

**Rev. Dr. Karen Blanchard**  
**“The Power of the Small Still Voice”**  
**First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood**  
**Sunday, August 9, 2020**

**Matthew 14:22-33**

*Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them. And early in the morning he came walking towards them on the lake. But when the disciples saw him walking on the lake, they were terrified, saying, ‘It is a ghost!’ And they cried out in fear. But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, ‘Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.’*

*Peter answered him, ‘Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.’ He said, ‘Come.’ So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came towards Jesus. But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, ‘Lord, save me!’ Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, ‘You of little faith, why did you doubt?’ When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. And those in the boat worshipped him, saying, ‘Truly you are the Son of God.’*

**I Kings 19:9-18**

*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. 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.’*

There's a bit of background needed for the particular passage for this morning. So I'm going to begin with the prayer and then share the summary of the story until I come to the point in the reading where the passage begins but it's a long intro so get comfy. Pray with me please. Gracious God, you offer us the living word. Living then, living now, living over the years in between and be with us so that we may open our hearts to be enlivened and moved by your spirit with the gift of promise you offer us this day. Amen.

The events that lead up to this morning's passage are about a time of unfaithfulness among the people of God. Their King Ahab has married a foreigner named Jezebel who worships other gods. Time has passed, and they are in the midst of a terrible drought and a resulting famine. So, God sends Elijah to the king to tell him that the people should turn away from the fake gods called Baal and Asherah and turn back to God. But when Elijah shares his message, Ahab calls him a troublemaker. So, Elijah challenges Ahab to what one might call a dueling prophet event against 450 prophets of Baal and 400 of Asherah. Both groups aligned with Ahab's wife.

Elijah sets a challenge. First, he asks the people in the crowd to tell him who they worship, God or Baal, and they say Baal. So, he puts himself up against 850 other prophets of other gods. Each side is to sacrifice a bull and sacrifice it in the name of their gods. The others go first, and they call upon Baal but there is no answer and nothing changes. And Elijah mocks them saying, "Oh, surely Baal is a god. Either he's meditating or has wandered away or asleep and must be awakened." Then they cried out and cut themselves with swords and lances until blood gushed out all over them and still there was no answer, complete silence. So, Elijah says to the people there, "Come closer," and they do. He repairs the altar of the Lord that had been thrown down, made a trench around it, cut the bull in pieces, and laid it on the wood, and then he asked them to take water and pour it on the offering and on the wood, and they do this three times.

Then Elijah came near and said, "Oh Lord God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, let it be known this day that you are God in Israel and that I am your servant. Answer me, O Lord. Answer me so these people may know that you alone, O Lord, are God." Then the fire of the Lord fell and consumed the burnt offering stones and wood and even licked up the water that was in the trench. When the people saw it, they fell on their faces and said, "The Lord indeed is God," and Elijah said to them, "Seize the prophets," and when they seized them, Elijah killed them there. Then Elijah said to King Ahab, "Go up and drink," and Ahab went up the Mount and ate and drank and Elijah went up onto the top of the mountain Carmel and said, "Go look toward the sea." And Ahab went and looked and said, "There is nothing." And Elijah said, "Go again." And he did that seven times. And the seventh time he said, "Look, a little cloud is rising out of the sea." Then the heavens grew black with clouds, and wind, and a heavy rain. And Ahab swiftly rode off to Jezreel to see Jezebel. Now Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done. And that the prophets had been killed. And Jezebel sends a messenger to Elijah saying, "So may the gods do to me if I do not make your life like the life of one of them by this time tomorrow." Then Elijah was afraid and fled for his life. Going into the wilderness and sitting under a solitary Burning Tree and asked God if he might die. "It's enough now, O Lord, take away of my life for I am no better than my ancestors." Then he lay down and fell asleep. An angel touched him and said, "Get up and eat." And he looked and there was a cake and a jar of water, and he ate, and drank, and laid down. And the angel came again and said, "Get up and eat. Otherwise the journey will be too much for you." And he got up and ate and drank, and then he went on that strength of food for 40 days and 40 nights to Mount Horeb, known as Mount Sinai the mount of God. And this is where we enter into the passage for this morning.

At that place, Elijah came to a cave and spent the night there. Then the word of the Lord came to Elijah 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." And God said, "Go out and stand at the mount 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 and 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. A voice came to him that said, "What are you doing here Elijah?" And Elijah 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 a 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, king over Aram. Also, you shall anoint Jehu, the 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, Elijah shall kill. Yet, I will leave 7,000 in Israel, all the knees that have not bowed to Baal and every mouth that has not kissed him. The word of the Lord.

