

*The Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost*  
September 4, 2011  
Amazing Grace Lutheran Church - Pastor Chip Wilke

1 Kings 19:9-18

*There he went into a cave and spent the night. And the word of the LORD came to him: "What are you doing here, Elijah?" He replied, "I have been very zealous for the LORD God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, broken down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too." The LORD said, "Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by." Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake came a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper. When Elijah heard it, he pulled his cloak over his face and went out and stood at the mouth of the cave. Then a voice said to him, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" He replied, "I have been very zealous for the LORD God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, broken down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too." The LORD said to him, "Go back the way you came, and go to the Desert of Damascus. When you get there, anoint Hazael king over Aram. Also, anoint Jehu son of Nimshi king over Israel, and anoint Elisha son of Shaphat from Abel Meholah to succeed you as prophet. Jehu will put to death any who escape the sword of Hazael, and Elisha will put to death any who escape the sword of Jehu. Yet I reserve seven thousand in Israel--all whose knees have not bowed down to Baal and all whose mouths have not kissed him." (NIV)*

What if God said to us "wait right here and in a minute you will see my presence as I come by?" What would we expect to see? How do we envision the Lord appearing to us? Some might think of God's presence on Mt. Sinai with the shaking ground, smoke, and thundering voice. Others might picture a consuming fire or God as holding a big lightning bolt in His hand always ready to strike. But by grace alone, this is not the first picture you and I have of our God, is it? If God told us to wait for Him we don't envision His coming to us right now in this way, do we?

In what ways does the Creator of heaven and earth work in this world? By what means does the Almighty One come to people in order to turn their wicked hearts back to Him? What will the eternal Alpha and Omega do and what message might the Lord send to a nation which has turned against Him and turned to worthless idols? I suppose God could shake the earth so that it crumbles and opens swallowing every living creature, like He once did to the sons of Korah who rebelled against Him in the desert. God could send down fire from the sky like He did upon Sodom and Gomorrah, or like He recently did in answer to Elijah's prayer by licking up the sacrifice in a spectacular display of power. God could even garner some attention by sending hurricane type winds - winds so strong that a crowd might begin to gather in wonder as they did on Pentecost. But again you and I, who have heard the sweet Gospel, know we have a Creator God who works in the world another way. We've experienced how our God works, and comes to people, and

changes hearts in a much different way than through mighty acts of judgment. May we, this morning, be encouraged and comforted with Elijah with the good news that: **The Lord still speaks to sinners in a still small voice.**

We read: *"There he went into a cave and spent the night. And the word of the LORD came to him: "What are you doing here, Elijah?"* What Elijah is doing in this cave is pretty well known from our Bible history. He had been running for his life. Again. This time Elijah thought things would change in Israel. After all, the battle at Mt. Carmel was no contest. Elijah had stood firm there all alone for the Lord against the 450 prophets of the false god Baal and 400 prophets of the false goddess Asherah. When the Lord proved to be the one true and only God, who alone answers prayer, all the people had to conclude - The Lord He is God! Then all the false prophets were put to death. Elijah, with more than a skip in his step, ran in a pouring rain ahead of Ahab all the way to Jezreel ready for a change. Certainly, Ahab would drop to His knees in repentance and turn back in faith to the Lord. Most likely one of the biggest reforms would take place as people would come flocking by the hundreds back to the one true God - right!

Yet, for God's servant the reality was the sobering opposite. Wicked king Ahab went whining about what happened to those prophets to his even more corrupt wife Jezebel. She sends a messenger to Elijah to say: *"May the gods deal with me, be it ever so severely, if by this time tomorrow I do not make your life like that of one of them."* No wonder the prophet of God ran in fear. No wonder Elijah was discouraged. No wonder he ran about 100 miles away to where he sat under a broom tree and prayed that he might die saying: *"I have had enough, LORD,"* After the Lord provided him food and water so he could travel another 40 days and nights, another 200 miles on foot, to the mountain of Horeb also known as Mt. Sinai, it isn't surprising at all what Elijah is doing here. He is afraid and dejected and hiding in this cave on this mountain.

Perhaps this also helps us understand the prophet's answer. *He replied, "I have been very zealous for the LORD God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, broken down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too."* When we examine the ministry of Elijah, he is not exaggerating here. Elijah was a passionate servant of God. He was literally jealous for God and would not bend when it came to God's Word. He spoke boldly and faithfully for the Lord. Now he felt like his ministry was a complete failure. Look at the results. The Israelites rejected God's words - even killing those who spoke them. They want to kill me too, says Elijah. He feels all alone saying he was the only one left. What good had he done? What good were the words he had spoken?

