

“Hearing the Voice of God”

1 Kings 19:9b-21

June 30, 2013

6th Sunday After Pentecost

We seem to be a society addicted to the spectacular. These days, a movie can't just tell a story. If it wants to be truly a blockbuster, a movie must have spectacular special effects that wow us. A phone today can't simply make phone calls and receive them. Phones must allow us to listen to music, see movies, and hook up to the internet. It's the same way with a computer. Woe to the computer that merely computes, processes words, and the like. Computers must allow us to send electronic mail, play games, and video conference with family, friends, or business associates hundreds or thousands of miles away.

It is no wonder that we bring this thirst for the spectacular when we deal with challenges within the church. We remember the “good old days” when more people joined the church and more people worshiped more regularly than now. We look to the number of people in our community who don't even claim any connection to a church any more and we feel the need to reach out with the Gospel of Jesus Christ. We notice the number of people who are still on our church membership roles, but have not attended worship or anything else in years and we feel the need to reach in with the Gospel of Jesus Christ. We look within ourselves and may also notice a certain spiritual boredom or apathy within us which troubles us and we feel the need to perk up or revive our spiritual lives.

So, naturally, being children of the culture around us, we look for some spectacular solutions to these problems. We want a dynamic evangelism program that shows us exactly what to say and to bring people in. We want the exciting activities which will lure the inactive members back into the church. And we want something spectacular in our own lives which will change our blasé attitude and get us “on fire” for the Lord.

We assume something spectacular, something exciting, something amazing will convert people to the faith, bring people back to the faith, or rejuvenate our own faith. But have we assumed

correctly? Is this the way the Lord works – through the spectacular? Our text today from the Old Testament lesson would indicate otherwise.

It is the story of the prophet, Elijah, who was undergoing some tough times. He remembered the “good old days” easily because they had just occurred a few days ago. He had defeated the 450 prophets of Baal in a classic confrontation on Mount Carmel. By his word, a three year drought in the land had been brought an end. Those were pretty spectacular accomplishments.

Now things had changed. Elijah had run away in fear because his life had been threatened by Queen Jezebel. He was sitting alone in a cave all by himself, and he was complaining. There were three things bothering Elijah. First, he whined about how zealous he had been for the Lord and how hard he had worked for the Lord. Secondly, he complained about how unfaithful the people of Israel had been. They had thrown down the altars of the Lord and killed His prophets. Thirdly, Elijah boasted that he was the only faithful person alive in Israel and now they wanted to kill him.

In Elijah’s pity party, there is the implied desire for God to do something about this mess and in a spectacular way. Elijah wanted to see the Lord’s power here – some visible and measurable wrath of God to rectify the situation. So the Lord told Elijah to go out, stand on the mount of the Lord, and watch. God was going to do something.

Then the Lord unleashes His power. There was “a great and strong wind that tore the mountains and broke in pieces the rocks before the Lord.” This is pretty powerful stuff here. But, the text says, “the Lord was not in the wind.” After the wind, there came a mighty earthquake, another clear display of the Lord’s power. Yet, again, “the Lord was not in the earthquake.” After the earthquake, there came a great fire. Again, more power from the Lord and, again, “the Lord was not in the fire.”

The Lord’s power was evident. He can do anything He wants and He can do it in spectacular fashion. But that’s not always the way the Lord chooses to work. He can accomplish His will through seemingly smaller and weaker ways as our text indicates.

After all the divine fireworks, there comes the “sound of a low whisper.” This was not spectacular. This did not seem powerful. But this is where the Lord was and this was how the Lord was going to work.

Elijah, who apparently had not obeyed the Lord’s command to come out of cave earlier, now wraps his face in his cloak and timidly comes out of the cave to listen. This low whisper was the very Word of God. Although unspectacular to the casual observer, this Word of God had the power to declare reality and then to bring about reality.

With regard to Israel’s unfaithfulness, the Lord would deal with this situation by sending Elijah to anoint Hazael as king over Syria and Jehu as king over Israel. They would take care of the problem of unfaithfulness by putting to death those who were unfaithful. Whoever escaped the sword of Hazael would be killed by Jehu. With regard to Elijah’s hard work and faithfulness and the possibility of him “burning out”, the Lord would take care of this problem by providing a faithful successor in the person of Elisha. With regard to Elijah’s claim that he was the only faithful person left in Israel, the Lord would take care of this problem by leaving 7,000 faithful people who had neither bowed before Baal nor kissed him in Israel.

The wind, earthquake, and fire, as powerful and spectacular as they had been, did not solve the problems because, even through they were caused by God, they were not the essence of God. The low whisper, as weak and unnoticeable as it had been, took care of the problem because it was the voice of God Himself and has the power to declare and the power to do what it declares.

