



“Gentle Whispers”

a sermon by

Gregory A. W. Green

First Presbyterian Church
Charlotte, North Carolina

May 1, 2005

“Elijah is a bona fide hero of faith. He is larger than life – faithful, confident, and authoritative. He is able to bring about miracles through prayer, even [raise] the dead and [call] fire down from heaven. He is able to confront a powerful king and accuse him of sin, and he dares to challenge a large crowd of Baal worshipers. He is even able to outrun Ahab’s chariot in a seventeen-mile race. So we certainly would not expect to find an easily intimidated, suicidal, self-doubting yet self-righteous Elijah.¹” Yet that is exactly what we find in chapter nineteen.

Talk about a mid-life crisis! Here is Elijah, in his prime – already known and revered as the prophet of the Most High God. He is coming off of one of his more shining moments, where he has led the people of Israel to a mass conversion, and then wham! Out of the middle of nowhere, a threat is made on his life, which wasn’t anything new by the way, and suddenly he is running scared, afraid, completely depressed, and wanting to relinquish his title as the Honorary Prophet of Israel. After the heights of triumph comes the depths of despair.

Suddenly there are few “places that the beleaguered prophet finds hospitable. Certainly not in the Baalist north, from when he came. Certainly not [the Southern Kingdom which he sped right through]. Outnumbered by Baal-lovers, and apparently unloved by God-lovers, the prophet ... now flees the hostility of the world for the sterility of the desert. From the north, through the south, to the very dry edge of the world.²”

Elijah is flamed out. His soul is sagging and his brain is bagged. He has nothing left. He’s lower than a turtle’s transmission.

Not only has Elijah fled the northern kingdom of Israel, but he has traversed the length of the southern kingdom, as well, and still he does not feel safe from Jezebel’s wrath, so he journeys yet another day beyond civilization, ‘into the wilderness,’ where, either from a sense of safety or, more likely, from exhaustion, he ends his flight.³”

Seeking to escape his problems by fleeing Jezebel, Elijah wanders into the wilderness and curls up into the fetal position beneath a solitary tree. “The poor soul was dejected, disheartened, dispirited, and depressed.⁴” Life has not turned out as he has planned, so like we are all tempted to do, he runs away from his responsibilities and asks to die.

And how many of us have been there? How many of us are there today? “Never before have human beings been so constantly bombarded by the demands of the world ... The home used to ... at least [serve as] a semi-private place away from our public lives. Ironically, however, the very gadgets that make it easier to stay home yet stay in touch – personal computers, [blackberries], [cell phones] – at the same time blur the line between the private and public person. When we try to ‘escape’ to our own

¹ *New Interpreters Bible Commentary*, Vol. III, p. 138.

² Homiletics Online, “*The Tortoise Test*” – June 20, 2004.

³ Homiletics Online, “*The Tortoise Test*” – June 20, 2004.

⁴ Homiletics Online, “*Brain Training*” – June 20, 2004.

private caves, the world now comes along,⁵” inviting themselves right into our living room. In our over-scheduled lives we are always trying to impress the next person, so much so that we fail to feed our skittish souls.

Is it any wonder that psychiatrists today say that the most common emotional problem in America is depression and that it has risen to epidemic proportions. None of us are immune to it. The truth is, we will all face depression to some degree or another during our lifetime. Most of us are ashamed of it, particularly those of us who are men, largely because we see it as a sign of weakness – as a sign of incompetence or failure.

But that could not be farther from the truth. Some of the most competent people in history have wrestled with depression. People like Beethoven, Tolstoy, Abraham Lincoln, and Martin Luther. Winston Churchill battled with it his whole life and referred to it as his “black dog.”

Life simply has a way of becoming too much and at times it leaves us flabbergasted, gasping for air, and begging for things to be different. We all get to “feeling low, useless, worthless, nervous, apathetic, no-account, worried, or just plain ‘blue.’ We call it having a ‘bad day.’ Dear Abby, in her column, listed some portents of a bad day: ‘You know it’s going to be a rotten day when you wake up facedown on the pavement. You know it’s going to be a bad day when your birthday cake collapses from the weight of the candles. You know it’s not going to be a good day when you put both contact lenses in the same eye.’ Low days hit us all: even religious people, even Christians, even good, God-loving people, people like Elijah, the prophet of God.⁶”

We all have problems: marital problems, money problems, children problems, parent problems, friend problems, work problems, health problems, the list goes on. We are all afraid: afraid of failure, afraid of criticism, afraid of sickness, afraid of death, afraid of a thousand ghosts that haunt us daily⁷. And amidst it all it becomes increasingly difficult to hold onto hope.

I once heard of a ‘Peanuts’ comic strip which showed Linus and Charlie Brown talking while leaning on a fence. In it Linus says to Charlie Brown, “I guess it’s wrong to be worrying about tomorrow, maybe we should think only about today.” To which Charlie Brown interrupts him to say, “No, that’s giving up. I’m still hoping that yesterday will get better!”

