

“The Sound of Silence”

I Kings 19

Series: *The Story Week 15 God’s Messengers*

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May 3, 2015

Maybe you’ve heard this one.

Muhammad Ali boarded an airplane. You know the usual drill before the plane takes off: seats in the upright position, tray tables locked and loaded. Above all, everyone must fasten their seatbelts. When the flight attendant finished the spiel, she noticed Mr. Ali still hadn’t clicked the buckle on his seatbelt. “Excuse me Mr. Ali but you must fasten your seatbelt.” Muhammad Ali replied, “I don’t need to fasten my seatbelt. I am the greatest.” “That’s nice,” the attendant smiled, “But we can’t take off until you fasten your seat belt.” “Listen, I’m heavy-weight champion of the world. I do not need a seatbelt.” “I’m sorry sir,” the attendant persisted, “but everyone needs a seatbelt.” “You don’t understand,” Ali declared, “I am stronger than Superman. Superman don’t need no seatbelt to fly.” To which the attendant replied, “Superman also don’t need no plane to fly. Click it!”

With a new Avengers film coming out this weekend it seems appropriate to talk about the superheroes of the Story. We call them the prophets. So far, we’ve met priests like Aaron who perform sacrifices and kings like David and Solomon who rule God’s people. The prophet is the third major leader in the Bible. Seventeen of the thirty-nine books in the Old Testament are by or about a prophet. There are Major Prophets like Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Daniel and there are twelve Minor Prophets such as Hosea, Joel, Amos, Hosea and Jonah. They are called “minor” because they are shorter in length. Unfortunately, the prophets are probably the least read portions of the Bible. That is a shame because, whether they are major or minor, they all have a major league message.

“What is a prophet?” The word ‘prophet’ literally means ‘to speak for someone.’ A prophet is a representative, an ambassador, a spokesperson, a press secretary for God. A prophet has essentially two jobs. The first is the one we usually associate with prophets: *foretelling*. Prophets bring a message from God about the future. We often mention how Jesus is the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies. But the lesser known and more common role of a prophet is *forth-telling* – to put forth what God wants to tell His people now. God has a message for His people and the prophet is the messenger. The prophet does not create the message. It comes from above. Prophets come from all walks of life. You do not need a seminary degree. The only qualification is God called you. Prophets rarely volunteer for the job. No one wants it because you have to deliver a message of bad news and the audience almost always wants to, as they say, “kill the messenger”...literally.

That’s what the king and queen want to do to Elijah. There is no book in the Bible named after Elijah. Yet He is the Super Prophet of the Old Testament. Like Muhammad Ali, Elijah is “the greatest.” He is the symbol of all the prophets. He is a Superhero who

has the ability to stop the rain and call down fire. That's why, in the New Testament, they expect Elijah to come back and prepare the way for the Messiah, that's why they call John the Baptist Elijah, that's why Elijah appears with Moses at the Transfiguration.

Elijah was God's messenger during Israel's darkest days. The united kingdom of David and Solomon is torn in two. The northern ten tribes become Israel. The southern two tribes are called Judah. God keeps his promise to always put a son of David on the throne in Judah. It is a different story in the north where we see a chaotic mess of warring royal families. The worst of them is Ahab who falls hook, line and sinker for a foreign queen named Jezebel, daughter of the king of Sidon, and her foreign idols Baal and Asherah. Following three years of crippling drought Elijah has a cataclysmic showdown: He stands as one lone prophet of the Lord against Ahab's 450 prophets of Baal. On the heights of Mount Carmel, fire falls from heaven and proves that the Lord, and not Baal, is God. The people of Israel fall on their faces and worship the Lord. Then they fall upon the prophets of Baal. It's the beginning of Elijah's revolution.

But then everything changes in an instant. Ahab, that weak-willed, hand-wringing, sorry excuse for a king runs to his wife Jezebel and tells what Elijah has done to her prophets. The venomous Jezebel takes a more direct approach: "May the gods kill me if, by tomorrow, I don't kill you." When faced with such a challenge, there are only two options: fight or flight. And Elijah the Super prophet, Elijah who is faster than a speeding chariot, more powerful than all the kings men and all the queens prophets, who is able to leap into the sky on a single whirlwind, Elijah the Super prophet. . .runs away. Fear seizes him and drives him from the town, from the country, from all vestiges of civilization. At the last outpost he leaves behind his servant and walks alone into the desert. After traveling a day in that arid forbidding land, he spies a single scrubby bush and throws himself down under its stingy, meager shade.

