

I Kings 19 “When God Whispers”

My father’s father was a pastor who served in what we used to call the “Northern Presbyterian Church”. On the whole there wasn’t much difference in our denominations on a local level. However, in the North, congregations expected to hear a prospective pastor preach before they voted and they often had evening services where several candidates would preach one after the other and the congregation would vote on their choice.

My grandfather was a soft spoken, bookish sort of pastor, he so loved biblical study that he named my father after his Hebrew professor. Grand dad’s sermons were thoughtful but I guess they were seldom dramatic. I say this both from my own memories and a story my mother told. Mom was the teenage organist at the Presbyterian church in Lonaconing Maryland when she first met her future father-in-law. Lonaconing was in a search process and Grand dad came to preach on one of those nights when prospective pastors were preaching. Mom remembered the discussion among the church members and they liked Grand dad’s pastoral manner and agreed the sermon he gave contained valuable content. But another preacher that evening was much more dramatic and really woke everyone up with his fiery presentation. They voted in favor of waking everyone up and Grand dad lost out that evening.

However, it didn’t take long to discover the new pastor’s fiery nature was not limited to his pulpit presence when he slugged a deacon in an officers meeting. At that point he left and the session decided to call my gentle grandfather who served there for the next twenty years until he retired.

I think of this story today because Grand dad just loved the prophet Elijah. I have often been fascinated by the fact that a quiet bookish man would be attracted to the guy who pulled off such dramatic miracles, but maybe today’s story has a little bit to do with that. You don’t have to be a show boat to identify with Elijah in this passage. This passage is also helpful to anyone experiencing stress. Because make no bones about it, poor Elijah must have been under great stress. Prophecy is always a high-stress job. Prophets are called to tell people they have to change and that’s inevitably an unpopular message, anywhere, anytime. When most of us are told God expects us to change, we think one of two things: either our comfortable world is about to be shaken, or we aren’t doing things as well as we could. These aren’t popular messages.

Then we have the characters Elijah had to confront, Ahab and Jezebel, Two of the most hopeless sinners in the Bible. Ahab is introduced in I Kings 16:30 with the note that “he did evil in the sight of the Lord more than all who were before him.” That’s a lot of evil. Ahab was weak where he should have been strong and stubborn when he should have listened. His idea of prophets was to put a lot of yes men on the court payroll who

approved of whatever he did and told him whatever he wanted to hear. In fact, Ahab was so bad that when Herman Melville named the captain in Moby Dick Ahab, Melville's biblically literate audience would have known this guy was going to be bad news.

If Ahab wasn't bad enough by himself, he was married to queen Jezebel. If you are a fan of old movies you may remember Bette Davis in Jezebel. In the old days southerners would call a particular kind of woman a Jezebel and it wasn't a compliment. If you went on a double date with a girl who professed to be your best friend and she dropped her date to steal yours, then having wrecked your relationship she went on to steal your sister's boyfriend you might call her a Jezebel. But the biblical Jezebel was a lot worse than that. If she didn't like you she was a lot more likely to execute you than steal your boyfriend.

When we get to today's story Elijah and Jezebel have one of the most dramatic show downs in the Bible. Queen Jezebel had filled the court with prophets of pagan god Baal and she was trying to convince the kingdom that Baal, not Yahweh was the true God. Elijah needed a really big miracle to make his point. Now God will probably not supply a similar miracle every time we want to win a theological argument, but the promised land was at stake so Elijah got the support of some divine drama.

In this story Elijah stood alone against 450 prophets of Baal. For the show down two bulls were readied for sacrifice and placed on wood, then all of the prophets of Baal called on their god to rain down fire to light the sacrifice, and the court prophets prayed for hours, they cut themselves, they cried and raved and Elijah mocked them and nothing happened.

When Elijah prepared his bull he even drenched it with water again and again then he prayed to the God of Israel and fire came from heaven and the sacrifice was consumed, proving which God is real.

Did Jezebel thank Elijah for showing her which God was real? Of course not. She didn't want to learn something, she wanted to be right. So she did what evil rulers do, she decided to get even, and in her case that meant ordering Elijah's execution. At this point Elijah did the sensible thing, he headed for the hills, literally. After all of that drama, in all of that danger, Elijah camped out on Horeb, God's holy mountain and prayed. "I've had enough, take my life."

Does that sound like burn out to you? Elijah won the day, but he was still ready to give up. An angel came to feed him, but he still needed clear direction from God., so he waited for a sign. God directed him to go stand on the mountain. There was a great wind that tumbled rocks and ripped out trees, but that was not the sign. There was an

earthquake, but that was not the sign, There was fire, but God was not in the fire. Then finally it became quiet, and in the stillness Elijah heard God.

This story is about many things, the arrogance of a queen, the power of God, the nature of court politics, But in a stressed out world, on a very human level, the story of Elijah himself is a powerful message. Elijah, after staring down 450 court prophets with divine fire and running for his life may have expected a hurricane or earthquake to carry God's word. But God's message to him. God's plan for his life came when he remained still and listened to the calm.

For all of his low key manner my grandfather was no stranger to loss and stress in his own life. He was orphaned at the age of five when his parents died in a typhoid epidemic. He served in World War I in an infantry unit which accumulated a record number of days on the front. Throughout the depression he pastored mountain congregations which often could not pay even his meager salary. He saw his sons go off to serve in WWII, in spite of the fact that he thought he had helped win the war to end war. But my primary memory of him is a gentle soul who prayed for God's guidance in the quiet of his study and the peace of his garden. I don't think he could have survived as he did without the still small voice who guided his biblical hero Elijah.

During this crazy stress filled time, that is an important message. God's voice doesn't usually come when we are arguing our own case or pushing for what we have already decided is the answer. We hear better when we listen, when we are open to change, when our hearts and minds search for the subtle message, the unlikely challenge. As we spend more time at home it's okay, even emotionally and spiritually healthy to honestly vent to God and pray about the confusion and frustrations of our era. But after we have our drama and speak our peace, it is also important to be still, wait and listen for God's whisper.