

- Pastor Keith Madsen
Sunday, 11/08/15

“Five Encouragements: God will Direct You”

1 Kings 19:1-13

As most of you know by now, as I am approaching the time of my retirement, I am focusing my last ten sermons on the ten thoughts I want to leave this church. The first five were challenges which I have presented to this church as you move forward, and the last five will be thoughts of comfort I want to encourage you with. My first “encouragement” message was my article for *The Bell* for this month, where I reminded you that you are not alone.

The second encouragement is: *remember God will direct you*. You aren't having to decide things on your own. Through prayer and sensitivity to the Holy Spirit, the same God who has directed the church from the beginning will direct this church as well.

My Scripture for this week concerns a prophet who was in bad need of the encouragement that comes in knowing God was directing him. It is significant that in our story, the question which God asks of Elijah, not once, but twice is “What are you doing here, Elijah?” “What has brought you to this place, to this time in your life?” That is an important question for anyone seeking God's direction. So let's look a little more at the story.

Where had he been? As our passage begins, Elijah is being confronted by King Ahab and Queen Jezebel, who together were the most evil and oppressive ruling tandem in Israelite history. Next to them, City of Issaquah regulations are a piece of cake! Elijah had stood forth to condemn them for turning away from God and God's ways. In taking this stand he had pretty much stood alone, as the other prophets of God were content with telling the king and queen whatever it was they wanted to hear. For taking this courageous stand, Jezebel threatened him with death. Well, Elijah was courageous, but he wasn't stupid, and so he fled. The first part of his journey, then was a journey *away from*; it was a journey away from threats and fear.

This church is also on a journey *away from*. It's a journey away from our past, with its good and its bad, its failures and successes. It's a journey away from “the good old days” when we had several hundred people involved in church, and 70-80 young people in BYF. And it's also a journey away from the times when troubles and divisions tore this church apart. It will even be a journey away from the last nearly 5 years we have had together with me as your pastor.

Elijah was led by God so the second part of his journey was also a journey *towards*; a journey towards God, a journey towards finding help from the one who was Lord of his life. This church will also find your own “journey towards”, a journey where God will lead you in your future under Pastor Britt Carlson.

For Elijah, the place he went for this direction was not just any place. Rather, as verse 8 tells us, he went to “Horeb, the Mount of God.” Horeb was another name for Mount Sinai. It was the place where Moses had met God and received the Ten Commandments. It was also the place where even earlier Moses had

confronted God in a burning bush, and received the call of God to lead his people to freedom. This was a place with deep spiritual roots.

So, it's little wonder that Elijah would be led towards Mount Horeb in his spiritual journey. But if he was looking for what people had found in that place before, he was, at least at first, disappointed. In this story, some of the most significant information comes from what it says about where God was NOT found. Verse 11 says, "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...*" Now, there is a history of God being found in great winds. When Moses, who had been commissioned to lead Israel on the very mountain where Elijah now stood, was leading the Hebrew children out of Egypt toward the Promised Land, they came up against a great sea. And how did the people get across? Exodus tells us that "the Lord drove the sea back by a strong east wind all night, and turned the sea into dry land..." The Lord had been in the wind. Then later at Pentecost the Holy Spirit came to a gathering of believers, and we are told that "suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting." Once again God had been present in the wind. Here it is significant that the Greek word for wind, *pneuma*, is the same word for spirit and for breath. When God breathed into Adam the *breath* of life, it could also be said, he was breathing into him the *wind* of life or the *spirit* of life. The English word *inspire* similarly means to take in breath, or to take in wind, or to take in the *spirit* of God. Yet with all this, in our present story we are told that "*the Lord was not in the wind.*"

Verse 11 also says there was an earthquake, "but the Lord was not in an earthquake." Ancient people often associated God's presence with earthquakes. When God gave Moses the Ten Commandments, on the very mountain where Elijah now stood, we are told that "the whole mountain shook violently." But in this story, we are told, "*the Lord was not in the earthquake.*"

Then verse 12 tells us that after the earthquake came a fire. Surely God would be in the fire! It had been on that very mountain that Moses, while he was still tending sheep for his father-in-law, had met God in the burning bush. God had told him, "Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." Later, the spirit came on Pentecost in the form of tongues of fire over the heads of the disciples. But in our story for today we are told, "*the Lord was not in the fire.*"