He came to a broom bush, sat down under it and prayed that he might die. "I have had enough, Lord," he said. "Take my life; I am no better than my ancestors." (I Kings 19:4)

The Super Prophet who stood alone against all the servants of Baal on the heights of Mount Carmel is now all alone in the depths of the wilderness. . .in the depths of despair. Depression can hit any of us. Even a Super prophet does not have a bullet-proof spirit. Elijah is not immune to depression. All the classic symptoms appear. His spirit collapses under the pressures of life. He cries out in anger, frustration, and resignation. Feeling that there are no other options left, he runs away into a desert of loneliness. Physically and spiritually exhausted, Elijah curls up into a fetal position under the broom tree and prays for death.

The Scriptures honestly uncover the inner life of this saint. The Bible does not hide depression from our eyes. But we do. Often depression is right before us and we do not see it. Perhaps we cannot see it. Perhaps we cannot bear to.

The National Institute of Health reports that one in four adults experience mental illness each year. That's about 61.5 million Americans. 13.6 million live with chronic serious mental illness.¹

If depression and mental illness are that common, why is it so misunderstood? Mental illness is not intentional. It is not a sign of failure. It is not a sin. It is not a lack of faith. We know these things to be true. Yet why do we withdraw from those who suffer? Why do we feel awkward in their presence? Why do we avoid discussing the subject when it comes up? Why do we fail to give people the space to talk about their feelings? Why do people feel embarrassed or stigmatized about going to a counselor, taking medication, reaching out for help? Are we cruel or uncaring? I would say, 'No.' We simply don't know what to say or what to do. And where is God in all of this?

Elijah does not know what to do. He does not know where God has gone. When he closes his eyes to lie down under the broom tree, he hopes he will not open them again. But a stranger touches his shoulder and invites him to get up and eat. A small cake of bread cooks over a charcoal fire. Beside it is a jug of water. He eats and drinks his fill and then lies down once more thinking this is all a dream. But it happens again. Same stranger, same meal. This time, though, the stranger will not let him return to his hideout in the shade. "Get up, eat, you have a long journey ahead."

For forty days and forty nights, Elijah wanders the wilderness. Why so long? Where is God taking him? This is not just a journey of miles or days. It is a journey of the spirit. Elijah treks back across the same wilderness where his ancestors wandered for forty years. He is led to Mount Horeb, also known as Mount Sinai, the mountain of God. Climbing the craggy rock Elijah seeks shelter in a cave. If there is any place where he can find God, it must be here. On this mountain, Moses heard the voice of God from a burning bush. At this meeting point between heaven and earth, God's presence descended with wind, earthquake and fire. On its peak the Lord gave His covenant and His Ten Commandments to Israel and at its base the stubborn, stiff-necked Israelites worshiped a golden calf and broke the commandments just as they are doing in Elijah's day. Elijah's search for God leads him back to his spiritual roots, back to the Rock of his foundation, back to the birthplace of his people, back to God's mountain.

When you feel stuck in the sinking quicksand of depression, the best place to stand is the Rock of Jesus. He is your foundation, your solid ground, your refuge from the storms. His love is unlimited. His forgiveness is unfathomable. His salvation is unstoppable. Go to the Rock. But that is only the first step.

On the rock of Mt. Sinai Elijah finds God. Or rather, God finds him with a question. "What are you doing here, Elijah?" Why have you come? The question ignites an explosion of wrath within Elijah. "What am I doing here? What I want to know is what have you been doing? I have been very zealous for you, Almighty. Meanwhile the Israelites reject your covenant, tear down your altars, and put your prophets to death with

¹ Christy Heitger-Ewing, "Standing in the Gap: Iowa Church Launches Mental Health Ministry," *Outreach* (May/June 2015) p.30-31.

the sword. I am the only one left and now they are trying to kill me too. We are getting slaughtered out here and either you're too weak to help us or you just don't care."

