

“The Sound of Silence”

I Kings 19:1-14

Series: Cliff Notes Week 6. Prophets

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One of my childhood heroes was Superman. I read Superman comics, watched Superman TV shows and movies, saved up box tops to buy records of Superman from old time radio. I wore a Superman costume as a kid. Somehow it must have altered my genetic makeup because I even had Superkids. I remember, though, this warning written on the costume: “Remember, only the real Superman can fly.” In other words: kid, don’t try to leap off any buildings in a single bound. I can play Superman, pretend to be Superman, but I will never have the power of Superman.

Sometimes, we think great heroes of the Bible are Supermen and women. If God speaks to them and through them, they must be almost god-like – super spiritual, head and shoulders above the rest of us mere mortals. Their lives are perfect. They always do the right thing. They never struggle, they are never plagued by doubts or despair. Often, the opposite is true. If you have been reading the Bible and the Cliff Notes along with us, you’ve already discovered the mishaps, the missteps, even the mistakes of Great Bible Heroes. Their lives were extremely difficult and far from perfect. What separates them from us is not that they are super powerful but when they are in the pit of powerlessness, they know where to go for help. They draw on the power of God.

So far in our Cliff Notes Tour through the Old Testament we’ve learned about two types of Leaders: Priests (like Aaron, brother of Moses) and Rulers (including Judges like Gideon and Kings like David). Today we look at the third Leader: Prophets. The word literally means “To speak for.” The Prophet is a spokesperson, a representative, an ambassador for a higher authority. The Prophet delivers the word of the King, Queen, CEO, President or Pope. Prophets, in the Bible, speak for God. This is why their most common introduction is: “Thus saith the Lord...”

Prophets differ from Priests and Kings because those two jobs are often hereditary – passed down through the family. Prophets are chosen by God. Prophets do predict the future. We call this foretelling. The Lord gives them a vision of what He plans to do. But Prophets also do forth-telling. They put forth what God is telling His people to do – usually to repent and turn back from the disastrous course they’ve chosen. Since Kings and Priests are usually the heart of the government, they are often the ones leading the charge into disaster. Prophets are on the outside. They criticize the government’s sins and challenge the leaders to return to God. This is why Prophets are not popular. They are usually imprisoned and killed. Then, later, the people realize the prophets were right and revere them. Jesus makes this accusation.

Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You build tombs for the prophets and decorate the graves of the righteous. And you say, ‘If we had lived in the days of our ancestors, we would not have taken part with them in

shedding the blood of the prophets.’ So you testify against yourselves that you are the descendants of those who murdered the prophets. Matthew 23:29-31

No one wanted to be a Prophet. It’s difficult, even dangerous, to speak the truth people don’t want to hear. Yet God still called them. And He is calling you to tell the truth and to live the truth. At times it can feel like facing an uphill battle, standing against a tsunami, fighting Snowstorm Fern. When you face opposition and frustration it can make you feel depressed.

Anyone feeling weary? Worn-out? Worn down? Daily grind has you all ground up? You’ve been at it for so long and suddenly you wake up and wonder: Why? No one seems to appreciate all you are doing. Sometimes they even accuse and attack you. You want to escape – go anywhere to get away. That also happens to Superheroes of the Bible. They teach us the best place to hear God is in the silence.

Elijah is the Super Prophet of the Old Testament. Of all the prophets in the Old Testament, Elijah is greatest. That’s why, in the New Testament, they expect Elijah to return and prepare the way for the Messiah, that’s why they call John the Baptist Elijah, that’s why Elijah appears with Moses at the Transfiguration.

Elijah deserves this reputation. In a cataclysmic showdown he is the one lone prophet of the Lord against 450 prophets of Baal. On the heights of Mount Carmel, fire falls from heaven and proves the Lord, and not Baal, is God. The people of Israel fall on their faces and worship the Lord. Then they fall upon the prophets of Baal. It’s the beginning of Elijah’s revolution. When Ahab jumps in his chariot and races back to his palace,

The power of the Lord came on Elijah and, tucking his cloak into his belt, he ran ahead of Ahab all the way to Jezreel. (I Kings 18:46)

Sign him up for the Olympics. Elijah appears unstoppable.

