Still, Small Voice

Vienna Presbyterian Church
The Rev. Dr. Peter G. James
1 Kings 19:1-12

January 11, 2015
Today’s sermon has a target audience. It’s for any of you who struggle with discouragement, despair and depression. The hero and protagonist in our story is a prophet named Elijah. His role is to call people back to God. Prophets are not at liberty to embellish or editorialize what God wants them to say. Their job is comparable to a press secretary. President Obama’s Press Secretary, Josh Earnest, is not at liberty to pontificate on what he thinks is in the best interests of our country. His job at press briefings is to accurately communicate the present administration’s perspective on the issues.

The villain and antagonist in our story is a king named Ahab. Of the 19 evil kings who reign over the ten northern tribes during its 200 year existence, King Ahab is the worst. We are told “he did more evil than any king before him” (1 Kings 16:30, 33).

King Ahab is married to Queen Jezebel, who could pass as a clone for the wicked witch. She zealously promotes Baal worship in Israel; a barbarous religion that practices child sacrifice. Even by today’s standards, Baal worship would challenge our commitment to the freedom of religion.

Elijah and King Ahab square off on Mt. Carmel. Ahab is well represented by 450 prophets of Baal. Each side is given a bull to sacrifice on the altar. The god who answers by fire is the one, true God. May the best religion win!

The 450 prophets of Baal call upon their god from morning till night to reign down fire from heaven. Nothing happens. Elijah ups the ante by drenching his altar with water. His prayer is dramatically answered as fire consumes his water-soaked altar.

The people declare, “The Lord is God” (18:39). And, for the first time since Elijah announced a drought three years ago, it starts to rain.

Ahab runs with his tail between his legs back to Queen Jezebel. Now we know who calls the shots. She orders a 24-hour bounty on Elijah’s head.

Elijah flees for his life into the southern desert, far away from the jurisdiction of the wicked king and queen. He travels 100 miles over rugged terrain to a God-forsaken place called Beersheba. He falls down
exhausted under a solitary broom tree. The landscape, like his mood, is altogether bleak. The thrill of victory on Mt. Carmel has given way to the agony of defeat in the Negev desert.

Elijah prays to die. Thankfully, God doesn’t answer our every prayer. Where would we be if God answered every single prayer we have ever prayed?

Elijah falls fast asleep. He is awakened by an angel who offers him a food and beverage service. He partakes and falls back into a deep sleep. Again, the angel taps him on the shoulder and offers him seconds. He must be fortified for a 40-day journey to Mt. Horeb, which doubles in Scripture as Mt. Sinai. It’s the place where Moses encountered the burning bush and was given the 10 Commandments. Elijah wanders into a cave and spends the night there.

“What are you doing here, Elijah?” God asks (19:11). Prophets don’t belong in the desert; they belong among people. Elijah answers the question (in so many words): “I’m pretty upset, if you really want to know. Everyone has gone AWOL; prophets included. I’m the only one left to represent you.”

What does God say? “Oh, I’m so sorry. I know you’ve been working like a dog. Take some time off for good behavior.” Not exactly. Actually, God calls Elijah to stand at the entrance to the cave. He is going to make a personal appearance.

A violent wind shatters rocks, but God is not in the wind. An earthquake shifts the ground under Elijah’s feet, but God is not in the earthquake. Then fire appears, like the fire that consumed the altar on Mt. Carmel, but God is not in the fire. After the fire, a gentle whisper or, as the King James Version translates it, “a still, small voice.” God’s voice is barely audible.
Again God asks, “What are you doing here, Elijah?” (19:13). Elijah answers with the same story, second verse. Elijah, you’ve been alone on the mountain long enough. You need something to do. Go and anoint the next king. Pass your prophetic baton to Elisha. And, just so you know, there are still 7,000 prophets who have not bowed the knee to Baal.