The Lord does the same today. Like Elijah, we whine about how hard we have worked for the Lord when other people will not; complain about how unfaithful people have been to the Lord, and moan about how persecuted we are. In the midst of our disappointment and frustration, we expect the Lord to do something powerful and noticeable to correct the situation in the way we think it should be done and in the time frame in which we think it should be done.

Instead, we get the low whisper. Now some have said that Elijah listened to the still small voice within himself. That's not true. That which saves us is always outside of us. Any voice from within us is tainted and corrupted by sin. It does not and cannot save. This low whisper does not come from Elijah. It comes to Elijah. This is the Word of the Lord which came to Elijah and which now comes to us. The Word of the Lord does not come to us with power and might, but quietness and humility.

The Word does not descend with glory from on high to assume power. "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us" to serve. (John 1:14) It was a birth unnoticed in a tiny village of peasants and disregarded by all who were there, save a band of dirty shepherds. His entrance was a "low whisper" indeed.

The Word made flesh, Jesus Christ, does not bring salvation through a display of military might in which He kills His enemies. Jesus brings salvation by humbly offering His own life as the payment for all sins so that His enemies – all of humanity – might live forever. It was death by criminal execution on the most horrible instrument of torture ever devised – a Roman cross. It makes no sense to those expecting the spectacular or to those expecting a sensible plan. Even Jesus' resurrection from the dead, a truly spectacular action to us, was seen by a few, believed by some, and dismissed by many as a lie or deception. Even with the resurrection, His saving act was a "low whisper" indeed.

And, now, the Word of the Lord comes to us, not with spectacular miracles which we might expect and not with a show of force which many of us would like. The Word of the Lord comes to us, delivering the gifts of the Lord, in a low whisper – in ways which we do not expect or ways which we might have a hard time accepting.

First, the Word of the Lord – the Creator of the Universe – is published in an ordinary book made of ink, paper, and leather. How amazing is that – to have the word of the Lord in portable and

printable form. It's no wonder that so many Christians doubt and so many other people disbelieve the Bible as the Word of God. It is so unbelievable....such a "low whisper."

Secondly, the Word of the Lord – the Savior of all people – is spoken audibly and verbally every week. The Lord chooses to speak, not in a voice thundering from heaven, but in a voice speaking from a pulpit, through a man whom He has chosen and in whom He places His Words. In the reading of the Scriptures and the preaching of the Word, the Lord speaks His Law which condemns us for our sin and sends us straight to hell. He speaks the Gospel which saves us from our sin and sends us straight to heaven. Most pastors, although speaking the Word of the Lord, serve in anonymity and humility. Many people (even members of their own churches) do not notice them or pay attention to them. They are but "low whispers".

Thirdly, the Word of the Lord – the Giver of great gifts – delivers His gifts through physical means. These physical items are not dynamic, spectacular, or monetarily magnificent. They are ordinary – water, bread, and wine.

Water is just water and can only clean the body, not the soul. But water with the Word of God becomes a baptism which washes away sin from the soul, creates new life, and guarantees salvation.

Bread and wine are edible staples and can only provide physical sustenance. But bread and wine with the Word of God unites the very body and blood of Jesus Christ with the bread and the wine and with us who eat and drink this holy food. Holy Communion brings forgiveness of sins, strength for faith, and unity with our Savior and with those who partake with us.

Even many Christians cannot believe such spectacular results from such humble means in the Sacraments. Such a low whisper indeed!

These spectacular gifts – not that they are delivered in an unspectacular ways – is what makes all the difference in the world. The Word of the Lord became flesh for you. He died on a cross for you and earned forgiveness for your sins. He speaks His Word of Law and Gospel through a human

voice for you and your benefit. His Word brings cleansing, new life, and faith for you in the water of Holy Baptism. His Word brings forgiveness, strength, and unity for you in the Lord's Supper.

This means you have the strength to carry on when you feel overworked in your service to the Lord. This means you have hope as you reach out to unbelievers and in to inactive believers with these means. What the Lord has done for you, He will do for them. And what the Lord has used with you, He will use with them. This also means you have comfort when you feel lonely as a Christian in this world. Through the Word of the Lord in Holy Baptism and Holy Communion, you are always united with our Lord and with all other Christians – not just the ones sitting next to you this morning, but to all who have ever lived or ever will live. You are never alone!

Be counter cultural. Do not give in to the culture's demand for the spectacular when it comes to the things of God. Instead, listen for the "low whisper". It may not attract attention. It may not astound. It may not be what we want it to be or what we think it should be. But in the low whisper of the Lord, we find Him. In the low whisper of the Lord, we receive His gifts of forgiveness, life, strength, support and salvation. And that, ultimately, is all that matters. Amen.