Then in an instant everything changes. Ahab, that weak-willed, handwringing, sorry excuse for a king runs to his wife Jezebel and reports what Elijah did to her prophets. The venomous Jezebel takes the more direct approach: “May the gods kill me if, by tomorrow, I don’t kill you Elijah.” Faced with such a challenge, there are only two options: fight or flight. So Elijah the Super prophet, Elijah who is faster than a speeding chariot, more powerful than all the kings men and all the queens prophets, who is able to leap into the sky on a single whirlwind, Elijah the Super prophet...runs away. Fear seizes him and drives him from all vestiges of civilization. At the last outpost he leaves behind his servant and walks alone into the desert. After traveling a day in that arid land, he spies a single scrubby bush and throws himself down under its stingy, meager shade.

He came to a broom bush, sat down under it and prayed that he might die. “I have had enough, Lord,” he said. “Take my life; I am no better than my ancestors.” I Kings 19:4

Elijah faces a mountain of depression. Even a Super prophet does not have a bullet-proof spirit. Elijah is not immune to despair. All the classic symptoms appear. His spirit collapses under the pressures of life. He cries out in anger, frustration, and resignation. He runs away into a desert of loneliness. Physically and spiritually exhausted, Elijah curls up into a fetal position under the broom tree and prays for death. Elijah needs a quiet place with God. So do we. Why?

To **Refresh**. In the quiet place God refreshes and feeds your spirit. During any given day you are probably scattered in a hundred different ways. There are even times when you feel you can't go on, when you are running on fumes. That's how Elijah feels. When he closes his eyes under the broom tree, he hopes he will not open them again. But an angel touches his shoulder and invites him to get up and eat a small cake of bread and drink a jug of water. He eats and drinks and lays down. It happens again: same angel, same meal. This time, though, the angel says, "Get up, eat, you have a long journey ahead." God refreshes Elijah.

God wants to refresh your spirit. Jesus says,
Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light. Matt 11:28-30

I see so many weary and burdened people. You know who are the strongest people? Mom's of little kids. Slung around their necks are backpacks, diaper bags, purses, coolers, crafts supplies, first aid kit. You have to be strong to drag all that stuff. Do not mess with them. Forget triathlon. Try a toddlerathlon. No wonder they're so tired.

All of us get weary and burdened. Worries, fears, tasks, responsibilities, frustrations, sins and struggles. Jesus invites you to come to your quiet place and lay down your burdens. He wants to refresh you. He wants to give you rest. This isn't another task or job. It's a gift. Don't deny yourself God's gift of rest and refreshment.

Next, in your quiet place you **Remember** who you are. In that sacred space God reminds you that you are His child. For forty days and forty nights, Elijah wanders the wilderness. This is not just a journey of miles or days. It is a journey of the spirit. Elijah treks back across the same wilderness his ancestors wandered for forty years. He is led to Mount Horeb, also known as Mount Sinai, the mountain of God. Climbing the craggy rock Elijah seeks shelter in a cave. If there is a place to find God, it must be here. On this mountain, Moses heard the voice of God from a burning bush. Here, God's presence descended with wind, earthquake and fire. On its peak the Lord gave His covenant and Ten Commandments to Israel and at its base the stubborn, stiff-necked Israelites worshiped a golden calf and broke the commandments. Elijah's search for God leads him back to his spiritual roots, back to the Rock of his foundation, back to the birthplace of his people. Here he remembers how all this started. Like a football coach taking a troubled team back to basics, God helps Elijah remember that He chose Israel to be His beloved people. The Father said the same to Jesus at His Baptism:

And a voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.” Matthew 3:17

God says the same to you. You need a quiet place with God so you can remember who you are – His beloved child. You are not what your performance evaluation says, what your critics or enemies say, what your low self-image says. You’re His beloved child and that will never change. Don’t deny yourself the gift of remembering who you truly are.

