

A Gentle Whisper

1 Kings 19:1-18

June 24, 2007

I'm taking a survey this morning: name the greatest people of the Bible. If you can, write down your list.

Where did you put Elijah on that list? Was he one of the top greats? Was he further down on your list? Was he even on your list? Would it surprise you to know that very few people would normally pick Elijah as one of the greats? If you did pick Elijah, it probably says that you know your Bible. The truth is that most Christians aren't really sure who Elijah is, other than knowing that he was a prophet. They hear his name, but don't necessarily know what he did or when he did it.

Did you know that in the Bible Elijah is considered the greatest of the prophets, along with Moses (we may not consider Moses to be a prophet, but the Bible does)? In fact, we hear in scripture that when Jesus was transfigured (we don't really know what transfiguration was, other than the fact that it left Jesus' face shining with light), Moses and Elijah appeared and spoke with Jesus. That's a tremendous testimony to Elijah's greatness—that he was considered by God to be on par with Moses.

According to the Bible, Elijah spoke truth to power, healed the sick, raised the dead, and challenged those who would wipe out the Jewish faith. So what I want to do this morning, before reading our passage, is to introduce you to Elijah. In fact, my actual sermon is pretty short, but that's because I want to spend most of my time telling you who Elijah was and why he was considered to be so great.

To begin with, Elijah was a prophet. Now, most people misunderstand what a prophet is. We think of prophets as people who speak truth about some sort of evil taking place in society. That's not necessarily what a prophet is. For example, many people considered Bob Dylan, John Lennon, or Bruce Springsteen to be prophets because they sang about social ills. They may have been great musical artists who had important social messages, but they weren't prophets. Why not? Because an essential quality of prophets is that they not only attack social injustices, but they call people back to faith and to God, reminding people that faith in God is the platform for righting a society's ills. Elijah was a prophet because he was all about calling the people back to centering their lives in God.

We don't know much about Elijah in terms of where he came from or what his life was like before becoming a prophet. What we do know is that he came from just across the Jordan from Israel, in a mountainous land called Gilead. He lived during the 9th century B.C. in a time after the reigns of King David and King Solomon. During their reigns, the nation of Israel had become a relatively major power in the region, forming a kingdom that stretched across present-day Israel, as well as parts of what is now Jordan and Syria. Soon after Solomon's death, the kingdom was divided, primarily into two kingdoms: the nation of Judah in the south, with Jerusalem as its capital, and the nation of Israel in the north, with Samaria as its capital. While

they both maintained the Jewish faith, the northern kingdom of Israel was slowly moving away from it. The movement away from the Jewish faith all started with king Omri, who reigned as king over the northern kingdom of Israel for twelve years.

Omri was a king who understood the need to hedge his bets. He held to the ancient Jewish beliefs, but his kingdom was also filled with transplants from Phoenicia, a small but economically powerful kingdom to the north (they were expert mariners who traded all through the Mediterranean). The Phoenicians worshipped a local deity named Ba'al, as well as his goddess wife, Asherah. Ba'al was the Phoenician god of thunder, storms, and rain. Omri set up regional temples where people could worship and make sacrifices to God (Yahweh), but he also set up ones for the worship of Ba'al and Asherah. Why worship just one god when you can worship more and ensure divine insurance coverage? In doing this, he was moving away from the Jewish faith, where God said, "You shall worship only me."

Things were bad for the Jewish faith under Omri, but they became worse under his son, Ahab. In the Bible, Ahab is considered to have been among the worst of the kings of Israel, which is why his name conjures up evil images. It is why Herman Melville named the obsessed captain of the whaling ship "Ahab" in his novel *Moby Dick*. During Ahab's reign he actively encouraged the worship of Ba'al. There was a reason for this. His wife, Jezebel, was a Phoenician princess, and Omri had arranged the marriage to create an alliance between Israel and Phoenicia. Her father was king of Phoenicia, and a priest for Ba'al. Jezebel herself was a priestess in the service of Asherah. Jezebel wanted the Jews to abandon their worship of Yahweh completely, and to worship only Ba'al and Asherah.

Ahab was the king, but Jezebel was the power behind the throne. She had strong ambitions to remake Israel in her own image, and so she started a pogrom to get rid of those who were most strongly bound to worship of Yahweh. For instance, she tried to have 100 Jewish prophets captured and put to death. They eluded death only because Obadiah, a faithful man (and a prophet himself) who ran one of Ahab's palaces, hid them for a year in caves along the banks of the Jordan River. She also tried to have the prophet Elijah killed because he insisted on standing up to her and Ahab, including one incident in which he put to shame 450 priests of the god Ba'al, along with 400 priests of Asherah. But more about that later.

