

**Sequoyah Hills Presbyterian Church**  
**Knoxville, Tennessee**  
**Dr. Jay Howell**  
April 26, 2020

**“Not Here: Silence Speaks”**  
**1 Kings 19:8-18**

In case you missed last week’s worship, I’d encourage any of you joining us this week to go back and watch the service when some of the youth from here at Sequoyah Hills were leading us. I’m grateful for the faithfulness our youth showed, and especially by the words offered by our senior speakers Neeley Wilson, Luke Lampley, and Dylan Lewis. They kicked off what will be our focus in this post-Easter sermon series we’re calling “Not Here,” and that phrase is taken from the words we heard in the Gospel of Mark earlier: “He has been raised; he is not here,” meaning somehow the good news of Jesus was at least in those first moments a declaration that he was alive and at work, but just not where they could see it just then.

And that’s what our seniors guided us through last week, Neeley sharing from Isaiah 65, that God is with us even when it doesn’t look like it to us, Luke sharing from Colossians 3, that when our focus is on things above as opposed to earthly things, God comes much more in focus, and Dylan sharing from Job 1 and 42, that even in life’s most challenging hours, God is there and has a purpose. To see all that, to see all that God is doing, as the theme of last week’s worship put it, takes a vision beyond what we can see.

That’s the focus we’ll be continuing over the next four weeks, looking at instances in Scripture, in particular in the Old Testament, of God being at work beyond what we would normally look for, beyond what we would normally be able to see, beyond what is physically present before us, asking, how might this work of God in Scripture point us to see the power of Christ’s resurrection, the power of new life, at work in the world in ways we wouldn’t expect. Will you pray with me?

*Holy God, for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.*

Take a walk from here to Memphis, and you would have a journey roughly the same length as the one Elijah took. Forty days and forty nights, v. 8 tells us, he walked to Horeb the mount of God. And there he was hoping to see something, because he wasn’t in a good way. He was dejected; he felt alone; he saw little in the way of faith among his people. So, on this 40-day journey, he was hoping, maybe, at the end of it, God would show him something.

Elijah’s story is one some of you may be familiar with, others of you may not be, so here’s a crash course. The Book of Kings is an account of the peak and collapse of the Israelite kingdom. It starts with Solomon, son of King David, at the peak of Israel’s power, but trouble was brewing, and before long the kingdom splits into the southern kingdom of Judah and the northern kingdom which kept the name Israel. The rest of the Book of Kings bounces back and forth between Judah and Israel and the different lines of kings each had.

One of those kings in the northern kingdom of Israel was a king named Ahab, whose queen was a woman named Jezebel, and they were ruthless. It was under their rule that the worship of a god named Baal became widespread in Israel, likely from Jezebel’s home country.

It's in that backdrop of a divided kingdom, a ruthless king and queen, and the worship of a foreign god that a prophet emerges, this prophet Elijah. Most of Elijah's story consists of confrontations either with King Ahab and Queen Jezebel or with priests of this god Baal.

The most well-known of those clashes was a showdown between Elijah and a bunch of priests of Baal with a whole bunch of people watching. Happened on top of a place called Mount Carmel—not Mount Caramel, which sounds delicious—but Mount Carmel which is up in the north, actually not far from where Nazareth would later be. On Mount Carmel, the test was to see whose god would send fire to consume an offering. If you've heard that story before, you'll remember that Baal's prophets flail around, crying out to Baal, but nothing happens. Then Elijah prays, and God sends fire and burns up the offering. Afterward, the people worship the Lord, and Baal's prophets are put to death.

You might think that this is a good result for Elijah, but this is like Game of Thrones—there are consequences when you cross ruthless people like Ahab and Jezebel. Elijah gets word from the queen, whose god has just been humiliated, that she's going to kill him. So Elijah runs, flees to the south, and goes to a place called Mount Horeb—that's where we pick up—and for forty days and nights, he journeys there.

By the end of the journey, exhausted and dejected, he tells the Lord in v. 10, "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's just been the conduit of a grand, powerful display, showing God's might to the people, and there's contrition, sure, but it doesn't seem like anything's changed. He despairs and journeys to this mountain for forty days, hoping God would show him something there.

You see, God and his prophets have a history with this mountain. Mount Horeb it's called here, but it has another name: Mount Sinai. It's the place where Moses led the people of Israel after God delivered them from Egypt—this is back in the Book of Exodus. On this mountain, with the people gathered at its foot, the Lord descended with thunder and lightning and smoke and fire, and it was terrifying, but the Lord showed who he was. And I think Elijah went there hoping for some kind of sign like that, that God would show himself, to give him hope in God's power in that uncertain and frightening time.

That's why we do that, isn't it? Look for signs? Something to show us that God is there or that God is real or that God is good or that God is at work or that God has got things under control. And as far as signs go, it's the unmistakable sort that tend to go over better, something so amazing that there could be no other possible explanation than the presence and power of the Lord. Might be the sort of sign you've looked for in the past. Maybe you were in a hard time, facing struggle, facing loss, and you just wanted something to show you that God was there. Might be the sort of sign you're looking for right now. God show me something, and if it's all the same to you, maybe make it something big.

I suspect you'd be especially eager to see some kind of sign like that after a forty-day journey of exhaustion in the wilderness, some sign to show you that everything you're doing is somehow on the right track, that it's going to amount to something, that things will be okay.