Third, in a quiet place you can **Review** what’s going on inside you. My home in Murray Hill, New Jersey was in walking distance to a large Bell Laboratory. My Grandfather worked there. At one time, the Guinness Book of World records named it the quietest place on earth because of a special noise cancelling room they built. It’s so quiet in there the only things you hear are the sound of your breath and the beat of your heart. When you get alone with God, He helps you review what’s going on inside you, you begin to hear what’s happening in your heart.

When Elijah crawls inside a mountain cave, God finds him with a question. “What are you doing here, Elijah?” He replied, “I have been very zealous for the Lord God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, torn down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too.” I Kings 19:9-10

‘What I want to know is what have you been doing? We are getting slaughtered out here and either you're too weak to help us or you just don't care.’ Elijah gives Almighty God a performance review. I don’t recommend doing this.

The Lord said, “Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by.” I Kings 19:11

Then Elijah does a risky thing. He disobeys the Lord. He does not leave the cave. Maybe he is still angry. Perhaps he is brooding or sulking. He might even be afraid God’s angry at his defiant words. And he has good reason to stay under cover. Immediately a powerful wind tears through the mountain, shatters the rocks and crushes them to powder. "It is the Lord," Elijah fears. But the Lord's presence is not in the wind. Next the earth beneath Elijah's feet rumbles. The walls of the cave shudder and buckle. "The Lord comes!" But the Lord is not in the earthquake. Now fire surrounds turns the cave into an oven. But the Lord is not in the fire. Here’s the most amazing fact: none of this drives Elijah out of his hole. Instead of coming out to be with God, Elijah prefers to stay in the cave and listen to the music of that 70s R&B band Earthquake Wind and Fire.

Why all the ruckus? For some odd reason, you and I, like Elijah, often prefer to stay in the chaos, than come to God. We keep grinding at the grindstone until it wears us down, we keep staying on the cutting edge until it cuts us to pieces, we keep running the rat race and what do we get? Trophies fit for rats. Let’s stop the insanity, come out the cave of chaos and spend time with God. Listen to what’s in your heart. Review the chaos in your life and give it to God.

When the flames burn out there is the sound. . .of silence. After all the loud pyrotechnics and special effects comes a stillness, a calmness, a whisper. And this heavy emptiness draws Elijah out of his hole. The Lord comes to Elijah in the silence. As the

prophet walks to the mouth of the cave, Elijah covers his face with his cloak for he knows no one can see God and live.

Then a voice said to him, “What are you doing here, Elijah?” He replied, “I have been very zealous for the Lord God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, torn down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too.” I Kings 19:13-14

And God listens. Where is God when you are in the cave of chaos? He waits for you in the silence. Do not look for him in the earthshaking miracle. Seek him in silence. Do anguish and pain threaten to drown you? Pour it out to Him. Do you need to shake your fist? Give your anger to Him. Is your spirit under pressure and about to collapse? Tell it all to Him. Let Him release the pressure.

And there in the quiet place He will help you **Renew** your purpose. After Elijah said his peace, after the Lord listens to all that’s on the prophet's heart, God speaks. "I have a plan to deal with Ahab, and I want you to set it in motion, Elijah. And one more thing: you are not the only one left who serves me.

Yet I reserve seven thousand in Israel – all whose knees have not bowed down to Baal and all whose mouths have not kissed him. I Kings 19:18

Reach out to them. Find them. They will help you.

What does God give you in the quiet place to help you renew your purpose? Two things: He provides brothers and sisters in Christ who will support you and He gives you His presence to guide you. He will go with you through the day. He will not leave you. He will not forsake you. He will never stop listening to you or loving you.

On the back of your bulletin I ask you to write down the place and the time you will meet with God each day. Make an appointment to talk to God. He is already there in the silence. Tell Him everything – all your feelings. Hold nothing back. He will never leave you. He will never forsake you. He will never reject you or turn you away. How do I know? When Jesus cried out from the cross, “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?” He heard only the terrible sound of silence. He suffered in silence and rose again so that silence will never again come between you and God.