

“The Sounds of Silence”  
(sermon given 6/20/10 by Scott Jansen)  
1 Kings 19:1-16

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[Prayer for Illumination] Loving Father, help us to push all the noisy gongs and clanging cymbals aside for this hour, that we may hear only your still small voice.... This we ask through Jesus Christ our Lord.... Amen.

Our scripture lesson is about the old Hebrew Prophet Elijah. Elijah felt called by God to engage in a violent confrontation with some of the prophets serving other gods. So this reading describes what happened after that violent confrontation.... Of course, a prophet's job is to discern, and proclaim, God's will. So, the question I want to explore today is—how do we know what is God's will???? Listen now, for God's word for you....

Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done, and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword. Then Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah, saying, "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."...

Then he was afraid; he got up and fled for his life, and came to Beersheba, which belongs to Judah; he left his servant there. But he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a solitary broom tree.... He asked that he might die: "It is enough; now, O LORD, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors."

Then he lay down under the broom tree and fell asleep.... Suddenly an angel touched him and said to him, "Get up and eat." He looked, and there at his head was a cake baked on hot stones, and a jar of water. He ate and drank, and lay down again....

The angel of the LORD came a second time, touched him, and said, "Get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you." He got up, and ate and drank; then he went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights to Horeb the mount of God....

At that place he came to a cave, and spent the night there. Then the word of the LORD came to him, saying, "What are you doing here, Elijah?"

He answered, "I have been very zealous for the LORD, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away."

He said, "Go out and stand on the mountain before the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by." Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the LORD..., but the LORD was not in the wind.... And after the wind an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence....

When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. Then there came a voice to him that said, "What are you doing here, Elijah?"???

He answered, "I have been very zealous for the LORD, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away."

Then the LORD said to him, "Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus; when you arrive, you shall anoint Hazael as king over Aram. Also you shall anoint Jehu son of Nimshi as king over Israel; and you shall anoint Elisha son of Shaphat of Abel-meholah as prophet in your place.

Amen. So ends the reading and may God add a blessing to our understanding.

Elijah had a difficult time discerning the will of God, and so do we. And that reminds me of a joke about three good friends—a rabbi, a priest and a pastor—who used to play the lottery together. And, one day they won, so each of them was going to get ten thousand dollars. Well, they talked about what they were going to do with the money, and how to be faithful. Ultimately, the question was, how much should they keep for themselves, and how much should they give to God.

So the rabbi had an idea. He said, "I'm going to take my winnings in hundred dollar bills, and I'll draw a circle on the floor of the sanctuary, and then I'll throw all the money up in the air, and whatever lands in the circle is for God, and whatever lands outside the circle is for me."

Then the priest said, “I like that idea, except when I do it, whatever lands in the circle will be mine, and whatever lands outside the circle will be for God.”

Then the pastor said, “well, as you know, I am a man of prayer. So, I’m going to throw all the money high up in the air, and then I’m going to pray to God and say, ‘God, whatever money you want—take it.’”

The point is, we often try to read God’s will... by assuming that God communicates with us through flashy, miraculous, deeds of power. People have tried to discern God’s will by reading tea leaves, or by reading dead animal intestines or bones, or by drawing lots. The assumption is that God is perfectly controlling what happens in the physical world around us. So, we find God out there.....

It was certainly natural, in Elijah’s day, to assume that God was in the wind storm. Elijah wanted to discern God’s will. So he went up to the same mountain where Moses had received the Ten Commandments. In fact, Elijah took a forty day journey up the mountain, without food, exactly like Moses. And there, on top of the mountain, was this tremendous storm, splitting the rocks with thunderous effect. That’s how Moses heard God—through a similar storm on top of that same mountain. So, when the original reader of this story heard that Elijah had a big storm up there, that reader would certainly conclude that, surely, God was in the storm.....

And, we’ve all been there, right? We’ve been unsure of what God wants, and so we ask God for a sign, a miraculous sign.... We have folks joining our family as new members today, and anyone who joins a church has to ask oneself, “Is this God’s will for me?” How do you know what is God’s will? Do we always get signs, signs that are obvious, powerful, so we know for sure exactly what God wants of us? Do you say, O God, if you really want me to join that church, then please God, strike that tree over there with lightning—and then, then, I’ll know that it’s your will..... I wonder how many people who have joined a church have received that type of sign.....

Today, I want to consider what it would mean to say that God is not in the storm. God is not in the earthquake. God is not in the fire. God is not the grand puppeteer pulling strings to make the physical world comply perfectly with God’s will. What would that mean????

