

All Saints 2017 Elijah

ALL SAINTS WEEK  
NOVEMBER 1/4/5, 2017

1<sup>ST</sup> LUTHERAN, MARSHALL  
PASTOR SCOTT FULLER

I KINGS 19:1-18; LUKE 13:31-35

*Dear friends in Christ: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.*

*Prepare our hearts, Lord, to receive your Word. Silence in us any voice but your own that in hearing we may believe and in believing we may obey your will revealed to us in Jesus Christ. Amen.*

You've all had a few moments to think about what a *mountain-top experience* is...



It can have a literal meaning – like our First Lutheran Youth experienced on their High Adventure trip to Alaska four years ago. But, as we heard them all share, though they were on the top of a mountain for this picture, there was so much **more** to the trip that **truly** made it a *mountain-top faith experience*.

So it can also refer to one of those rare moments when everything turns out better than you could imagine, like:

- acing a test,
- winning a championship,
- getting straight A's,
- or a hefty raise...*all on the same day!!!*

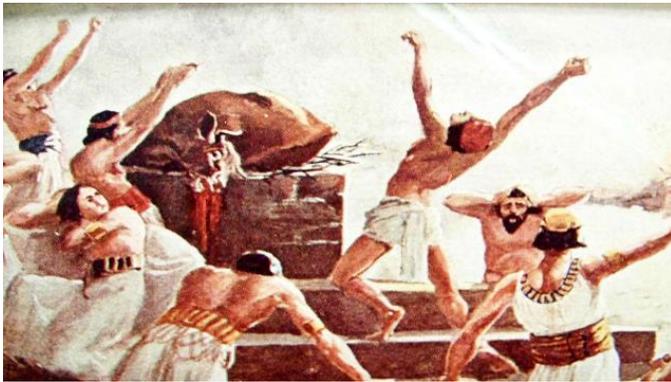
**That's** a mountain-top experience.

As I mentioned earlier, in the chapter right before our bible story for today, the prophet **Elijah** had a **mountain-top experience** – literally. He'd been anointed God's prophet to the nation of Israel – and it was **not** an easy job. **King Ahab** and **Queen Jezebel** were terrible rulers, they worshiped other gods, and they even those that encouraged child sacrifice.

Says I Kings 16:33

*(King) Ahab did more to provoke the anger of the Lord, the God of Israel, than had all the kings of Israel who were before him.*

So God sends Elijah to challenge Ahab's **false** prophets to a **duel** – 450 of the king's prophets in one corner...vs. Elijah in the other – it does not appear to be a fair fight.



Both sides agree to the rules: each “team” will build an altar, sacrifice a bull, place the meat on the altar, and then call on the name of their lord. The god who answers by igniting the altar with fire from heaven is the one true God.

**Does anyone remember what happens?** Elijah lets the priests of Ba'al go first. They build the altar, kill the bull, then dance around it for hours crying out to their false god, asking to have their altar lit.

After a good while, we're told that Elijah teases them saying, ***You better cry louder – I don't think your god can hear you – maybe he's indisposed, or on a journey, or maybe he's asleep and needs to be awakened!***

Baal's prophets even cut themselves to show their dedication, but their altar remains unlit. Finally, the men fall to the ground exhausted... utterly spent...

Then it's Elijah's turn – he builds the altar, kills the bull and places the meat on the wood. Then...he digs a trench around the altar, tells his helpers to fill 4 big jars with water – and then douse the whole thing! Not once, not twice, but 3 times!

Water is literally dripping off the wood. Now, one thing I learned as a Boy Scout is that it's not a good idea to soak the wood in water before you try to light the campfire...?!?!

Well, the prophet steps back then and prays, saying:

*This is your show, God – answer me, O Lord,  
answer me so that these people may know that you are God,  
and that you have turned their hearts back to you...*  
(I Kings 18:37)

### **And what happens?**



God sends fire down from heaven. It burns up the entire structure: meat, wood, stones, dust, even the water that was in the trenches...

This is the World Series, Super Bowl, Stanley Cup and World Cup of prophet competitions all rolled into one, and Elijah wins the whole thing hands down!

However...his big mountain-top moment is only that – for as soon as Queen Jezebel hears what Elijah has done, she a price on his head...which is where our story starts today: Elijah is afraid for his life! He's hiding out in the desert – he's depressed, he's lonely, he's sick-and-tired-of-being-sick-and-tired...so he just gives up and goes to sleep.

At some point, we're told, an angel interrupts his nap – wakes him up twice, in fact, to get him to eat some bread and drink some water so that he can continue on his journey. That he does and eventually the prophet arrives at a cave on the mountain of God.



Once inside, the word of the Lord comes to him asking, *What are you doing here, Elijah?*

I kind of chuckled when we read this at Bible and Brew on Thursday night – I mean, the poor guy's just following orders – remember? He was sleeping soundly in the desert when God's angel wakes him up and sends him on this forty day journey to this very cave. I would have been tempted to say, ***YOU brought me here, sir...*** (though I'm pretty sure I would have been scared enough to keep my mouth shut!).

So here's what the weary prophet tells the Lord: *I've worked hard for you God – and I've got nothing to show for it: your people have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, killed your prophets, and **I'm the only one left... and now they're trying to kill me too!!!***

God doesn't respond to the details of Elijah's complaint, but seems to aim for something deeper in the prophet's heart. The Lord tells him to stand at the mouth of the cave...and you...remember the drama.