Elijah had prophesied that in response to Jezebel's intent to get the Israelites to worship Ba'al, God would cause Israel to have a drought for two years, thus showing that Ba'al was no god, for the God of Israel is God of the elements. So Israel had a drought two years. During the first year of the drought, Elijah was told to hide and live in a ravine by a brook in the mountainous area around Gilead. He drank every day from the brook, while ravens fed him with meat and bread. After a year, Elijah was sent by God to live with a woman, Jarepheth and her son in the Phoenician city of Sidon. He showed up on her doorstep and asked her to make him some bread. She complained that she had only a small jar of flour, and another small jar of oil, and that it was barely enough for them. Elijah promised that if they fed him, they would not run out of food for the time he was with them. And so she did, and each day found her jar of flour and jar of oil filled with enough food for the three of them for a day.

During his stay with them, tragedy struck as the woman's son died. She asked Elijah how God could treat them this way, especially after they had housed Elijah. Elijah laid the boy on the bed and lied on top of him. Three times Elijah did this, praying each time. After the third time, the boy came alive. Soon afterwards Elijah sensed God calling him to return to Samaria to speak with Ahab and to tell him that the drought was over.

Hearing that Elijah was on his way, Ahab ran out from his palace to confront him. Elijah told him that the drought was over, but that he also had a challenge for Ahab from God. He challenged the priests of Ba'al to a duel in which they would all meet atop Mount Carmel to see who was stronger, Yahweh or Ba'al.

So, 450 priest of Ba'al, and 400 of Asherah, gathered on Mount Carmel in response to the challenge. Elijah instructed them to build an altar, and to place wood on top of it. Then they were to choose a bull to sacrifice. Afterwards, they were told to call on Ba'al to light the fire from heaven. So they built their fire and proceeded to chant, pray, and call on Ba'al to light their fire. They chanted, prayed, and prostrated themselves for over twelve hours. Nothing happened. Elijah mocked them, making fun of the way they danced by pretending to dance like them. When they were finished, Elijah built his fire and placed the bull upon it. The he gathered four buckets, and poured them onto the wood. He filled them again and poured four more buckets on the wood. He did the same thing a third time (in case you are counting, that makes 12 buckets—one for each tribe of Israel). He then called upon God to light it. Immediately from heaven a fire came down and the altar burst into flames. He then had all the priests of Ba'al killed, as well as those of Ashereh.

You would think that in the aftermath of doing such a great feat, Elijah would bask in the glory of doing God's will and gaining a great victory. Of course, you would be wrong, for Jezebel did not take the defeat of Ba'al lying down. Jezebel was determined to have Elijah killed. This is where our passage begins:

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." [by this she meant that she was going to kill him] Then he was afraid; he got up and fled for his life, and came to Beer-sheba, 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 [a broom tree is actually a juniper tree—they used to use the branches as brooms] 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. [other translations translate this as "gentle whisper—the word can mean both]

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. Whoever escapes from the sword of Hazael, Jehu shall kill; and whoever escapes from the sword of Jehu, Elisha shall kill. Yet I will leave seven thousand in Israel, all the knees that have not bowed to Baal, and every mouth that has not kissed him."

So what do you learn from our passage? I pulled three lessons from the passage, and I want to share them with you. This may be the shortest sermon you've ever heard.

First, *if you follow God, and do the right thing, you may have to suffer for it.* This is a basic message of the Bible that most of us don't want to hear. We like the idea better that if we do God's will, God will reward us with an easy and successful life for doing the right thing. But that's not what the Bible teaches, and Elijah is a vibrant example of this. Look at him. He did something great by taking stands for God. The first time he took a stand and told Ahab there would be a drought. His reward? He had to go into hiding for two years. The second time, when he defeated the priest of Ba'al, he had to go into hiding into the desert.

What this teaches us is that doing the right thing has a price, and we have to be willing to pay that price if we are to serve God. For example, if you are a student in school, resisting the lure of drugs, not cheating, doing your work, and refusing to do what is wrong may make you unpopular and lonely. But that is the price to pay for doing what God wants. In your job, doing the right thing might mean maintaining a certain level of ethics in the face of those who would do what is unethical. It may even mean pointing out to others that what they are doing is unethical, and that you refuse to join them. And it may cost you your job. That is the price you

pay for serving God. If we choose to serve God and do the right thing, there may be a price to pay.

This leads to a second lesson: *if you want to hear God, listen for God in silence and stillness*. Most of us demand that God speak to us in a voice that we can easily hear. We look for God in big things. We listen for God's voice in easy places, hoping that God will speak to us in a clear, loud, and inspiring voice. What Elijah's experience teaches us is that God doesn't speak through thunder, lightning, earthquakes, or exciting events. God speaks in stillness and silence. It took Elijah forty days of quiet to hear God. Are we willing to wait for God in silence?

If you want to hear God, you have to *make* time for quiet prayer and reflection. You have to *create* space for stillness. And you have to be willing to wait. If you get frustrated and quit, you won't hear God. God speaks best in a gentle whisper, so we have to make time to listen for that gentle whisper through stillness and silence.

Finally, we are taught that *if we have faith, God will always be there with us*. Despite the fact that we may go through tough times for doing the right thing, God will still be with us to get us through the difficulty. Elijah struggled and suffered, but in the end God was always with him. And in the end God did glorious and wonderful things with Elijah. And God will do the same with you.

Amen.