I didn't realize this until recently, but the word "quarantine" originally referred to a period of forty days—came from a word in old Venetian when ships would try to make port in Venice during the Black Death, but the crew would be forced to wait for forty days before they could disembark.

Incidentally, depending on what day you start counting, we're about at forty days since social distancing really took effect here in Knoxville—well, forty-one days at least since we started online worship, but who's counting. And you might be coming like Elijah to this time, exhausted after forty days, thinking, "God show me something." You might be coming like Elijah expecting something huge.

That's what he'd be expecting. Something grand, something powerful. But he doesn't get it. God tells him in v. 11 to go out and stand on the mountain, for "the Lord is about to pass by." So now Elijah's thinking, it's gonna happen.

Then the text tells us, "Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the Lord," and Elijah's gotta be thinking, this is God. A great wind? Like the wind that blew over the waters at creation? Like the great wind that pushed back the Red Sea? This is God. "But the Lord was not in the wind." The text goes on, "and after the wind an earthquake," so now Elijah's gotta be thinking, okay, *this* is God. The very ground is moving. The foundations of the earth are shaking, "But the Lord was not in the earthquake." The text goes on, "after the earthquake a fire," and now Elijah's gotta be thinking, okay, I get it, *this* is God. God who led his people by a pillar of fire at night long ago, God who covered this very mountain with smoke and fire when he spoke to his people. "But the Lord was not in the fire." All these great and powerful signs, all of which Elijah would have otherwise figured, okay, this is God, this is how God is going to show himself. But the wind? No. The earthquake? No. The fire? No.

Instead after the fire, as it says in v. 12, "a sound of sheer silence." If you're looking in other translations you might see something like "the sound of a light whisper," or maybe the most well-known, "a still, small voice." And oddly, despite what Elijah might have been expecting, that is what Elijah takes notice of. That's what he hears. That's what he hears the Lord in. All that loud stuff, the wind, the earthquake, the fire, all that stuff he might have expected, he didn't hear the Lord in it, but he heard the Lord in this sound of silence, this whisper, this still, small voice, and he goes out. And the Lord then commissions him to go back and continue in his work, anointing those who would come next, and telling him that there are thousands who have kept the faith, showing him that there's more reason to hope than perhaps he had seen.

It's a powerful story during a dark chapter in Israel's history. It shows us that God is just as able to speak through silence, through a whisper, through the faint, even unnoticeable things of the world, as he can speak through thunder and wind and earthquakes and fire. And sometimes it's those whispers that can keep us going, that can show us there's more reason to hope than we might've thought.

When I was in high school, our youth group used to take these mission trips, service trips to Tijuana, Mexico, each year. It was through a ministry there that worked with churches in the city to provide housing for impoverished families. Groups would come—nothing fancy—and do a basic build of a small house, and while doing so, the groups would stay at a campground nearby. So you build during the day, and in the evening you come back, usually exhausted, to the campground, share dinner around a fire, and sleep in tents, then do it again the next day.

Those trips had become very formative for me, I went each year. I had seen God show up in powerful ways—in the work, in the fellowship, you name it. The group that went was of course different each year, but it was powerful seeing it come together. I came to crave it, associating Tijuana with God showing up, with God showing us something big.

But then one trip, things were just not working well. The build was tough, the group wasn't coming together. There was tension, there was frustration, and because I had come there

expecting more of what I had seen before, more of God's grand, powerful displays, I was pretty disappointed. It was kind of naïve of me, expecting some kind of formula, you go to this place, do such and such work, and like magic, there's this powerful, unmistakable spiritual experience, but I was pretty let down that I wasn't seeing God at work in the way I had thought he would.

So one evening, after the day's build, I'm in my tent before dinner. It was still kind of bright out. I'm tired, I'm frustrated, and I'm just lying there wondering, "What are we doing here? What am I doing here? God, why aren't you doing something?" And I remember at one point looking over to the side of the tent, and at that moment, I saw the small shadow of a bird go across the surface of the tent. Took all of a split second. If I had blinked, I could've missed it. And to borrow a phrase from this story in 1 Kings, I couldn't help but think that "the Lord was in the bird." Now the cynic in me tells me, Jay, it was just a bird that happened to fly by and cast a shadow on your tent, this ain't signs and wonders here. But that's kind of the point. It was in the faint, nearly imperceptible thing that I felt the Lord at work. It wasn't grand, no one else saw it, and I didn't share it with anybody, because it was just a dang bird, but to me that split-second shadow flitting across the side of the tent, kept me going.

Now afterward, there wasn't a miraculous turnaround. The build was still tough. The group never really came together. It was a hard week. But it felt different, just because I had this sense, through this silent, faint shadow of a bird, that God was at work and that maybe there was more reason to hope than I had initially seen.

Friends, whether it is specifically now during this pandemic or whether it's during any season, we might come to the point of exhaustion, even frustration, and we might come to God saying, "God, show me something." We might come expecting, even demanding some grand, powerful, unmistakable display, and because the Lord is certainly capable of it. But we might also keep an eye out for the small shadow on the side of the tent. Because, though we might be looking for the earthquake or the fire, sometimes the Lord is just as present in the faint whispers. Sometimes the silence speaks.

And if you're looking for signs of new life in this season of resurrection, sometimes they first emerge out of sight, so keep an ear out for the still, small voice. It'll keep you going.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**