

June 20, 2004

"Gentle Whisper"

1 Kings 19:1-15

Preached by Rev. Dr. David C. Fisher

Elijah, prophet of the Most High God, was scared. He was on the run - on the run for his life. That's not the fearless behavior you'd expect from a prophet of Almighty God. Lack of courage is certainly not what you'd expect from Elijah. His life up to this point exhibited extraordinary courage accompanied by towering faith.

A prophet needed courage and faith in those days in Israel. It was a dismal chapter in the life of God's people. Oh, they were experiencing peace and prosperity of a sort. But dreadful moral and spiritual rot lay beneath the surface of ordinary life.

A big reason for the corruption was King Ahab and his queen, Jezebel. To say Ahab was a rotten king was an understatement. Ahab, the narrator of 1 Kings tells us, did more to provoke the Lord's anger than any king in Israel's history. He ignored God, oppressed the poor, opposed God's prophets and encouraged the worship of pagan gods.

Queen Jezebel encouraged the king's evil. Jezebel was a Phoenecian princess, the daughter of a king who was also a priest of the fertility goddess Astarte. She married Ahab a part of a political alliance that strengthened both nations.

And she brought her fertility religion with her. Soon God's people were worshipping at the shrines of Astarte and her male consort Baal. That usually meant performing the sex act with sacred prostitutes - in public. Fertility worship was supposed to make women, animals and the fields fertile. And, needless to say, it was an easy religion to sell. No wonder God was provoked and the prophets were angry.

Suddenly, without warning and with no introduction, the prophet Elijah appears on the scene. He points his bony prophet's finger at old King Ahab and declares, "It will not rain from this day on until I say it will rain!"

In other words, "You want talk about fertility, Ahab. I'll show you who's in charge of things growing! Nothing's going to grow until my God says so. Call on your gods if you will. It's useless. They are impotent!"

There is no record of King Ahab's response to the prophet. What we do know is that Ahab put Elijah at the top of his hit list.

The next time Elijah and Ahab met was after a long, hot, dry spell it hadn't rained for several years. Elijah decided to tell the king at long last it was going to rain. Ahab's assistant Obadiah tried to warn Elijah to stay away from the king. It seems Ahab was in a murderous rage.

Elijah insisted and got an appointment with Ahab. When he walked into the king's presence, Ahab snarled, "Is it you, you troubler of Israel?"

Elijah replied, "I have not troubled Israel; but you have...because you have forsaken the commandments of the Lord and followed the Baals."

Elijah proceeded to challenge Ahab and all his Baal priests, along with Jezebel's priests of Astarte to a showdown with Almighty God on Mt. Carmel. The test was to see if God or the gods were most powerful.

The contest is one of the great stories of the Old Testament. You've probably heard it. Elijah faced 450 priests of Baal and 450 priests of Astarte. "Here's the challenge," Elijah declared. "Gather wood into a great pile and then have your gods strike the wood with fire."

They did as Elijah asked. Then they implored their pagan gods to send fire. But no fire came. "Maybe your gods are on vacation," Elijah said. "or maybe they are hard of hearing. Perhaps, they are taking a nap and don't have time to rain fire."

Elijah kept mocking and they kept imploring – now they danced in a frenzy and cut themselves trying to get the attention of the gods. Ahab cheered them on. But no fire.

Then Elijah gathered his pile of wood and soaked it in water just to make the challenge greater. He asked God for fire and the fire came. The wood was consumed, the pagan priests conquered and Almighty God made champion of the people.

As his final jab at the king, Elijah told Ahab he'd better get in his chariot and get home fast. The rain was going to come and he didn't want Ahab to get stuck in the mud. The dejected and defeated king went home.

Elijah ordered the pagan priests killed. The defeat of the pagans ended savagely. With great courage and faith, Elijah overcame deadly opposition, – and God won.

So, why is on the run in the very next episode of the story? The story simply says Elijah was terrified. Why the sudden lost of courage? Where is the triumphant prophet's faith?

It seems when Ahab got home that day – he beat the rain – he told Jezebel what happened up on the mountain. When she heard about the slaughter of her priests, she got mad and decided to get even. She uttered her own challenge. She sent a message to Elijah, "So may the gods do to me, and more also, if I do not make your life like the life of one of them by this time tomorrow." In other words, "Prophet, by all the gods I serve, you've got less than 24 hours to live !"

