

Too Far, Too Fast

1 Kings 19:1-15

Once there was a group of tourists on a safari in Africa. They had hired several locals as porters to carry their gear as they traveled. Three days into what was fast-paced excursion, the porters informed the tourists, that they would have to stop and rest for a day. It was not that they were physically tired. They explained that they had walked too far, too fast; so that they needed to pause and wait for their souls to catch up with them.

Which might be exactly how the prophet Elijah was feeling in the passage I just read. Elijah was a great prophet who lived in Israel, some 850 years before Christ was born. At that time Israel was ruled by the notorious King Ahab and his Phoenician born Queen, Jezebel. Jezebel promoted the worship of a pagan fertility god named Baal, from the land of her ancestry. Even to the point of having purged the land of altars to Israel's God and declared open season on Jewish prophets.

Elijah had seen enough, so he challenged more than 400 prophets of Baal to a decisive showdown at the top of Mt. Carmel, to settle once and for all, who was the one true God. These were the rules of the contest. There would be two altars, one for the Baalists and one for Elijah. Each altar would have wood for a fire and an animal sacrifice. The pagan prophets would pray to Baal to send down fire and light the altar. Then it would be Elijah's turn to pray to God to light his altar with heavenly fire. The outcome would determine once and for all, which was the one true and legit God of Israel.

The priests of Baal were up first. They prayed and wailed and danced and even shed their own blood on the altar to entice their God into acting. This went on for hours, but nothing happened. All the while Elijah trash-talked them from the sidelines; coaching them to pray louder because it looked like Baal was sleeping, or was occupied with some other, more important business. Finally, the exhausted and dejected pagan prophets gave up and turned their prayers to the hope that Elijah's God would also be a no-show.

But before Elijah uttered even a single syllable of prayer for God to light his altar, he ordered the wood on the altar to be thoroughly soaked with water, rendering it virtually un-ignitable. This escalation of difficulty was a level of showing off comparable to the Flying Wallendas not only attempting to cross over Times Square on a tight wire—but at the last minute asking to be blindfolded before beginning! That was the magnitude of the hope that Elijah had in God. And when Elijah prayed for God to light the altar of drenched wood—BAM!—it happened. Although Elijah had been involved in some other miraculous events, this was definitely the apex of his prophetic career.

Naturally, Queen Jezebel was not pleased with this outcome. So, she put out a contract on Elijah's life, forcing him to flee fast and far to elude her vengeance. But maybe, Elijah had come too far, too fast—and like those safari porters, needed to pause and let his soul catch up with him. He finally collapses, and cries to heaven, "I've had it, Lord. Just take my life." Then, exhausted, he goes to sleep. Twice, an angel wakes him up from his nap, with food and drink to replenish his body and his spirit. "Eat up!" the angel tells him, "Otherwise you'll never have the stamina to finish the journey God has planned for you."

Elijah keeps on going, deeper and deeper into the barren desert wilderness, until he arrives at last at Mount Horeb, where he finds a cave, that he can rest in. What's intriguing though, is that the original Hebrew does not describe it as "a cave," as though it was just any old cave. It names this cave as "*the cave*". Now, the only other place in the Bible involving a cave on Mount Horeb is a story about Moses. In it, Moses has been leading the Hebrews on a long journey from slavery in Egypt to the Promised Land. But maybe Moses had come too far, too fast. Because, he experienced a crisis of faith. He wondered if God had abandoned him, much as Elijah had done. So, God set Moses in a cave on Mount Horeb and God passed by the entrance to the cave to reassure Moses that God was still with him.

Could the cave where God led Elijah be *the same* cave? Well, God also tells Elijah to wait in this cave, for the Lord to pass by. From within the cave, Elijah hears a wind so powerful that it shook the rocks loose from the mountain. But the Lord was not in the wind. After the wind there came an earthquake. But the Lord was not in the earthquake. The earthquake was followed by a great fire. But the Lord was not in the fire, either. In the aftermath of all that sound and fury, came a sound of sheer silence.

Which, if taken at face value, is an oxymoron, isn't it? If something is a sound, that rules out its being silence. And if something is silent, it by definition, is not a sound. Whatever you want to call it—Elijah knew that God *was* in it! The mystery of it, drew him to the mouth of the cave, which is where he heard the voice of God speak to him.

Where is it that you find silence enough to hear God's voice? Does it have a physical location? Can it be found in a special spot that offers you shelter from the noisy demands of life? A certain room, or chair? A remote hilltop or forest trail? Is your cave a certain hour of the day? In the quiet stillness of early morning or late evening; when the well of silence allows you to hear God's whispers?

In the hectic pace at which most of us live our lives, places of solitude where we can experience the nearness of God can be few and far between, can't they? We tend toward believing that we need to get our outer lives in order before we have time for attending to our inward, spiritual health. There is so much else that demands to be done that prayer is often left undone. But that is backwards. The great Protestant Reformer, Martin Luther once said that he made it a

priority to pray for an hour every day. And on days when he was extraordinarily busy, he made sure to pray for two hours. In this church, the Contemplative Prayer meetings offer a place to slow down and let our souls catch up with us through ancient Christian forms of meditative prayer. Because, life often sweeps us all along too far, too fast; and we need times and places to rest, so that our souls can catch up with us.

If there was one place on earth that I expected the presence of God to be hard to miss, it was on our pilgrimage to the Holy Land. The truth is, the pace of the pilgrimage created its own challenge to listening for that still small voice within, even though we were literally walking in the footsteps of Jesus. Each day, we were swept from one holy site to another and another, including the site on Mount Carmel where Elijah delivered a knockout blow to the worship of false gods in his land. Which was great as far as leaving us satisfied to have set foot on so many places that most of us had only read about in our Bibles. But it also felt as though we were maybe moving too far, too fast to fully benefit from the opportunities that the places we visited offered for being centered in the presence of God.

It's not all that hard to experience God's presence when everything is right and goes our way—the way it did for Elijah in his Mount Carmel triumph. But we also need to be nourished by God's nearness when we feel like life is a treadmill, if we expect to be prepared for whatever long journeys lay ahead of us. Unless prayer is more than telling God what we hope for or what we fear; if it isn't also listening to what God is trying to tell us, we too may end up looking for God in places where God isn't, and missing God in places where God is waiting to feed our souls.

© 2021 Raymond Medeiros

Preached FCCW July 11, 2021