It's as if God were saying, "You know all those places people have said you should look for me? Well, you need to think outside the box a little bit!" There isn't one place, one website, one person, we can go to and find God all pre-packaged and waiting for us. Finding God's direction is partly a matter of our willingness to search for him in the places where God is *not* expected to be. The pop singing group, The Fray, sang a song a little while ago called *You Found Me*. It's about a young man's search for God in the midst of some difficult times. The first line of the song is, "I found God on the corner of 1st and Amistad..." And that's the irony: sometimes we find God in the place we least expect him to be.

But another thing about what this Scripture says about where God was *not*: God was not in all of the dramatically destructive acts he is often associated with. Insurance companies have what they call "acts of God". What they mean is events like a hurricane or other destructive wind, or an earthquake, or a naturally occurring forest fire. Do we really want to say that it is only in such events that God acts? I like to call this the "Action movie" view of God – God is not really there unless something blows up!

Not long ago I saw on Yahoo news a story about a statue of Jesus that was struck and destroyed by lightning. A six-story tall statue of Jesus Christ near Monroe, Ohio was hit and leveled by a bolt of lightning. It's actually called "The King of Kings" statue and it was put up by The Solid Rock Church near Monroe. But there is a kind of irony, isn't it? What would they say to their insurance company? "Jesus Christ was destroyed by an act of God – are we covered?"

But God was not in the wind...or the fire...or the earthquake...or the lightning.

Where was God? The New Revised Standard Version tells us, "...and after the fire a sound of sheer silence." The New International Version says, "And after the fire came a gentle whisper." But the most traditional versions, the King James and the Revised Standard Version tell us that after all the dramatic, violent acts came "a still, small voice." The bottom line for all these versions is that God was not in the noisy and the dramatic; God was in the quiet. God was in the almost indiscernible voice which speaks to our hearts. And so the person seeking God's direction, often needs to get past the noisy and the dramatic, to get in touch with the quiet, to listen to the voice within their own heart.

Normally, when we think of the "still, small voice," we think of the voice of conscience, helping us to differentiate right from wrong, but that was not really what it was about in this story. Elijah didn't need to learn right from wrong; he had a strong sense of that already. Rather he needed to learn two things: he needed to know he was not alone; and he needed to know God still had a purpose for him.

Elijah had felt alone. It seemed like everyone who knew had sold out to the false gods, and with that the false values, of Ahab and Jezebel. Ever feel that way – like everyone around you has abandoned the values which are important to you? Elijah told God, "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..." Again, in the song I mentioned earlier by The Fray, the singer sings of feeling lost and insecure, and how "everyone ends up alone." That could have been Elijah's theme song! And God DID find Elijah. When God did, he told Elijah that there were 7,000 others who were true, and who would stand with him. In his self-pity, he was feeling all alone, when he didn't have to feel that way. There were others.

Well, as I said in my *Bell* article, sometimes we feel alone as well. But this church which God has given us is to reassure us that we are not alone. And beyond these walls, we are part of the Evergreen Association of American Baptists, and American Baptist Churches, USA, and our bond with the other churches of this community. Even as a church, we are not alone.

But God did not just tell Elijah he wasn't alone. He also gave Elijah a renewed sense of purpose, a purpose of renewing Israel's leadership. In the end, that's what seeking God's direction is about – not just finding God, but finding our own purpose, our reason for existence, our answer to the question that God started Elijah out with – "What are you doing here, Elijah?" "What are you doing here, Community Church of Issaquah?" "What are you doing at 660 NW Gilman Blvd, Suite, C-5?" If we were on our own, without direction, that might be a difficult question to answer. But, we're not! After asking the question, God showed Elijah the answer – he was there to work with those other 7,000 people, and lead people back to the true God.

God will, through Pastor Britt Carlson and this church's fine lay leadership, lead this church toward its future. There won't be any pillar of clouds or fire out in front of you. Hopefully, no burning bushes, or earthquakes ripping up Gilman Boulevard! But God's voice will be heard, and if this church is listening, there will be exciting things ahead!