At that, Elijah headed out of town straight for the wilderness where Jezebel couldn't find him. He was scared to death. The next thing we hear Elijah stopped at a resting place, lay down and began to moan to God, "Take my life God. It's not worth living. Nothing has changed. Just kill me and get it over with."

As Gene Lowry points out, the prophet is confused. He's running for his life because he doesn't want to die. Then he asks God to kill him and get it over with. Elijah can't make up his mind.

He was confused. He took a nap, ate lunch and took off running again. He headed straight west and kept going for 200 miles until he got to Horeb, the Mountain of God. Sometimes it's called Mt. Sinai. It's the place in the Old Testament where God speaks.

Now we understand why Elijah was on the run. He was in the middle of a crisis of faith. Things were not going according to plan. He'd soundly defeated the pagan prophets. The people of God swore allegiance to Almighty God. The king was humiliated. Jezebel was in an unholy snit.

How can God defeat the Baals and then let Jezebel try to murder him? "Come on, God. I thought you were in charge here. Ahab is still king and still a pagan. It doesn't seem anything really changed. You win and I'm running for my life."

He might have added, "God, why don't you just kill the rest of Baal and Astarte's priests? Give me a hand here. Turn on the power I saw up on the mountain. Where's the fire now? Would you please say something – explain yourself?"

Elijah found a cave and waited in the dark for God to say something. And we join him there. We, too long for a word or two of explanation from God. We want God to explain his behavior in this world. And we want some answers about our own lives too. Why God?

We wait in our dark caves in times of crisis. We always wonder why and ask for a word. But we long for a word from the Lord in ordinary times too. That's why we come back here week after week. We want a word from the Lord about life, about faith, about ourselves. And we wait.

Life requires a word from the Lord. And we listen. We wait – sometimes in the dark. We argue with God and we wonder why God seems silent.

Elijah waited in the dark for a word from God. Suddenly, a rock splitting wind struck. Now God seems to be answering. After all, in the Bible God's Spirit is called the Wind of God. But Elijah didn't hear God in the wind. There was no word.

The wind was followed by an earth shattering earthquake. "Go God!" Elijah listened but there was no voice of God in the earthquake. That seemed strange.

Then fire came. Now here's a real possibility! God sometimes speaks out of the fire – at least God spoke to Moses from the fire. This is just like the old days. But there was no word from the Lord in the fire either.

Now this was discouraging. You've got to expect something spectacular from the God who did send fire back on Mt. Carmel. Elijah wanted something big, dramatic, a loud shout from God vindicating God's cause and Elijah's, too.

Then, God spoke. Elijah heard a "gentle whisper." It was the word of the Lord. Nearly inaudibly, God whispered to his prophet.

"What are you doing here, Elijah? Why did you run? You, of all people should stand firm. You saw my power first hand."

God sounds a little like Jesus who occasionally asked his disciples, "Where is your faith?" They too had seen the power and grace of God up close and personal. Yet, their faith seemed to flee as fast as it came.

But I think there's more to the story. God said, "What are you doing here – not there." Did you hear that. "Here!" God was in the cave with Elijah. It was God's cave, too. "Elijah, I'm with you. Don't be afraid. Trust me."

That's not what we expect is it? God doesn't explain his great plan for the ages to Elijah. God doesn't even explain why Jezabel is chasing him. There's no formula for faith here. There's no guarantee for the future either. God doesn't give Elijah a method for boosting up his faith. Just a gentle whisper, "I am with you."

Then God told Elijah to head back home. God had more work for the prophet. "Oh, Elijah," God might have added, "I am with you, no matter what."

God was in control despite all appearances to the contrary. Elijah's response was simply to trust God, love God, keep on working for God. For no matter where he was or what he was doing, God was with him, here and now.

So, listen for the gentle whisper of God. Listen to Scripture, of course. But listen to life. Listen to each other. Listen to the world. Shh! Listen.

These seem to be uncertain days for Colonial Church. But know this. You are God's church. God is here. God holds the future. Keep doing the work of the church and listen in your lives and in your work for the whisper. So, listen. Listen to your leaders. Listen to each other. Listen, just listen for that gentle whisper. Shh!

And if you do, you'll understand. Shh!