Well, first of all, how would that change the way we understand the Bible? We remember Moses on top of the mountain. We’ve all seen Hollywood images of God writing words on Charlton Heston’s

machined tablets with little precision bolts of lightning. So, sometimes we think of the Bible as if every word of it was written like that—written by a God who perfectly dominates and completely controls the physical world, so that the human author played no role whatsoever in what was actually written.....

But what if God is not in the storm? What if we should not take every word of the Bible as purely from God, but we should also consider the bias of the humans who wrote it? Then, what do we do, for example, when we hear that an angel gave Elijah some cake and some water that sustained him forty days??? Did Elijah literally not eat for forty days???? Or was this a metaphorical way of saying that Elijah was just like Moses—going up the mountain to find God's will????

Well, let's look at what the original reader would know—that you may not know. The story says that Elijah went one day south of Beersheba, and it was there that the angel fed him, under a broom tree. So how far was it from the broom tree to the top of the mountain? How far did Elijah walk in those “forty” days? Well, if you consult your Bible atlas, you'll find that it was approximately thirty miles.

Thirty miles..... For a culture that tended to walk everywhere—thirty miles was not that big of a deal. I know many folks in this congregation, in spite of our lazy gas-guzzling cars—many folks here could walk thirty miles in a single day if we really had to. So I think it's better to look at the spiritual message here, than to look at it like a history book. Why does the author tell us Elijah walked “forty” days? Maybe that's just a poetic comparison to Moses.

I don't think any original reader would be confused by such symbolic numbers. It's not that the author was trying to be deceptive. It's just that we don't always understand words that were not written for us.

The poetry of the writer was meaningful to the folks of the writer's culture. The writing was inspired by God—God helped to empower the author to write it; but the writing was also a product of a particular human being within a particular culture.

It's not one or the other. It's not that something is either influenced by God, or it's not. That's too simplistic. We all know about “contributing factors.” Take BP for example. We can say that greedy BP cut corners to boost their profit. And that the government regulators didn't do enough regulation. And that the consumers (us)

pressured the oil industry to provide us with the cheapest possible gas. And that the car companies haven't done enough to raise mileage standards. And that all of us human beings have been more concerned with money than with the health of God's creation. So, who is to blame? It's just not that simple....

Effects arise from multiple contributing causes, not just one single cause. The Bible is an effect. It was inspired by God AND written by fallible human beings. There is no conflict there. This is the way it is with everything. In every moment we become who we are in this moment. And, in every moment the result is comprised of numerous contributing factors.

To simplify my point, let's just consider three basic categories. Some of our contributing factors come from those outside of us: our friends, our family, our bosses, even the air we breath and the sunlight we absorb. Our environment influences us to become who we become. But we are also influenced by God. In every moment, God calls upon us to become whatever is closest to God's will for us in that moment. God influences us through a still small voice. God influences us subconsciously, luring us towards something good. But at the same time, we are also influenced by our own free will. We have the freedom to choose among the options before us and to shape our own paths—at least to some extent.

And so we have these three categories: the environment around us, the Spirit of God, and our own free will. All three exert some influence, play some role in determining who we become.

But, if that's true, then perhaps, when we're looking for God's will, we should not look someplace outside of ourselves. We shouldn't look on the top of Moses's mountain where God asked Elijah, "Elijah, what are you doing here?" We shouldn't look for signs in the lightning storms or in the earthquakes. If we want to discern God's will, we need to look inside of ourselves, where God's Spirit is speaking to us in a still small voice.

You know, there are many voices all around us, speaking as loudly as they can. And I don't mean i-pods and train whistles and cell phone ringtones—those are just the tools that the voices use. But, the voices belong, mostly, to people. We hear the voices of bosses, or teachers, who bark out their orders; the voices of family members or friends, who sometimes guilt us into doing whatever they want us to do; the voices of doctors and experts who sometimes pretend to know exactly what would be best for us; the voices of the media who

tell us we can't be at peace until we buy this particular piece of garbage; and there are many, many other voices....

These voices are sometimes threatening. Like a windstorm they blow loudly, drowning out other sounds. Like an earthquake they can come upon us suddenly and powerfully. Like a fire they can consume everything that stands in their path, without giving a thought to what those things are really meant to do....

But what if God is not in the wind, the earthquake, or the fire? What if those scary, powerful voices should not command our ultimate loyalties???? What if they are all less than God????

Well then, how do we discover what is God's will for us? How do we know what God is calling us to become????

Maybe we need to shut out all of those noisy voices; turn off all the channels that they use to shout at us. Maybe we need to discover a sound of sheer silence.... Only then will we be able to hear the voice of God.

Amen.