

Down in the Dumps
By Rev. Susan W. Holderness

Selections I Kings 18 & 19
Mark 6:45-51

RRPC
July 22, 2018

One of the joys of begin a supply preacher is that the congregation is usually very forgiving—so if the preacher forgets a part of the service, as long as it is not the offering, or messes up the order, usually folks will just shake it off. But to let you know, I have not forgotten the second scripture reading, Instead of reading all of I Kings chapter 18 and 19 to you, I am going to tell it like a story--the way the original hearers would have experienced the story, though I hope to put a few 2018 interpretations in it. I'm guessing many or most of you will not know the beginning of the story, though you may know the ending, and if you remember nothing else I say, I hope you will learn a new OT lesson today.

A long time ago, in a place, far far away..... almost 3000 years and about 6000 miles, there lives a king of Israel. His name is Ahab. The people had begged for a king, but they weren't expecting someone like Ahab. He is despised by the prophets and the faithful of Israel. He does the unthinkable and marries Jezebel, who worships Baal—a foreign God, or one they claim as a god. Even if you don't know the name Ahab, you probably have heard of Jezebel—or at least know how the name is used today—a shameless, morally corrupt woman. This is a holdover from this woman almost 3000 years ago.

Jezebel has lots of influence over Ahab and has him build a place of worship for Baal and she kills many of Yahweh's prophets (I Kings 18: 13). Other prophets were so scared of her that they go along with the Baal worship. She wants the Israelite kingdom to know that Baal is the strongest of the Gods and is to be worshiped by all under the rule of Ahab. However, Yahweh, the God of the faithful Israelites calls the prophet, Elijah, to bring the Israelites back to worship God, not Baal. God instructs Elijah to set up a competition.

We see competitive contest on TV—survivor, dancing with the stars, bachelor or bachelorette. But this was something much bigger. It was North Korea and the US battling over nuclear weapons. Who is the strongest? Who will have power? Who will lead and be first? Who will they worship?

Let's find out.

There has been a terrible drought. People and animals were dying, which meant their live hood and their own future were in doubt. All the land and wood were very dry. It would not take much for things to catch on fire. The prayers to Baal for rain have not been answered.

It is not like our contests today—no TV, no internet notices, no 24 hour, all news, all day. But Elijah wants lots of folks there, so he tells Ahab

to bring about 800 of those who follow Baal—including the prophets that no longer worshiped Yahweh, to the mountain top. He, also, tells Ahab to bring two bulls and put one the wood but don't light the fire. Then let the prophets of Baal pray to their god, and then Elijah will pray to the Lord, and the God who answers by sending fire. That one is God. The people shout their approval.

Elijah lets the Baal worshippers go first—how nice of him. They put the bull on the dry wooden altar. They pray, "Answer us, Baal!" and dance around the altar they have built. But no answer comes...

Elijah makes fun of them: "Pray louder! He is a god! Maybe he is day-dreaming or relieving himself, or perhaps he's gone off on a trip! Or maybe he's sleeping, and you've got to wake him up! (18:27) They continues to pray and dance all day long, but the fire is never lit by Baal.

Finally, Elijah gets a chance. He not only puts his bull on the altar, he is really very obnoxious about it. He builds a trench around the altar, and tells the people to take some of that very precious water, (remember there had been a drought for 3 years) 4 jars full, and pour it over the wood. He is so sure that Yahweh will light the wood that he wants it drenching wet--- three times they add water to the wood-- so that the trench they built is full of water. Then Elijah prays to Yahweh, a very simple prayer:

"Answer me, Lord, answer me, so that this people will know that you, the Lord, are God and that you are bringing them back to yourself." (v.37)

The wood catches on fire and consumes everything, even the water in the trenches. The people now know-- Yahweh has shown all of them that He is greater than Baal.

When the people saw this, they threw themselves on the ground and exclaimed, "The Lord is God; the Lord alone is God!"

And then the rains came, ending the drought....

Elijah had done his job by bring God's people back to the fold. Elijah is flying high! And that is where we often end the story. End with the triumph, of course. But, There is more to the story.

Not surprising, if you think about it, Queen Jezebel threatens Elijah with death. Certainly he is no longer afraid of her.....not true!

Elijah shows his humanness, something we may be able to identify with---he runs away to hide. Elijah goes from this complete, literal, mountain top experience, where The Israelite God "shows up" and demolishes the most popular god of the time, to running away to hide. So much for faith in God taking care of him! He may be an OT prophet but we have lots of similarities with him! He is scared and feeling alone and only a few moments after an experience of God he is feeling down in the dumps...

I am reminded of Judith Viorst's wonderful children's book. Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day. It begins with Alexander speaking...

I went to sleep with gum in my mouth

and now there is gum in my hair
 and when I got out of bed this morning I tripped on my skateboard
 and by mistake I dropped my sweater in the sink while the water was
 running
 and I could tell it was going to be a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad
 day.