I'm picturing a scene that's been created by Hollywood icons like Cecil B. DeMille, George Lucas and Steven Spielberg – it's the 10 Commandments, Star Wars, and Indiana Jones all wrapped up into one.

Elijah sees *a great wind – so powerful that it that splits mountains...but God’s not in the wind; and after the wind, an earthquake...but the Lord’s not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake, a fire...but the Lord’s not in the fire; and after the fire...a sound of...*

NOTHING?!?!

Hebrew experts tell us that the phrase can be translated a few different ways:

A still, small voice

A thin, silent sound

A gentle whisper

A sound of sheer silence...



Though each of these definitions is unique, they’re all so close to each other in meaning that the...meaning is clear. It reminds me of waking up on a day in Marshall when the wind is NOT blowing – you step outside and it’s...eerily quiet – it’s a sound of NOTHING...at least, not any wind!

I find it fascinating that Elijah is not at all moved by the deafening effects of the wind, earthquake, and fire...and that he only steps outside the cave when he hears that noise of...silence. It’s kind of like what parents of small kids often say: ***I only get nervous when I CAN’T hear my kids!***

From the silence, THE VOICE asks again, *Elijah, what are you doing here?*

And this world-weary man answers exactly as he did the first time,  
*I've worked hard for you God – and I've got nothing to show for it: your people  
 have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, killed your prophets, and  
I'm the only one left and now they're trying to kill me too!!!*

I see some very interesting things in this story:

1. In spite of the Lord's magnificent displays of power-in-nature...the prophet is unimpressed. As if nothing at all had happened, Elijah simply picks up his complaint exactly where he left off.
2. Yet God doesn't seem upset with Elijah – the Lord shows no pique with his prophet, no displeasure with his servant, no frustration with his wholly human helper.
3. The third amazing thing is the way that God rejects those big, noisy natural displays of power...and makes himself known to Elijah only in a virtually soundless, almost-unnatural silence...

I'm fascinated by that. We usually read about God interacting with humans in a very human fashion: by talking! From Adam and Eve in the Garden, to Noah in the Ark, to Abraham and Sarah who laugh at God's promise that they'll have a baby in their old age.

On and on it goes – over and over again, we've heard countless stories of God SPEAKING CLEARLY to his followers...But something's different here... Windstorm, earthquake and fire – ferociously loud displays of power... Yet it's only when the wind dies down, the mountains stop shaking, and the fire is extinguished...that Elijah is drawn to move out of the cave...

Silence...a still, small voice...a thin, sheer sound...



The Book Thief...is the title of an amazing novel that is unique in many ways... Markus Zusak tells the story of a young orphaned girl in Nazi Germany who is sent to live with foster parents... As the couple is less-than-supportive of Herr Hitler's agenda, the family also agrees to hide a Jewish man who comes to them for safety.

As you would rightly guess, there is a fair amount of death in the novel – in fact, the whole story is narrated by...the Angel of Death.

Now, when I say *angel of death*...I'm wondering what image pops into your brain...? I'm guessing that most of us conjure up a similar sort of persona:

- a grim, faceless figure
- in a hooded, black cloak
- often holding a sharp, curved scythe to cruelly cut a soul from life...

Think of Ebenezer Scrooge and the last ghost that visits him on Christmas Eve. Shadowy, stern and *silent*...the specter forces Scrooge to look at his own gravestone and contemplate the selfish life he's been living. The emphasis on such an angel of death – is definitely on **death**.

But in The Book Thief, the emphasis is on *angel*... Death is silent as it goes about its business – unable to explain to the dead why they died. But it collects each soul tenderly, providing comfort as the gift of life slips from their bodies.

In both The Book Thief and in our bible story, SILENCE is the medium between the spiritual and the physical, between God and creation, between angels and humanity. And in both stories *silence*...is truly...GOLDEN...



When Elijah stands before God's SILENCE, and the Lord asks him a second time: **Why are you here?** the prophet simply repeats his complaint... So if God was looking for a different answer, it doesn't happen.

Then it dawned on me that as much as being in SILENCE helps us listen to God's *still, small voice*, I wonder if it also helps **God** listen to **us**. It's like the Lord just then realized that Elijah...was empty – spiritually, emotionally, physically spent.

So God gives the prophet three little jobs to do on his way home: anoint two men as kings, and a third, Elisha, **as the prophet who will take Elijah's place**. In some ways it's like the Lord is saying, *Well done, good and faithful servant, it's almost time for you to rest.*

There are precious few moments in our busy-and-technology-cluttered lives when we can enter a mountain-top sense of silence...and hear a word from God, or perhaps God can hear a word from us.

But those quiet moments are exactly how God wants it to happen, wants to come to us as he did to Elijah: it won't be anything loud, flashy, or dramatic...but in a sound of *sheer silence*, or a *still, small voice*.

- It might be a moment of inspiration while you're praying, or
- hearing someone say, *This is the body and blood of Christ...given and shed for you!*
- Or it could be a song that inspires, or a smile from a friend –
- but know this: God is out there in the world working through our families, neighbors, and friends– even strangers on the street.

God wants to speak to us in that SILENCE so that we can always clearly hear the Word of Life that is Good News for all people. Amen.