So, Elijah, the prophet, has spoken, attempting to call the unfaithful people back to God. And his attempt to do that begins in the midst of a famine and a drought. He wants to prove to them that God is real and will send rain to help them. And Elijah carries out the call. But things take a sudden turn in the story. While Elijah's act of sacrifice at the altar brings forth rain, Ahab and Jezebel are not grateful. Rather than being impressed by the power of the God of Elijah, Jezebel is angry and threatens to kill him. And Elijah runs away in fear. But something's different at this point. Elijah no longer acts like a challenger who's flashy and confident. He's defeated and exhausted and worried. The people who he had hoped to bring back to God do not seem to see it that way. And he is demoralized.

It was interesting for me to read the commentaries on the passage. Some scholars say that Elijah was quite the show-off with his actions, shaming both the prophets of Baal and the Queen. Others say he lost his trust in God and so is hiding away, that Elijah who had been in God's presence and power and knew that they were at his disposal suddenly acts like he no longer trusts God. And there are those who say that his behavior so distressed God that God decided to remove the mantle of the prophet from Elijah and give it to Elisha. But I have always felt that this passage was about something else. Rather than seeing Elijah as someone who acts unfaithfully, I think we are witnessing a very human story, the story of one who feels overwhelmed and desperate and alone, someone who wants to hide deep into a place of darkness where there is no light, a story of someone seeking peace who cannot seem to find it. For me, the power of the story is not in what Elijah does, but in God's response, a God who responds in pastoral ways. And as I dug deeper into commentaries, I found that others see this in the way I do. This is a story of pain, not punishment. It's not a story of judgment, but of understanding. It is not about a lack of unfaithfulness, but about a God who senses and helps someone feeling hopeless. And I couldn't help but feel that this is a very providential and poignant time for this story to appear in the lectionary as many of us struggle with what is going to happen in the days to come. I find comfort in a reminder that God offers strength and comfort for us in those times in our lives.

Now, it's true that Elijah struggles may seem surprising on one level. He seems to succeed in all that God has called him to do, working hard to show others they are worshiping the wrong Gods. He put together quite a successful showdown. But the response it is not what he expected. It's kind of an unholy trifecta of responses. Ahab sees it and the rain that follows, but he's not convinced. Instead, he goes to Jezebel to tell on Elijah, and Jezebel was furious. Are we surprised? Some people do not like to be shown that they are wrong, and they will respond with retaliation. And Jezebel is one of those. She's not impressed. She's angry, and if she could kill him, it would prove that God could not protect Elijah. The people don't respond as Elijah thought they would. Though flashy with his actions, I don't think his intent was to be a mighty hero but to make a mighty statement so that they would be stunned enough to return to God. But they don't do that, so he is feeling defeated and deflated and runs for his life, and soon finds himself in the wilderness, sitting under a broom tree. This is where I find myself thinking of Jonah who also sat under a broom tree, struggling with the same issues. He too was discouraged and wanted God to take his life, and like Elijah, thinks he failed.

Elijah has not failed, and he is not logical. But we also know that being illogical is not unusual when one is depressed. He simply says, "I failed. I thought what I did would make a difference, but it didn't." But that part was not his job. Their response was not his job. How they responded was up to them. They rejected it, not because they had seen it, but in spite of what they'd seen. But Elijah's response is to think he hasn't done enough, and this is where God enters in. They are under the tree out in the wilderness. Elijah falls asleep, and an angel, a messenger with the gift of nourishment feeds him in body as well as spirit. It's a tender scene of compassion and encouragement. This was no easy fix. It took time to get steady on his feet again. He needed to rest and renew and replenish, and he does that. And in time, he's prepared to continue the journey. We are told it took the biblical 40 days and 40 nights. But while he is struggling, still, we can sense that he has been reminded that he doesn't go this alone. There has been an angel who brought a message of hope and healing.