Elijah has given up that yesterday will get better and he has no hope for today or vision for tomorrow. He simply wants to be alone. He simply wants to die, but instead God chooses to feed him and send him upon a journey. God does not answer his prayer as he prayed it, but instead sends him deeper into the wilderness, 150 miles deeper, a 40-day walk deeper.

⁵ Homiletics Online, “*Thunder in the Mountains, Silence in the Soul*” – 6-21-92 June 21, 1992.

⁶ “*Deep Depression or High Hope?*,” sermon by Barbara Brokhoff.

⁷ list taken from “*Deep Depression or High Hope?*,” sermon by Barbara Brokhoff.

The answer to prayer doesn't always come when and how we would expect or wish. Sometimes it demands more of us, at precisely those moments when we genuinely believe we have no more to give. Sometimes it demands more of us, even though we may believe we have already given enough, proven enough, gone far enough. Sometimes the answer to prayer, surprising leads us deeper into the wilderness.

By the time Elijah has reached his destination, his mood is sour, his complaint is formed and canned, and he is in the throes of self-pity. When he reaches the Mountain of God, where God once revealed Himself to Moses, Elijah finds a cave and tries to hide. In his cave mentality, he was a prisoner of himself. "He had shut the sunlight out of his mind. He had drawn the shutters of his heart ... Then comes the voice of God."⁸

I think it is important to note here that the voice of God does not come as we might expect. It does not come in rebuke and condemnation, but instead in conversation. "What are you doing here, Elijah?" It isn't that God doesn't already know why he is there. God in fact called and directed him there. But God wanted to give Elijah the opportunity to share his heart.

Of course, Elijah answers with his well-versed complaint. "I am zealous, but no one else is. I worship you, but everyone else is a sinner and they all want me dead." To me it sounds like that children's song that says, "nobody loves me, everybody hates me, guess I'll just go eat worms." Except Elijah is not a child and substitutes eating worms for wanting to die.

Elijah's complaints remind me of a story I once heard about a novice nun. A certain young girl entered a convent to prepare herself for a life of celibacy and service. The institution was a very strict order. Besides the requirement of poverty, chastity, and obedience, the order imposed three other regulations. Stability, meaning that she was not to leave the grounds, flagellation of flesh, and silence, not a word was to be uttered. The Mother Superior explained to the new girl that this rule of silence was very rigid. However once every five years, two words were allowed to be uttered as a privilege.

So at the end of the first five years the novice was called in and instructed that she had earned the privilege of expressing two words. To which she replied: "Food Rotten!" Five years later the Mother Superior called her in again and offered her the privilege of two more words. This time she responded: "Bed Hard!" The third time she was called in, the novice was exasperated and exclaimed: "I quit!" Whereupon the Mother Superior retorted: "Good riddance! All you have done since you arrived was complain!"

Elijah has had enough. He wants to quit. He has submitted his letter of resignation, yet God somehow doesn't seem to be listening.

What Elijah is complaining about here is a lack of power. The world is going one way, a way opposite of where Elijah believes it should, and he lacks the power to change it. He is complaining about feeling small and useless. He is complaining about the lack

⁸ "The Still Small Voice," sermon by Steven E. Burt.

of power to sway or change the public majority, and to some degree about the lack of power he feels to defend and protect himself and the God he has so faithfully served. And you know what, he's right. He does lack that power.

So what does God do? Elijah wants a demonstration of power and God shows him one. God tells him to get out of the cave and go out onto the mountain. God calls him out with a rock-shattering wind, and a mountain-splitting earthquake, and a life-consuming fire.

But God was not in those demonstrations of power. God was not in the pyrotechnics. Because God knows that pyrotechnics don't sustain us, they merely excite us. Instead God shows up, in the stillness that follows. "The sound of fine silence. That silence – the silence after the whirlwind, [after] the earthquake, and [after] the fire – is so deep and penetrating that you can hear it."⁹ It's palpable.

The display of power was a way of saying, you are powerless but I am not. God flexed His muscles, to remind Elijah of Divine power, yet Elijah was still too wrapped up in his own woes to pay close attention. He wanted a two-by-four upside the head, and he got it, but still he didn't get the message.

Notice that God did not change His question to Elijah. God is inviting him to change his response. "Despite the fact that insurance policies commonly refer to such calamities as 'acts of God,' our God is not simply [an] impersonal force of nature. Our God is a personal God, one who communicates, acts, loves, [and] comes to us."¹⁰ But Elijah doesn't get it and his complaint remains the same.

The reality is, much of life is about wilderness. Much of life is about powerlessness, and the sooner we understand that, the better we will be as individuals and as a Christian community. Remember Christ redeemed the world by dying for it. Remember His words, "Whoever seeks to find and save their life will lose it." Too often we want to be known as Savior, and in our attempts to fix everything, to make life conform to our ideals instead of God's, we run ourselves frantic and become even weaker. The weaker we feel, the more egocentric we become. Our complaints get forged and we decide to throw in the towel.

