

Out of the Nothing
I Kings 18:37-39 & I Kings 19:9b-18 (Zion 6/2/13)

37 Hear me, Yahweh, hear me, that this people may know that you, Yahweh, are God, and that you have turned their heart back again.” 38 Then Yahweh’s fire fell, and consumed the burnt offering, the wood, the stones, and the dust, and licked up the water that was in the trench. 39 When all the people saw it, they fell on their faces. They said, “Yahweh, he is God! Yahweh, he is God!” (World English Bible)

Most humans are drawn to power. When we go to the Grand Canyon, we love the view--but we marvel at the force and the time it took to create such a wonder. We have been watching the videos of tornadoes over the last few weeks--and we are awed by the power of them. When a hurricane is headed for the coast, some people flock to the path. They stand on the docks and they watch the waves. I also think this is why the ocean seems to draw us even when there is no storm. It is so vast we can hardly imagine and its power can't be stopped. We go to NASCAR races and tractor pulls. We watch men pit themselves against powerful animals at rodeos. Traditionally, the power of the United States has made us a target for envy. Sometimes it seems it is in power that we trust, not God.

When we talk about God, it is often his power we speak of. After all, Scripture tells us that he is the one that made everything possible--the canyon and the tornadoes and the hurricanes and the bulls and the ocean--even the power of the sun comes from God. Seems to me that he has REAL power.

Prior to Elijah's time scripture tells us that God spoke the universe into existence. We read of him parting the Red Sea. We read of him raising the dead. He fed the Israelites in the wilderness. The walls of Jericho fell down for no real physical reason. There are miracles recounted all through the Old Testament.

Just before this passage, Elijah had challenged the prophets of Baal to a kind of duel. They prepared sacrifices to Yhwh God and to Baal and basically the god that could burn up the sacrifice would be the real god.

Basically, Elijah's challenge was that each side would prepare a sacrifice and then call upon their God to send fire to burn the sacrifice. The prophets of Baal went first—they started in the morning, calling on Baal to send down fire. About noontime, Elijah began to mock them, saying things like “maybe he is away on a journey” and “call louder, he may be asleep...” Then the prophets of Baal cut themselves and shouted until the evening but nothing happened.

Then it was Elijah's turn. He built a wooden altar and he placed a bull on it. Then he dug a trench around the altar and water was poured over the bull and the wood so that it wet everything and even filled the trench. When he called upon the name of the LORD, fire came down and consumed the bull, the wooden altar, the rocks, and then all of the water in the trench.

Once God had burned up the sacrifice, the three-year drought ended and Elijah captured and executed the prophets of Baal. The queen, Jezebel was furious and was seeking to kill Elijah--as you might expect.

After all the power God had shown and after the triumph of the sacrifice and the ending of the drought, Elijah ran. I don't know why he ran--but apparently he thought he was alone in serving God and he didn't know what else to do.

He was ready to die.

As he hid in the desert, and angel ministered to him and fed him. In spite of how much of God's power he had seen, he was hiding in a cave in the wilderness.

I Kings 19:8-18:

8 He arose, and ate and drank, and went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights to Horeb, God's Mountain. 9 He came to a cave there, and camped there; and behold, Yahweh's word came to him, and he said to him, "What are you doing here, Elijah?"

10 He said, "I have been very jealous for Yahweh, the God of Armies; for the children of Israel have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I, even I only, am left; and they seek my life, to take it away."

11 He said, "Go out, and stand on the mountain before Yahweh."

Behold, Yahweh passed by, and a great and strong wind tore the mountains, and broke in pieces the rocks before Yahweh; but Yahweh was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake; but Yahweh was not in the earthquake. 12 After the earthquake a fire passed; but Yahweh was not in the fire. After the fire, there was a still small voice. 13 When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle, went out, and stood in the entrance of the cave. Behold, a voice came to him, and said, "What are you doing here, Elijah?"

14 He said, "I have been very jealous for Yahweh, the God of Armies; for the children of Israel have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I, even I only, am left; and they seek my life, to take it away."

15 Yahweh said to him, "Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus. When you arrive, anoint Hazael to be king over Syria. 16 Anoint Jehu the son of Nimshi to be king over Israel; and anoint Elisha the son of Shaphat of Abel Meholah to be prophet in your place. 17 He who escapes from the sword of Hazael, Jehu will kill; and he who escapes from the sword of Jehu, Elisha will kill. 18 Yet I reserved seven thousand in Israel, all the knees of which have not bowed to Baal, and every mouth which has not kissed him." (World English Bible)

There is one main reason I love this passage. I think there is something deep here--a shift in how God revealed himself. Prior to this passage, we always read of God's power and majesty and might and he revealed himself in earthquakes and fire and all kinds of mighty ways. The pillar of fire before the Israelites in the desert. The bush that didn't burn up. When God appeared, mere humans fell to the ground in fear and trembling because of his majesty.