Those are the two questions we ask God in the cave of depression: Is God able to help and does God care?

"Go out of your cave," the Lord replies, "and stand on the ledge of the mountain in the presence of the Lord, for I am about to pass by." Then Elijah does a risky thing. He disobeys the Lord. He does not leave the cave. Maybe he is still angry. Perhaps he is brooding or sulking. He might even be afraid the wrath of the Lord will consume him for his defiant words. And he has good reason to stay under cover. Immediately a great and powerful wind tears through the mountain, shatters the rocks and crushes them to powder. "It is the Lord," Elijah fears. But the Lord's presence is not in the wind. Next the earth beneath Elijah's feet begins to rumble. The walls of the cave shudder and buckle. "The Lord comes!" But the Lord is not in the earthquake. Now fire surrounds the mountain and turns the cave into an oven. But the Lord is not in the fire. And when the flames burn out there is the sound. . .

Of silence. After all the loud pyrotechnics and special effects comes a stillness, a calmness, a whisper, a murmur. And this heavy emptiness draws Elijah out of his hole. Now the Lord has come. The Lord is in the silence. As he walks to the mouth of the cave, Elijah covers his face with his cloak for he knows that no one can see God and live.

"What are you doing here, Elijah?" the Lord whispers. Again the prophet lays out his tale of woe. But this time Elijah knows that God is able to help him. He has witnessed the earthshaking power of the Lord. Now the question is: does he care? "I have been very zealous for you Lord. 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."

And God listens. Where is God when you suffer in the silence of depression? He is there in the silence. Do not look for him in the earthshaking miracle. Seek him in the silence. Do anguish and pain threaten to drown you? Pour it out to Him. Do you need to shake your fist in anger? Give your anger to Him. Is your spirit under pressure and about to collapse? Tell it all to Him. Let Him release the pressure.

When Elijah has said his peace, when the Lord has listened to all that is on the prophet's heart, God speaks. "I have a plan to deal with Ahab, and I want you to set it in motion, Elijah. And one more thing: you are not the only one left who serves me. There are still seven thousand in Israel whose knees have not knelt to Baal, whose lips have not kissed his idols. Reach out to them. Find them. They will help you."

What does God offer us when we hide in the cave of depression? Two things: He provides fellow believers who will support us and He gives us His presence in the silence. He will not leave you. He will not forsake you. He will never stop listening to you or loving you.

What can I do to help others who suffer in silence? The answer is “Seek.” Seek out those who are hidden in a cave of depression or mental illness. Do not avoid the topic or the person. Do not change the subject. Do not look down on someone who is depressed. This is an illness like any other. Sometimes you will be called on to perform a simple task similar to the angel who gave Elijah a meal. Pray for and with the person. But above all, you must patiently listen as God did to Elijah when he complained and told the same story over and over. Do not push the person along toward health. Listen with patience and confidentiality. Listen to all the feelings. People tell me, “I don’t know what to say.” Don’t say anything. There is nothing to say. Just listen. And when the problem is more than you can handle, encourage the person to seek professional help. Seek them out and sit with them in the silence.

And to those of you who suffer I have this word: Please do not hide. Are you afraid to talk to someone? Does the depression keep you walled up in silence? Perhaps the most difficult step you take will be the one that breaks that silence. Elijah had to take a step outside his isolation. Instead of hiding, take a step – even a small one. Talk to someone: a pastor, a counselor, your spouse, your coworker, a believer in Christ.

The Lord is giving us a vision for caring for those who are afflicted with depression, who are burdened with bi-polar symptoms, who suffer with mental illness. He sent us a woman named Pat D’Alonzo. She called me and asked if she could offer a support group where people who are burdened with these conditions can come, talk, share and support one another in a safe, confidential, Christ-centered group. Pat knows the struggle from the inside. She will partner with members and families from Woodside. It is our prayer that this group will help those who struggle to connect with believers and talk with God. We want everyone to know that God is always with you in the silence. Tell Him everything – all your feelings. Hold nothing back. He will never leave you. He will never forsake you. He will never reject you or turn you away. How do I know? When Jesus cried out from the cross, “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?” He heard only the terrible sound of silence. He suffered in silence and rose again so that silence will never again come between you and God.