We are good at complaining, but terrible at admitting that we are not God. We are good at complaining, but terrible at listening.

Studies say that 70% of human communication happens through non-verbals. That means that almost three quarters of the knowledge we gain about others is not through what they say, but by what we see.

⁹ "The Still Small Voice," sermon by Steven E. Burt.

¹⁰ "The Still Small Voice," sermon by Steven E. Burt.

If you consider that we cannot physically see God, to pick up on non-verbal cues, then it means we must try that much harder and listen that much closer, because we are already at a serious disadvantage.

I believe God speaks to us all the time, the problem is, we aren't listening. We are caught up in our own selfish lives and our complaints are formed. The reality is, we want God in the wind! We want God in the earthquake! We want God in the fire! That kind of God is powerful! It demands our attention! But we do not know what to do with a God who whispers. That kind of God is much too subtle.

We are a fast-food society and we want a fast-food religion. We want a God who is convenient and who works on our timetable. We want to offer up our pre-cooked prayers, no matter how much they taste like cardboard. But God is not a Burger King, "your way, right away" kind of God. Instead God demands patience and reverence. God demands silence and listening.

"God has promised that in 'quietness and confidence shall be your strength.' God has said, 'Be still and know.' [But] far too often we 'rush around and guess.' The story is told of two brothers; one was 16 years old, the other only about nine. The older brother never wanted to tell the younger boy anything of his private business, so he was especially secretive when it came to courting his first girlfriend. He had gone with the girl for several weeks, and was trying to work up the nerve to kiss her.

One night he planned his evening carefully, and at the proper time he took his girl by the arm, walked casually out to the back yard, clear beyond the back fence, to an old cottonwood tree. He sat down with her under the tree. He had no idea that his kid brother had climbed the tree earlier, and now sat among the branches, seeing and hearing everything that went on. Finally, the older brother bolstered his nerve, lifting his eyes to the sky as if he were praying, and said, 'Heavenly Father, up above, may I kiss the girl I love?' Immediately he was answered by a voice from the treetops which said, 'Sixteen-year-old down below, pucker up and let'er go!'¹¹

Certainly God's voice coming to us is no childish prank. "He does come to us, he does speak to us ... sometimes through a sermon, or a prayer, maybe in the voice or actions of a friend, perhaps [through] a portion of the Scriptures, or even in the stirrings of ... conscience."¹² God does speak. God wants to engage us in conversation, but what good does it do, when we refuse to slow down and listen?

Mother Theresa once said, "We need to find God, and God cannot be found in noise and restlessness. God is the friend of silence. See how nature – trees, flowers, grass – grow in silence; see the stars, the moon, the sun, how they move in silence ... The more we receive in silent prayer, the more we can give in our active life. We need silence to be able to touch souls. The essential thing is not what we say, but what God

¹¹ "Deep Depression or High Hope," sermon by Barbara Brokhoff.

¹² "Deep Depression or High Hope," sermon by Barbara Brokhoff.

says to us and through us. All our words will be useless unless they come from within – words which do not give the light of Christ [only] increase the darkness.¹³”

In his book “Directions,” James Hamilton tells about a man who lost a valuable watch while working in an icehouse. He and his fellow workers searched diligently but could not find it. A small boy who heard about the missing watch slipped into the icehouse during the noon hour one day and soon emerged with the missing watch. The amazed workers asked him how he had found it. He said, ‘I closed the door, lay down in the sawdust, and kept very still and quiet. Soon I heard the watch ticking.’¹⁴

“God is not locked into any one mode of appearing. Sometimes God is not made known to us through flashy theophanies. Sometimes God is known in unspectacular ways, [such as] through the quiet working out of history.¹⁵” God longs to appear to you. But will you pay attention to a God who likes to speak in a gentle whisper? While God can speak through the spectacular manifestations of nature, revelation is most often found in the ordinary course of life. Will you slow down and listen?

This “chapter is blatantly honest about the humanity of God’s servants. Even the prophet who has experienced God’s providence and power has his moments of darkness.¹⁶” Yet, God does not chide him for his depression and doubt, instead God invites him into conversation and then commissions him back to the field.

Are you in the wilderness? If so, I urge you to go to the mountain of God and do not talk, but instead seek the terrifying silence that awaits and listen. Listen for God to speak in the soul-centered whisper. Listen for God to reveal his purposes and in the silence recognize the power of God to transform life. Amen.

¹³ quoted in James Roose-Evens, *The Inner Stage*, p. 130.

¹⁴ quoted from, “*A Prophet In A Panic*,” sermon delivered by Dr. Bill Bouknight.

¹⁵ *New Interpreters Bible Commentary*, Vol. III, p. 144.

¹⁶ *New Interpreters Bible Commentary*, Vol. III, p. 145.