The contrast between the old and new is even greater when you think where Elijah was. He was on Mt. Horeb also known as Sinai. Here is where God was in the thunder and lightning earthquake--where the law was given and where the people couldn't even look at Moses' face because he had been in the presence of God.

Let's work through some of these verses and see what we find.

In the last part of verse nine--notice that God called Elijah to task. "What are you doing here...?" Simple question, so Elijah thought--but he didn't really get it.

I don't think an accounting of the last few weeks' work was the intent of God's question, do you? I've always heard that there is a statement behind every question and the statement behind this one might have been "You are my prophet, a servant of almighty God--you should be doing my work instead of hiding out!"

In verse 10, we see Elijah's reply--that account of his ministry. He gives an account of the people's condition. He gives an account of his troubles.

In reality, he was being honest--he HAD been zealous for God. The Israelites HAD forsaken the covenant and thrown down the altars. King Ahab HAD killed most of the prophets of God and now he WAS seeking to kill Elijah for Jezebel's sake. Also as far as Elijah knew he was the last faithful one out there.

So in verse 11, Elijah is told to go out of the cave and wait on the LORD, for he was about to pass by. Just then, a mighty wind blew. More powerful than a hurricane. More powerful than an EF 5 tornado like we have seen in the past few weeks--it tore the mountains apart and split stones.

Ahhh! This must be God!!

But God was not in the wind.

After the wind died down, there was a mighty earthquake. It shook and tore and creaked and thundered. Ahhh! HERE must be God!!!

But God was not in the earthquake.

Then there was fire--just like the fire God had just sent down to consume that sacrifice. It had totally consumed the wet wood and the wet bull and then lapped up the water in the trench around the altar--and had even burned up the rocks that made up the altar. Unbelievably hot and fierce fire!

But God was not in the fire.

After the fire, we are told that there came a whisper--less than a whisper--a nothingness. The Hebrew word can be translated as "whisper" but also as "silence." When this "nothing" came, Elijah instinctively knew he was in the presence of God.

It seems that Elijah was moved by God--but from the inside out instead of the outside in. God's spirit seems to have been communicating to Elijah's spirit.

Then the voice returned. "What are you doing here?"

Elijah again gives the same wrong answer.--but God in his gentleness and patience takes Elijah by the hand and puts him back to work as the servant of God--not the servant of fear. God knows that Elijah has a limited amount of time left on earth and he wants to tie up some of those proverbial loose ends.

God want's him to anoint the new king. Ahab is out--he just doesn't know it yet. God is sick of him--even though he also has a little time left. He will fall soon enough. God then wants Elijah to anoint his successor, Elisha. Between the three of them, God intends to punish the house of Omri.

Then, God lets Elijah in on a little secret--he is NOT the only one--there are 7000 who have not bowed before Baal and they will be spared.

We might, for just a few moments, consider some principles from Elijah's meeting with God--principles that seem to fit where we are today.

1. Sometimes the true revelation of God is sometimes quiet and simple--the voice of "nothingness."
2. Sometimes the true revelation of God is not what we expect. Elijah's past experience with God and the experiences of his forebears would have us expect to find God in the Wind or the earthquake or the fire--in a mighty revelation.
3. The true revelation of God is infinitely personal. I believe that if anyone had been in Elijah's cave, they wouldn't have heard the revelation of God that Elijah heard. It was for him alone.
4. I believe that a true revelation of God is also infinitely practical. "Get back to work Elijah!"

I am strengthened because God wasn't found in the fire or the earthquake or the mighty wind. I am heartened because God spoke to Elijah in a still small voice--spirit to spirit--JUST as he does to me. God used the same method to speak to his prophet as he does to me.

Just as Elijah did, I CAN know when God is passing by. YOU can know when God is passing by--we can know it in our hearts and in our souls--spirit to spirit. We don't have to have miracles--just that voice of nothing that Elijah had.

Isn't this a comfort? It is to me.

When we need to hear from God--when we've run as far as we can run--it seems that you and I can quietly listen as God's spirit speaks--whispering silently to us, his servants.

I'm going to ask that we stay silent for a couple of minutes now. Listen to God's spirit whisper. Maybe he is telling you as he did Elijah, "Get back to work!" Maybe he is speaking comfort to your troubled soul--or body. God calls quietly to each of us personally and practically--even now.