At the outset of our story in chapter 18, Elijah appears strong and confident. He doesn’t back down in the face of a menacing king and 450 prophets. But chapter 19 tells a different story. After Jezebel’s cursing vow, he becomes anxious and fearful. Elijah, who decisively defeated Ahab, now dissolves into the defeated one. He feels alone and discouraged. He’s miserable enough to die. Our strong and confident one on Mt. Carmel is rendered weak and ineffectual on Mt. Horeb.

God has three words of advice for depressed Elijah. First, get some rest. After the Mt. Carmel showdown, Elijah is spent. He has hit the wall. God understands his weary despair and lets him sleep. God sends an angel to attend to his needs. Food and rest are a part of Elijah’s recovery process.

His recovery takes time. His 100-mile trek to Beersheba must have taken a week or more. His journey to Mt. Sinai takes 40 days and nights. There will be no quick fix for Elijah’s despondency. God will heal Elijah slowly over time.

I am reminded of something Vince Lombardi said, “Fatigue makes cowards of us all.” Sabbath rest features prominently in God’s top-ten list.

God’s second word of advice to Elijah: get a new focus. Elijah has lost focus. He has shifted from trust in God’s provision to fear at Jezebel’s murderous threats.

He has lost touch with reality. His claim to be the only faithful prophet left is sadly skewed. When we become discouraged, we think the worst. We imagine ourselves as the only ones who have faced this particular struggle. God reminds Elijah there are 7,000 prophets who have not bowed the knee to Baal.

Discouragement has a way of inflating the opposition and minimizing our resources. God helps Elijah refocus. God sends angels to communicate His Word. God leads him through the desert. God speaks in a still, small voice.

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God eschews the showy and spectacular for the quiet and unpretentious. The fire on Mt. Carmel gives way to the still, small voice on Mt. Sinai. Sometimes, God whispers.

When my parents and teachers could not get my attention by speaking loudly, they would occasionally drop their voice and speak softly. To hear, I would have to become perfectly still and listen very carefully.

God’s third word of advice: get back to work. When we battle discouragement and despair, sometimes the best antidote is to stay busy. Don’t dwell on your misfortune. Keep working. Anoint kings and commission new prophets.

God calls Elijah back into community. Elijah, you’ve been flying solo long enough. You need people to speak into your life.

One of the lessons we learn in community is that we are never alone.

The devil loves to get us alone. We are so vulnerable when we are alone. When we are together, we are never alone in battling temptation or facing discouragement.

Let me take this moment to talk about joining this church. There are those of you who have been worshiping with us for some time now. You’re already vitally-engaged in our ministry. Some of you have been attending this church for years but have never taken the time to join. Maybe your schedule conflicts with our new member classes. Or it could be that the notion of joining sounds so institutional. How many people really care about voting at congregational meetings?

I want to recast joining this church in Biblical categories. Membership in the New Testament church is portrayed as identifying and committing to a local body of believers. We may not all know each other but we share three common beliefs—Jesus Christ as Lord, Scripture as my authority and a commitment to follow Jesus. Regardless of our stand on social issues, we are absolutely united around our resolve of “becoming like Christ together for the world.”
On Sunday, January 25th, we will give you opportunity to join our local body of believers. In a noonday meeting following worship, we will make it simple and easy for you to join our community. We’ll ask two things of you: your trust in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior and your willingness either to attend three Sunday morning classes or signing up for a one-on-one tutorial.

Why are we making such a big deal out of joining? Now more than ever, we need to stand in solidarity with a local body of believers. The Christian worldview is under assault in at least two directions: 1. From a radical form of secularity that denies religiously-grounded values a place in the public marketplace of ideas; and, 2. from a growing religious fanaticism, like we witnessed this past week in France, that uses terror and violence to accomplish its mission.

We will not be silenced by militant atheism. We will not be intimidated by militant religion. God is our security. We will not be afraid. Jesus is our Savior and teacher. We will follow his example of peace and humility.

We belong to each other. We are not alone. We’re all susceptible to discouragement. No one I’ve ever met is immune to it. I’m not either. One primary reason we worship and serve together is to encourage one another. I’ve said many times from this pulpit that we can be better Christians together than we can be alone.