

## “God Speaks To Us In Silence”

1Kings 19:9-13

October 23, 2011

Rev. Jeong Park

Fair Oaks United Methodist Church

There was a best-selling book, *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus (1992)*, which was published almost twenty years ago (it sold 7 million copies). A relationship counselor named John Gray wrote this book. This book deals with the differences between men and women. One of the major ideas in this book is the difference in the way men and women react under stress. According to his theory, men become focused and withdrawn, retreating to their “caves” where they can find a solution to their problem. In some cases, they may literally retreat, for example, to the garage or to spend time with friends. But, women, on the other hand, deal with stress by talking about the problem. Talk, for women, creates intimacy.

Today’s story is about a man whose heart, soul and body was deeply troubled; literally, he was retreating to a “cave.” His name is the prophet, Elijah. We didn’t read his whole story this morning. There was a behind the scene moment which explains why he had to run away to this “cave” for his shelter on Mt. Horeb. After he won the victory over the King Ahab, his queen sent a threat and tried to kill him. In our reading, we see him fearful, scared, exhausted and depressed. He was totally burned out physically, mentally and spiritually. He desperately confessed to God, “Lord, I have had enough. I am exhausted, tired and I can’t do any more. I want to die.” When he was in despair and crisis, he wanted to let go of the ‘last straw’ in his life. In this struggling moment, God came down and spoke to him with a gentle and quiet “whisper” that assured him that he is not alone. God told him, “I am with you.” (We didn’t read v.18 here, but God promised him that he reserved seven thousand for him in Israel all whose knees have not bowed down to Baal and all whose mouths have not kissed him." (19:18))

Let’s revisit to the story of Elijah. What happened to him? King Ahab brought an idol, Baal to the Kingdom of Israel as his God and Elijah warned him to stop worshipping the idol. So, there was a contest with the prophets of Baal, a competition to prove who God is for real on Mount Carmel. Both sides built a sacrificial altar, and when the prophets of Baal prayed to their god to light the fire on their altar, nothing happened. When Elijah prayed to God, fire came down from heaven and ignited his altar. Elijah experienced a great victory. His God, Yahweh, was proven to be the true God, the one the people had worshipped as the true God, and the Baal prophets had been put to death.

But this also became a very vulnerable time for Elijah. As soon as Jezebel heard of the victory of Elijah, she sent her messenger with her threat and tried to kill him. Being disappointed, he became fearful and afraid, so he ran away for his life down to Beersheba and then beyond into the desert. Now, he was alone, exhausted, and in the wilderness by himself without food and water. Of course, he was not alone because the Lord was there, but he felt totally alone, helpless, fearful, hurt, and felt as if he was a failure. He experienced a mountain-top experience, but now he had to watch for the valleys that followed. He came to a “cave” on Mt. Horeb. The very name Horeb or Sinai reminds us of images of a powerful and awesome God who showed miracles before the people's eyes. Elijah was on that very mountain of God where it all started. But his situation is not glorious at all. Although he showed the true God to the people of Israel, what returned to him was fear of being killed. He was in despair, disappointed, and hopeless in his faith. He wanted to die here.

How does Elijah's story relate to our life journey? In a sense, life is like a rollercoaster: there are ups and downs. Even though we know that Elijah is one of the greatest prophets (the Bible says, he goes to heaven without death), he was a man with a nature like ours. Just like the rest of us, he experienced the problem of depression which is mental and emotional feelings of discouragement, worthlessness, guilt and failure. It is true that life is not easy to live in. According to doctors Minirth and Meier, the number one problem in America is depression. At the present time, one American in 20 is medically diagnosed as suffering from depression. According to one estimate, about 20 million persons in America between the ages of eighteen and 74 are currently depressed.

Life is not only full of happy things. There are times of joy and gladness in life, but there are also times of pain, despair and crisis. We have experienced these in our journey of life already or we may sometime in the future of our life. Life is about relationships like a spider web; inevitably, we are supposed to experience misunderstandings, hurt, or being hurt, betraying or betrayed by people. Life is full of surprises, sometimes good ones but not always pleasant things. Where is God in the midst of this depression and suffering in our difficult time? What lesson can we get from the story of Elijah? Many today would want to see God in the fantastic and sensational actions of God. We need to notice how Elijah experienced God's voice and presence in his difficult time. As we know, Mount Horeb was also the very mountain where Moses had encountered God in the fire of a burning bush. It was at that mountain, also called Mount Sinai, that God had given the law to Moses amid fire, smoke, and thunder. But God didn't reveal his presence in this way to Elijah.

God called Elijah out of a cave and asked him to find where God is. Verse 1 says, "Go out and stand on the mountain before the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by." What happened? In Eugene Peterson's version, he describes it like this: "A hurricane wind ripped through the mountains and shattered the rocks before GOD, but GOD wasn't to be found in the wind; after the wind was an earthquake, but GOD wasn't in the earthquake; and after the earthquake was fire, but GOD wasn't in the fire; and after the fire a gentle and quiet whisper came." We don't exactly know what a gentle and quiet whisper was, but we can see the contrast between a hurricane wind and a gentle and quiet whisper. In his most vulnerable moment, God humbly came down to Elijah and spoke to him with a gentle voice. What was it? We didn't read it, but next chapter at verse 18, God promised him that "Don't be scared, afraid, I will be with you. I will protect you and preserve seven thousand people for you." God's voice came to Elijah's eyes with a hope and strength.

Can we hear God's gentle and quiet voice in our life situation? I am not talking about a majestic, glorious and mighty God, but God's comforting voice to our broken hearts when we are left alone, and struggle with our problems which overwhelm us. When we become exhausted, scared and vulnerable, can we focus on God by not focusing on our problems in our quiet moment? Then, I believe that God will invite us out of our "cave", and guide us to hear God's voice in our personal moments. Even in silence, God speaks to us and we can listen to it. On Mount Carmel, God had brought fire from the sky on Mount Carmel. Yet, that is not the only way God works in our world. Sometimes He is heard unexpectedly in the soft and subtle sounds of life as we are gently drawn to listen. We must be willing to listen, intently. We should know that God is not always in the loud and showy parts of our life. We should know that a "gentle whisper" can speak "louder" and "more clearer" to us than a violent earthquake, a powerful wind, or a raging fire.

God encouraged and strengthened Elijah back to involvement for God's mission. When Elijah was honest and vulnerable to God, God renewed him and gave him assurance with strength. He was still God's prophet. In the middle of our journey in life, we often become tired or feel we are good enough. We have inadequate feelings of failure and guilt about our life, and we retreat to a "cave" like Elijah. Our God is willing to come down to us and find us. He wants us to listen to His gentle and quiet voice. In order to catch the voice, we need to be vulnerable before God and to be honest with God laying down our pride. Just have a personal encounter between you and God. That is the meaning of "retreat". God is at work in unseen ways in our life and world, not just in the spectacular. I hope and pray that we all can listen to God's voice. May God

grant you his comfort and encouragement and restore you by his grace and blessings in your life.