Alexander doesn't find a prize in his cereal
 He doesn't get a seat by the window on the way to school,
 He leaves out the number 16 when he counts,
 His mother forgets to put dessert in his lunch bag.
 There were lima beans for dinner
 And kissing on the TV
 And he wants to move to Australia, but his mom tells him that some days are
 like that...even in Australia....

And like Alexander, Elijah is not having a terrible, horrible, no good,
 very bad day. He goes into the wilderness and sits down under a broom tree
 and tells God he would just as soon die. He is having his own pity party, not
 liking where his life is leading right now...certainly not with Jezebel's threat
 of death. Take away my life, O God.

But that is NOT what God does. Instead of reprimanding Elijah for
 losing his faith so quickly, God provides an angel, or a messenger of God,
 with food and water, and Elijah sleeps. Even when Elijah has little faith left,
 God takes care of him. But it is still not enough for Elijah.

Elijah wanders along, moving from the shade of the tree to hiding in a
 cave. I wonder if he really thinks that God wouldn't "see" him, wouldn't
 know he was in the cave. It reminds me of 18-24 month old children when
 you play peek-a-boo. When they cover their eyes, they think you can't see
 them, because they can't see you! Elijah may be thinking: I'll go inside a
 cave and God won't know I'm here.

But God knows and asks, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" (19:9)
 Well to be honest, God I'm feeling sorry for myself. I had this great
 experience of you and your power, but it didn't last. Now the queen is saying
 she will have me killed and somehow I have forgotten that you have more
 power than she, so I think I'll hide out until she is no longer a threat...

Maybe that would have been the honest answer, but instead he just
 complains: I'm the only one left and they want to kill me. Life went from
 really good, to really bad, from a sense of power and being appreciated as a
 servant of God, to a death threat...and Elijah doesn't know how to handle it.
 He expects to find God in the wind, or the earthquake, or in the fire. In the
 great wondrous events. Without that, he is not sure of God's presence.

In many ways, the disciples in our Mark passage are similar. They
 have just seen Jesus feed 5000. What a miracle. But afterwards, when the
 wind picks up, and they are straining with the oars to get their boat back to
 land, they, too, are afraid for their lives. They do not connect the miracle of

the feeding of the 5000 with their present situation. They have already forgotten that if Jesus cares enough about their physical health to provide bread and fish, he will continue to care for them when the wind rushes against their boat. In Mark's version Jesus does not command the wind to stop...all he does is step into the boat...he joins them. His presence is with them—literally. It is I. Don't be afraid. It must have sounded like a soft whisper after the noise of the wind.

Yes, God can, and does at times, give us mountain top experiences as believers. But even when that does not happen, God is still here with us. God may speak to us with just a hush, like a soft whisper as we hide away in a cave. God may speak through the smallest of events—or sometimes not even speak at all, but just be with us. Sometimes God is almost impossible to hear.

Those dramatic experiences of God are wonderful.

A mission trip where we see the hand of God through the volunteers' work... a small membership church that does so much through their hospitality... a clear medical report...

a letter that says we got into our first choice college.

These are ways we can see, and even tell others, about how God answers our prayer, and know for sure that God is directing our lives.

But sometimes God speaks in the still small voice, the inclination, the whisper to Elijah and the disciples. How will we know if we are not still, and do not wait, and do not listen? This may be the catch. We may need to be quiet in order to recognize the experience. We have to turn off our iPods, our TVs, our computers, our XM radios, our talk show hosts, our chattering at work.

There are few places in our everyday lives now where we quiet. Do we turn off the noise and tell God what is going on in our lives? Do we read the news and pray for the events we read about? Do we sit with scripture and wait for our minds and hearts to hear God's leading in our lives?

When talk show hosts are screaming to see who can be heard, when we choose our news by who agrees with us, when we come to worship on Sundays but are not connected to God at any other time during the week...how are we going to recognize a whisper?

How ironic it is that often our lives are quiet only when it forced on us: When we are sick in bed with only our thoughts to occupy us, or when we are up till 2 AM wondering where our teenager is, or when we sit by a hospital bed and worry about our aging parents.

Yesterday, while fixing a meal for a friend who had surgery, I thought about my sermon. I turned off the music "Alexa" was playing. I heard the bird singing. I looked out and saw the sun peeking out from the clouds. I realized I felt peaceful and how grateful I was for that peaceful feeling where moments before I was concerned about the meal I was cooking.

We'd all prefer God to speak to us, and to guide our lives, in dramatic ways. Those mountain top highs are wonderful and often get us through days of feeling down in the dumps. Yes remember those wonderful experiences.

But sometimes God doesn't work that way. I'd venture to say, most of the time God doesn't work that way in our lives. We have to be watchful, quiet, and listen. We need to be still. How else will we know to pay attention to that one phrase in Scripture that keeps rolling around in our head? What about that moment when we stop and noticed the bloom on the flower and thank the person caring for it? What about the person who keeps urging us to do something, as if that nudge might be from God? What about the joyous giggles we hear from a young child, that make us giggle with delight, too?

Try it.

Be watchful.

Be quiet.

God is still speaking.

In a soft whisper.

Listen.