When you finish praying, you have your to-do list for the day! But most importantly, you have resisted the distraction of the noise in your life. That's where God wants us to be.

I believe God can and will appear in amazing, “fire from heaven “ moments. But more often than that, I believe God clearly appears in the quieter moments. In the beauty of nature. A simple touch or hug from a friend. In a single verse from the Bible or from a hymn. A song that comes on the radio at just the right moment. Even in the death of a patriarch of your family. There is quiet. There is reflection. There is peace.

Elijah had many reasons to be afraid. But he had forgotten the most important part. God had work for him to do. Let's read the last part together.

I Kings 19:13b-18.

Do you notice that Elijah never directly answers God's question, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" Elijah claims he has been very zealous for the Lord, but his actions are confusing, if not contradictory. Yes, Elijah, you succeeded on Mount Carmel. But then you ran away, curled up under a tree, and thought about dying. That does not sound to me like a good way to serve the Lord!

So what does God do? He gives Elijah more work to do. Go anoint these two kings and a prophet to succeed you. God reminds Elijah again, the work is not yet done. "You are not alone, Elijah. I still have people who love me and will help you."

If you only remember one thing from this scripture today, this is it: you are never alone. We say it all the time: God is everywhere! And God especially is with you, showing you that there is a community of people who love and worship Jesus and want you to be part of them. Elijah lost his focus. He let his fears get the best of him. If that can happen to one of Israel's greatest prophets, it can happen to us. Elijah wanted to sit and complain. I'm sure none of us ever do that, right? Oops, guilty as charged. What if, instead of complaining, we prayed? "God, give me something to do. Give me someone to encourage. Give me someone to anoint. To heal. To lead. To love."

Yes, we will find God in the fire, the wind, the storm, and the awesome forces of nature. But perhaps, even more importantly, we need to expect God to show up in the silence, and furthermore, expect God to call us into mission so that others do not have to be silent or alone any more.

Memory Verse: I Kings 19:11-12

“...but the Lord was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake came a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper.”