Now the Lord, the God of free and faithful love, the God of grace who never changes, wants to teach an all important lesson to his servant, Elijah - to His servants, us. He orders Elijah to go out and stand at the mouth of the cave and wait for the presence of the Lord as the Lord Himself passes by. What did Elijah expect to see? In what way would the Lord carry out His work now? We read: *"Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake came a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper. When Elijah heard it, he pulled his cloak over his face and went out and stood at the mouth of the cave."*

What an awesome lesson for the Lord's servants! The Lord wants to make His presence known to His people not in mighty acts of judgement, but as the KJV translates in a still small voice. The Lord comes to sinners through the gentle whisper of His Word. That is how God made His presence known to Elijah. That is how the Lord wants to make His presence known to all - through the word and promises of a Savior. Yes, the day will come when once and for all God will appear with a mighty act of judgment to judge both the living and the dead. But for now the Lord still speaks to, and changes hearts of sinners in a still small voice. The Lord turns sinners back to Him through the good news of forgiveness and salvation in the Messiah, our Savior Jesus.

That's why after asking again what Elijah was doing here and again hearing the same answer, the Lord sends his servant back the way he came. The Lord still had work for him. The angels and fiery chariot to escort Elijah into glory will come another day. Indeed, God's judgment is coming upon the wicked in Israel - Elijah is to appoint Hazael and Jehu who will help carry out God's judgment. But even more than that, the Lord wants Elijah to know the Word of the Lord Elijah spoke will go on. He is to appoint Elisha as prophet to speak it next. Also Elijah is not alone. "***Yet I reserve seven thousand in Israel--all whose knees have not bowed down to Baal and all whose mouths have not kissed him.***" The Lord knows those who are His - God's words have not been returning to Him empty but remain living and active in Israel. There are still those who hear and rejoice in the still small voice of the gospel.

Are we ever as afraid or discouraged or dejected as Elijah was in this cave? Unfortunately, I have to admit at times I have felt like Elijah. I have undergone the high of a full church on Easter, only to be quickly discouraged by a mostly empty church a week or two later. I've experienced the joys of watching God's Word fall on good soil, but have also seen the seed of God's Word fall on the path, into the rocky places, and among the thorns.

Do you ever get frustrated serving the Lord? Perhaps you have heard it said that too many churches are like a football game where there are 22 players on the field desperately in need of rest, and about 65,000 fans sitting in the stands desperately in need of some exercise. If you are one of the 22 on the field do you ever get discouraged when not everyone else is as zealous for the Lord. Do we ever get frustrated that the church isn't growing as fast or as much as we want? Do we ever feel as lonely as Elijah? Ever think we are the only ones left in this world which shows such little respect for God's word and those who speak it? Do we ever look back and wonder if our Christian life and efforts were all a waste of time? Wonder what plans God has for us? Do we ever question if the Word of God and the gospel is enough to make a difference?

When we fall into such sins as Elijah did, we too need to go stand by the mouth of the cave with him. We need to watch as the shattering wind, the fire, and the earthquake remind us of God's law and what not just this world, but we sinners deserve from God. But most of all we need to once again hear the still small voice of the Lord. We need to hear again His promises and be reminded of how our God works in this world. He comes to us in quiet ways - in water connected to His Word - in a simple meal of bread and wine. The question of how the Lord comes to us has already been answered. Our God came to us as a baby wrapped in clothes and laid into a manger. The Creator of heaven and earth came to us as a servant. The Almighty came gentle and humble, even once

riding on a donkey. The eternal Lord came to suffer and pour out His own blood on a cross to pay for the sins of the whole world. He came to die for us. He came to rise again with our forgiveness & eternal victory securely in place.

This is the good news, and the only message that changes hearts. This is and always will be the gospel that is the power of God for the salvation of all who believe! Jesus is our comfort and our strength. His promises are what this world needs. So what are you doing here? I think the Lord gives Elijah, He gives us, the answer of what we are to do. We are to work and keep working zealously while it is still day. We are to go with His Word and preach the gospel to all creation. Rejoice for there is time as the Lord still speaks to sinners in a still small voice! Amen.