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## Eastminster Worship Services

Sunday, May 9, 2010

### Never the Same: When the Word Changes You

#### *Prophetic Smackdown*

1 Kings 17:1-6; 18:1-8, 16-40; 19:1-18

Rev. Dr. Steven M. Marsh, Senior Pastor

Prophets proclaim the ways of God. Prophets listen to God. A prophetic smackdown addresses the mission and self. Making a difference requires silence and a “gentle whisper”.

Yahweh and Baal; gods competing for a nation’s allegiance with drought added to the cosmic struggle for the souls of humanity.

Elijah was God’s man. His name means “Yahweh is my God”. Elijah was a regular guy from an obscure northern village called Tishbe. He was a prophet. A prophet proclaims that Yahweh is God and announces to the people to fall in line.

Elijah announced to King Ahab that there would be neither dew nor rain in the next few years except at Elijah’s word. Not a welcome word in the arid Middle East. Elijah did as the LORD commanded and then went to the Kerith Ravine and took refuge. There he drank the cool, clear water of the nearby brook and was provided for morning and evening by divinely-appointed ravens.

In the third year of Elijah’s hiding, Elijah was given instruction by God to present himself to Ahab and tell him that God would send rain upon the land. Elijah journeyed to Ahab. Ahab’s spouse, Queen Jezebel, was killing off the LORD’S prophets. It was a trying time in the life of God’s people. Whom would they trust to take care of them; God or other gods?

Elijah and Ahab met. Ahab accused Elijah of being the “troubler of Israel.” Elijah quickly corrected him and said that he was not the troubler but Ahab and his family was. They were forsaking the LORD’S commands and following the Baals. It was Elijah who was committed to restoring the people to God’s ways. Elijah and the prophets of Baal were headed to a smackdown or confrontation as to who really is God. It would be a contest between 450 prophets of Baal and the God of the prophet Elijah. No rain had fallen on the land because of the wickedness and

idolatry of King Ahab and Queen Jezebel. Prophets proclaim the ways of God. Prophets listen to God. A prophetic smackdown addresses the mission and self. Making a difference requires silence and a “gentle whisper”.

The challenge was set. Which God would set the sacrifice on fire? The prophets of Baal set up an altar. They put firewood on it and then lay a young bull on it as a sacrifice. They called on their god to set the sacrifice on fire and consume it. The prophets of Baal could not get Baal to send the fire they needed. They prayed from morning to afternoon, but to no avail.

After they were through, it was Elijah’s turn. Instead of building a new altar to God, Elijah repaired the one that was broken down. He took twelve stones representing the twelve tribes of Israel and built them into an altar. Then a trench was made around it. Wood for the fire was placed. A young bull which had been cut into pieces was put upon the altar. Twelve barrels, the equivalent of 96 gallons of water were poured upon the altar and its sacrifice. Elijah prayed and the fire fell from heaven.

Elijah then prayed for the end of the drought. They were high on Mount Carmel. Elijah asked his servant to look toward the sea. The servant looked and reported that he saw nothing. On the seventh look, the servant reported, “A cloud as small as a man’s hand is rising from the sea.” Elijah sent the servant to King Ahab to report that rain was coming.

Despite Elijah’s victory at the prophetic smackdown, he was persecuted again by Queen Jezebel. Elijah fled for his life into the wilderness. Eventually he went to Beersheba and sat under a juniper tree, a despondent man. Elijah had declared the ways of God. He told Ahab that he needed to change his ways. But Jezebel still disbelieved.

Paul Tillich, a great American theologian, said: “Our language has wisely sensed the two sides of being alone. It has created the word ‘loneliness’ to express the pain of being alone and it has created the word ‘solitude’ to express the glory of being alone.” That’s elegant. And it rings true. Haven’t we all, at some time in our lives, remarked at the difference between being lonely and being alone? A prophet is lonely and needs time alone. To declare God’s ways to a wayward people will create loneliness. To know what to say to God’s people, the prophet needs some alone time or solitude.