So finally, he arrives at the holy mountain, and the first thing he does is go into a cave. And it is at this point that God asks, "What are you doing in here, Elijah?" God listens as Elijah bemoans his faith and shares his limits. He said, "I'm the only prophet left. I failed. The people did not respond. I tried. I really tried, but it wasn't enough, and now I'm as good as dead." Elijah struggles with confused thinking. Not unusual for someone who's depressed but we are reminded that God still understands, and God calls him out of the cave, out of the darkness into the light, and as Elijah comes out, he hears a mighty wind. Air swirls, but God does not speak. Then the earth shakes, trembling mightily, but God is not found in that. A fire bursts forth. It seems that everything is happening at once and chaos seems to reign, but God is not in all of the earthquake, wind, and fire. It is in the silence that the voice of God can be heard, in the power of the small still voice. God gets Elijah's attention helping him to calm down enough to be able to listen, and in so doing, we are reminded that God's presence is not only in the mighty but in the calm, not only in the flash but in this stillness, even as still as a whisper. For this silence is so great it can be heard. God worked through Elijah with the rains, an impressive sacrifice, and fire at the altar. But God is present here in this small still voice of the whispers that can only be heard in the heart, the times when someone we know is listening and asking important questions.

We realize that Elijah now senses the presence of God in a profound way because as prophets do, he covers himself with a mantle as one going before the holy. Elijah is able now to listen to God and God gives him more tasks to do and God reminds him that he did not fail, that he matters, and there is still more work to be done. So pulled beyond himself and harsh introspection, he finds that he still has a mission, requests from God, first, to anoint the king of Syria, and then to anoint Jay who was the king over Israel, then he is to find Elisha and tell him that God is calling him to be a prophet. We find though that God is not replacing Elijah with Elisha because God is angry, but recognizing I think what would be helpful to Elijah--A companion, an apprentice, someone who learns the ropes from him and will become his successor. Elisha, for his part, accepts the call, and I think God's actions seem to relieve the pressure on Elijah, reminded, once again, he is not responsible for everything but that the work, whether it's a prophet or in other ways, is to be shared and life moves in a more hopeful direction for Elijah.

To me, this is the power of this story in Elijah's life. And why it is important for us to remember what happened in his time of struggle and healing. He's exhausted and overwhelmed and seeks the peace of God. But even this faithful man is lost in a moment of darkness. But God appears, not with all show and sound, but a voice that reaches deep into the dark night of the soul, to bring him out of the cave into the light again. I think the actions of Elijah remind us that humans do struggle. That at times we think illogically. And that at times it is hard to reach into another's darkness. There's an honesty in this story that can validate some of our own struggles and give us permission to talk about it. It can validate the struggles of those we love who are depressed. And it reminds us that there are many reasons for depression. Sometimes it is grief. Sometimes it is genetics. Sometimes it is events of loss and change. And so it is for us. These are not easy times. We are struggling. We miss family. We miss friends. Parents wrestle with how to have their children schooled in the building or online. Teachers are understandably worried about exposure. Business owners wonder if they can go on with dwindling sales. And too many families are going hungry. Healthcare workers are worked to exhaustion and struggle with the response of others who do not realize how much their lives are on the line.

We can feel as though we're wandering through the wilderness. Some days are harder than others. And some realize they need professional support. I called Care & Counseling this week to find out what is going on there and they are seeing more people than they ever have. While they still have openings, they're quite aware what a difficult time this is for so many. So, I love this story because it has such power in its quietness. We are reminded of a God of love and compassion, who seeks to help us remember we are not alone. It is the story of the Living Word that God will send messengers to us in the midst of difficult times. And that others who listen can be sources of healing and hope. It might be doctors who prescribe medications. It might be counselors who listen. It may be a friend who shares the gift of time and asks the right questions that help us to come out of the darkness into the light again. I think it is a reminder too that faith contains the gifts of love mercy and grace. That our God is a living God who by the power of the spirit moves among us in times of challenge in our lives. That we humans can be affected with depression and struggle with it, and that is not a sin. It is a part of being human. And faith can be a part of that which offers us a way home again. A lifeline to those who feel lost and want to make their way back. A reminder that even when we struggle God is not to speak dismayed. We can be those too who try to call others back into the light. But

at times we find it's not something that we're able to make someone else do. And even if the darkness does not end for the ones we love, God can be our light to sustain us when we worry for those we love. God works not only through showy, miraculous events but through a whisper. God loves us and speaks in a small still voice through others--through those who listen and help us find our way from the dark into the light again. God calls Elijah out of the darkness into the light, back into life reclaiming Hope. I think God calls us too. Thanks be to God. From whom all our blessings flow. Amen.