

Waiting For God in Silence and Prayer
1 Kings 19
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9-15-13

Has anyone here ever experienced what is commonly known as awkward silence? *Pause*

If you haven't, you just did. Creators of programs like *The Office* use silence to create comedic moments, convey messages, create tension, and introduce us to the humanity of the character. And it seems that silence can be either awkward and uncomfortable, or it can be pregnant with anticipation.

Last week, we began a series of messages that we'll be preaching on the subject of prayer. We're doing so not so that we'll be more knowledgeable about prayer, but in seeing the way God's people in the Bible pray, we will draw more deeply into a life of prayer.

And what I want to suggest this morning is that silence is actually the birthplace of real connection to God. For us to grow in and grow up in our relationship to God, we must recognize the place of silence and solitude, apart from the noise of our world, is where God will actually speak to us.

Silence is the birthplace of all genuine and heartfelt prayer.

I invite you to grab a pew Bible there in front of you or the one you brought with you, and open to the Old Testament book of 1 Kings, chapter 19. If you're following along in the red pew Bibles we've made available, it is on page 319. This morning, we are going to look at a man named Elijah, and before we begin with our text, it is important to know what happens in the verses leading up that will shape our story.

Do you know the story of the Prophet Elijah calling down fire upon the offering and defeating the prophets of Baal? Many of you, yes. If you don't, I'm going to briefly recap.

In Elijah's day, God's people Israel were far away from God. In spite of all the things that God had done for them, the people continued to hedge their bets, placing their trust in a multitude of gods—one of which was the god Baal. The Bible tells about a time in which Elijah the prophet confronts the prophets of Baal. He says, "You have led the people of God away from his care and now it's time to stop, and for you to turn back to God. So I tell you what, let's see who the real god is." And do you know how they did it? They had an ancient showdown.

The Prophets of Baal pray to their gods and do all sorts of incantations, nothing. Then Elijah says to them, "Perhaps he's sleeping. Maybe if you speak louder, he'll hear you and wake up." Still nothing.

Elijah soaks *his* offering with water six times and he prays a simple prayer: “God, I ask you to show up and show these people you are real.” Fire comes down and the offering is completely consumed.

This is a major victory for God and for Elijah. And you would think that this would be the thing that causes the people to return to God and worship him, but do you know what happens? Things pretty much stay the same. And this is where we pick up our text today, so I invite you to follow along with me in 1 Kings 19 beginning at verse 1:

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 as the life of one of them by this time tomorrow.” Then he was afraid, and he arose and ran for his life and came to Beersheba, which belongs to Judah, and left his servant there.

So Ahab goes and tells his wife Jezebel what just happened, and instead of saying, “Let’s turn to God and worship him,” she says, “Let’s kill Elijah.”

Have you ever tried to do something really, really good and it didn’t work out and you were really disappointed? Has anyone had that experience? How about when you are doing your very best to follow God, you know that God wants you to do this thing, with your family or work or spouse, and you do it and God shows up and its wonderful, but then the result of it is like nothing at all changes. Has anyone had that experience? Does it make you feel depressed?

Elijah is depressed and afraid, so he sets out with his servant from Samaria and travels south to a place called the Negev Desert, to a city called Beersheba, which is about 75 miles from Samaria in the southernmost part of the region of Judah. It is a desolate place. Can you imagine their conversation along the way: “What did we do wrong? What can we do better next time?” For those two or three days as they walked, they strategized. When they got to Beersheba, Elijah said to his friend, “From here on forward I’m going by myself.”

Continuing with verse 4, it says that **he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness.** This is solitude. Elijah has no distractions and he’s alone, and as he walks, his soul waits for God alone—you remember this is what David the Psalmist said in Psalm 62. As a community and as God’s people, I cannot stress this enough, it is good for us to find times and spaces in our lives when we don’t have our cell phones, or computers, televisions, or calendars in front of us, when we are not burdened by a deadline or a project, where we are simply alone. These are the times, this is the place, where prayer begins.

Now when Elijah gets one day into the wilderness, look at what he prays in verse four: **“it is enough; now O Lord, take away my life, for I am no better than my fathers.”**

If you go into silence and solitude seeking to hear the voice of God, do you know what you are going to hear first? You're going to hear what is going on in your own soul. Has anyone else had this experience where you try to be quiet and listen to God and all you hear is a bunch of other voices, the noise of what is incessantly going on around us? Then if you stay with it long enough to silence those voices, you know the next thing you'll hear? It's the sound of your own voice and all the messages it is telling you: "You should have done this, you aren't doing this well enough, you forgot to make that phone call or send that email," and so on.

The voice we hear when we are finally able to slow down and get quiet before God is the voice of what is going on in our own soul. What Elijah experiences when he goes into a time of solitude before God is discouragement; Elijah is really depressed. One of the most pervasive challenges in our culture today is not only the constant noise around us, but also the profound loneliness and isolation of our digital culture and the messages people hear when they live so much of their life in isolation.