This past Thursday I was exhausted. It had been a week of too many things to do and too many loose ends to tie up. There was so much to do that I couldn’t really slow down. By Thursday night I had had enough. I went home, Janet is in California with her Mom and sisters, I sat down in the chair, did not read the paper, or even watch the news. I sat and reflected. I felt like Thoreau in his cabin on Walden Pond, like Walter Mitty in the depths of his

own mind. Soon I was asleep. I was awakened by what I thought was a voice. “Be still and know that I am God.” When I awoke, it was dark. As I sat there half-asleep and half-awake in the solitude, a voice didn’t speak to me, but it seemed to come to me, assuring me that I was sufficiently refreshed and reminding me that I had some work I needed to finish. In effect, the voice seemed to be both reassuring me and reminding me that my time-out, my escape, was over, and that I needed to get back to the business of ministry. I felt rested, refreshed and ready to get going again.

Tillich’s words and my experience of the still small voice, help me to understand a little more about Elijah.

Times were tough in Israel. Yes, there was a searing drought, but there was the more pressing battle for people’s souls between the worshipers of Yahweh and the worshipers of the Baals. Ahab was disobedient to the LORD’S commands and his wife Queen Jezebel was a Canaanite and Baal-worshiper. In the midst of this conflict stood the prophet Elijah.

When Elijah fled to Mount Horeb, God came to him again and told him to arise and see the thing that was beginning to happen. There came a great wind. But God was not in the wind. Then an earthquake. God wasn’t in it, either. Then a fire. And God was not in the fire. But, after the fire came a still, small voice. God pointed out to Elijah that there were at least 7,000 in Israel who had not worshiped Baal.

God came to Elijah and communicated with him. The text states that “a gentle whisper” came to Elijah following the fire. A whisper is the fine sound of silence.

The silence after the whirlwind, earthquake and fire was so deep and penetrating that Elijah could hear it. He could hear the silence. And so can we. God comes to us in silence.

Elijah was dejected, exhausted and perhaps depressed. Elijah needed to be faithful to God for his well being, not just faithful to the calling God had given him.

When Elijah recognized that he needed to be faithful to Yahweh for his well being not just faithful to the mission God had given him, a voice came to him. “What are you doing here, Elijah?” Elijah answered, “I have been zealous for the LORD God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, broken 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.”<sup>1</sup>

Elijah had gone into hiding. He was free from Ahab and Jezebel, but he was a prisoner of himself. He had shut the sunlight out of his mind. He had drawn the shutters of his heart. Then the voice of God came. His strength

was refreshed, his faith was strengthened, he renewed his commitment and he regained his vision. Prophets proclaim the ways of God. Prophets listen to God. A prophetic smackdown addresses the mission and self. Making a difference requires silence and a “gentle whisper”.

We are bound to have days when we are exhausted, depressed and alone. But God will come to us and refresh us and renew us. Like Elijah, we need to be strengthened for the week to come; physically and spiritually. But like Elijah it will be in the fine silence; in the stillness and solitude we will be strengthened. Why? We will hear the “gentle whisper”.

The economy seems to be spinning out of control globally. Marriages are hurting. Many people are losing their way in behaviors that are self-destructive. There is a battle between the gods for our loyalty. In Islam the problem is pride and the solution is submission. In Confucianism the problem is chaos and the solution is social order. In Buddhism the problem is suffering and the solution is awakening. In Judaism the problem is exile and the solution is to return to God. In Christianity the problem is sin and the solution is salvation. The world’s religious traditions are not different paths to the same God.

As followers of Jesus we need to exercise our faith just like the Centurion. Luke reminds us in Luke 7:8-9, “For I myself am a man under authority, with soldiers under me. I tell this one ‘Go,’ and he goes; and that one, ‘Come,’ and he comes. I say to my servant, ‘Do this,’ and he does it. When Jesus heard this, he was amazed at him, and turning to the crowd following him, he said, ‘I tell you, I have not found such great faith even in Israel.’”

As followers of Jesus we have a simple gospel and we must not deviate from it. As the apostle Paul writes in Galatians 1:9, “If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let him be eternally condemned.”

As followers of Jesus we need to heed the prophetic smackdown. We must speak the truth, just like Elijah and see God light the fire, consume the sacrifice and make the change asked for. But, when not every one believes or when not every circumstance changes and when we are persecuted for righteousness sake and when we are alone, in solitude, do not become discouraged.

Listen for the gentle whisper. Allow the prophetic smackdown to cut both ways. See God be faithful to you when you are faithful to the mission. See God be faithful to you when you are alone, in solitude. In silence you will hear the gentle whisper.

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<sup>1</sup>I Kings 19:14

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But we need to listen for it. Which means we need silence. Let us pray!

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