But what the Scriptures teach us, when we allow ourselves to become quiet and remove all the distractions, is that you and I are not actually alone. You're not alone even in solitude. In fact, in those times, do you realize that you are actually nearer to God than any other time, and God is near to you? The Scriptures teach us that God is the one who binds up the broken hearted and who is near to the lost, the lonely, and the depressed.

The second thing from this text that we learn is that in silence and in solitude, when all other voices are muted, God speaks.

Did you see what happened when Elijah finally gives up all his worry and depression and anxiety and heartbreak to God? He takes a nap. Do I have any nap takers in here? I admit I struggle with naps; my wife loves them though. Let me ask you this, when do you like to nap most, what season? When I can, I'm a fall napper.

But do you see what is happening here? As soon as Elijah has quieted his heart and released all the noise and the voices, first, he realizes that he is very discouraged. But second, in the midst of that discouragement, God comes to him and shows him that he's not alone, and then and only then is Elijah able to rest. A depressed or anxious person is a person who never gets any rest. When Elijah learns he's not alone, he is finally able to rest.

Just this week I was really stressed, we had meetings here at church and we're still moving some things into our home, and we had taxes to fill out for my wife's Law Firm. I was stressed. But when I got home from my meetings and had a chance to talk to Amy, I learned that she had already completed the taxes, and do you know what happened then? It was like a thousand pound weight was lifted from me because I realized there was someone there with me, and that I was not alone. That night I slept, and I slept and I slept. Thursday morning of this week I didn't wake up until 8:30am, something that has not happened for well over a year.

After Elijah rests for a while, a messenger of the Lord wakes him up and gives him some good food, some desert baked bread and fresh water, and then he rests some more. Then a messenger came again and woke him up and gave him more to eat and said, “Get up, the journey is too great for you.” Then he traveled 40 days to Mount Horeb (or Mount Sinai), and there God instructs him to go into a cave, because that is where God is going to reveal himself to Elijah. Elijah was able to find himself in silence, and now he is ready to hear from God.

From the mouth of the cave, Elijah hears from God, and here we pick up with verse 9, **“What are you doing here, Elijah?”** God then says for Elijah to wait at the mouth of the cave where God will pass by. And then it says in verse 11: **And behold, the Lord passed by, and a great and strong wind tore the mountains and broke in pieces the rocks 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 the sound of a low whisper. And when Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his cloak and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. And behold, there came a voice to him and said, “What are you doing here, Elijah?”**

And the very simple, but profound lesson that God I think wants to teach us here is that when we remain with God long enough in silence and still the voices and cease from asking for things from God or worrying with our hearts, when we’re willing to simply quiet our hearts, God speaks. God is present and active not just to the one who keeps talking, but the one who waits who is quiet and expectant. To Elijah God says, “What are you doing here?”

You know, so often in our lives, we get so busy with tasks, going here and there, our lives are full of stuff, and maybe you’re like me that when things get too chaotic I find myself asking what is it all for? And this is exactly what God does. He asks Elijah, **“What are you doing here?”** Or what is your purpose? God takes us back to basics when we’re quiet before him in prayer.

Then, and this is the last bit of the text I want to look at, God says to Elijah, **“Go.”** Only from the place of solitude and prayer with God can we return to our jobs, our families, our business with perspective and purpose. God says **“Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus. And when you arrive, you shall anoint Hazeal to be king over Syria.”**

God wants Elijah to be a part of his mission in the world. And this is the most important point for us, too: God wants you to be a part of his mission moving forward, and the way we will learn to hear his Word to us that says go, the only way we will be the wife or the husband he wants you to be, the only way you will be the employee or teacher or sales person or pastor or student or CEO, the only way you will be the person God wants you to be and carry out the mission God has for you is when you learn to pray in silence. When we learn to sit, as David said, with your soul waiting and open for God, God will speak, and then God will tell us to go.

Author Henri Nouwen says that a word that bears fruit is a word that emerges from silence. This is true not just now, but since the foundations of the world. From the silence of nothingness, God said, "Let there be light," to the place in the beginning where it was only the Word, and the Word was with God. To the silence of the cross in which all hopes were dashed and the world fell back into a hushed nothingness, to those glorious words spoken into a silent room where the disciples, "Peace be with you." To those final words we call the great commission in which Jesus commands us then to "go" and make disciples. Only in our willingness to be silent before God is God eager and willing to erupt into our lives with words of promise, words of hope, words of compassion, and words of commission.

Here now at the close of our time together, I want to invite us to simply engage in a few moments of silence. I invite you, in as much as you are able, to allow the voices and messages you hear to fall away and listen for the still small voice of God. Then after our time together in silence, I am going to invite you to stand and turn to your neighbor and speak the words Jesus shared with his disciples on Resurrection Day when he said, "Peace be with you."

Let us pray.