

Powerful Weakness

Text: 1 Kings 19:11-21

Hymn: "Come, Follow Me, the Savior Spake" (*LSB* 688)

There is something almost tragic about Elijah's situation in this text. Tragic, and yet painfully familiar. Here is the man who called down fire from heaven on Mount Carmel against 450 prophets of Baal. Now he's hiding in a cave, cowering in the dark, burnt out, terrified, and utterly spent. All because one woman threatened his life. If you have ever felt that kind of collapse after great faithfulness, you know where Elijah is.

And as he sits there in that cave, God comes to him with a simple question: "What are you doing here, Elijah?"

Elijah pours it all out. "I have been very jealous for the Lord, the God of hosts. The people of Israel have forsaken your covenant. They have thrown down your altars. They have killed your prophets with the sword. And I—I alone—am left. And they seek my life to take it away."

"I alone am left." That is the sound of a man who has come to the end of his rope and let go. But God does not immediately answer Elijah's complaint. He does not correct his theology. He says, "Go out and stand on the mount before the Lord." And then... wind. Not a breeze, a great and strong wind that tears the mountains and shatters the rocks. Then earthquake. Then fire. Three awesome displays of raw power, one after another. But the text is clear: the Lord was not in the wind. The Lord was not in the earthquake. The Lord was not in the fire.

And after the fire—the sound of a low whisper. The still small voice.

Elijah hears it. He wraps his face in his cloak and he goes and stands at the entrance of the cave. Then God asks the question again, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" Same question he asked before all the fireworks, and the repetition isn't accidental. The wind, the earthquake, the fire—none of it changed Elijah's heart. None of it moved him from the cave. It was the whisper that brought Elijah to the entrance.

At the heart of this encounter with God is a paradox. The Almighty God reveals himself in a whisper. As St. Paul, who spent considerable time in his own cave, namely prison, put it, God's "power is made perfect in weakness." But make no mistake: the whisper is not weak. It is the Almighty speaking—power working in a way we do not expect or control and cannot mistake for our own.

That God is a God of *powerful weakness*, that He is both weak and powerful, is deeply unsettling, because we want it to be one way or the other. But what happens when we see only the whisper and forget that the Almighty is the one whispering?

We end up where Elijah started. *I alone am left*. Despair. The sense that God has gone silent, that the church is losing, that evil is winning, that nothing we do makes any difference. You know this feeling. Maybe you felt it last week, or last year. You have a child you're trying to raise in the faith, and you watch as everything you thought was going to work simply doesn't. You reach the point where you have nothing left—nothing left to hold on to. You have been praying for someone you love and nothing seems to be changing. You have shared your faith and met silence or contempt. You look at the culture and it seems as if the altars of the Lord are being torn down one by one. And you wonder: Is God actually doing anything? Am I the last one left who

cares? That is the temptation on this side of the paradox: to mistake God's quietness for God's absence. To look at the whisper and conclude there is no power behind it.

But notice what God says after the whisper, after Elijah repeats his complaint: "Go. I have work for you to do." And then comes the Gospel word Elijah needed to hear: "I have reserved seven thousand in Israel who have not bowed the knee to Baal." Seven thousand. Elijah thought he was alone. He was not even close to alone. God had been quietly, invisibly at work the whole time—preserving a remnant, sustaining faith in hearts Elijah would never see. This is the hidden church, the community of faith held together not by noise and spectacle but by the Word and the Sacraments quietly, faithfully administered. God is never without his people, and his people are never without him. And in your moments of deepest weakness, when you feel as though you have nothing left to hold on to, it is then that you are brought to realize that God is holding on to you, that there He displays His power.

But there is the other side of the paradox, and it is equally dangerous. What happens when we want only the wind, the earthquake and the fire, and we grow impatient with the whisper? We are tempted toward *independence*. We start to think, *I alone am enough*, that God's power must look dramatic and visible. We expect success in worldly or cultural terms and want fire from heaven now. And we'll provide it ourselves if God seems to be taking too long. But this misplaced zeal forgets our dependence. We lose the cave. We forget the whisper. We miss God.

Look at what happens at the end of this text. Elijah goes out and finds Elisha. There is no dramatic confrontation, no speech, no sign in the sky. He walks up to him and throws his cloak over him. A quiet, almost private gesture. And Elisha slaughters

his oxen and follows. The work of God moves forward through a cloak. Through a whisper. Through ordinary means that look like nothing to the watching world.

And we have been trained by the whole of Scripture—the Psalms, the prophets, the apostles—to expect exactly this. “The Lord is near to the brokenhearted,” says the Psalmist. “Cast all your anxiety on him,” Peter says, “because he cares for you.” These are not the words of a God who only shows up in earthquakes.

Now, the reason all of this matters is where the paradox ultimately leads us.

What is the most powerful thing God has ever done? What is the moment at which his might was most fully displayed?

It was not fire from heaven on Mount Carmel. It was a cross on a hill outside Jerusalem. A man, the God-man, dying. Forsaken. Weak. “He saved others; he cannot save himself,” the crowd said, and they thought they were mocking him. They had no idea they were announcing the very means of their salvation. The Son of God, making himself weak—not because weakness was done to him, but because he chose weakness, for us. He clothed himself in flesh and then let that flesh be broken so that our brokenness might be healed. And in the ultimate weakness—not just physical death, but bearing the Father’s wrath against sin—Christ won the victory none of our fire could achieve and thereby displayed His supreme power: the power to forgive sin, to defeat death, to reconcile the whole world to Himself. The Almighty whispered himself into a manger and cried out from a cross, “It is finished,” and in that whisper the world was saved.

And that same Jesus who called Elisha through a cloak is the one who calls you through water and the Word, through bread and wine, through the spoken Absolution

that declares your sins forgiven in his name. Things that the world looks at and says, That cannot be enough. But they are. They are everything. In these means—these whispered, ordinary, powerful means—the living God is present and at work for you.

This is why you can live in the paradox rather than trying to resolve it. When you feel the despair of I alone am left, you are not alone. Seven thousand, and then some —the whole church of God across time and space is with you, and Christ himself is with you, interceding for you, sustaining you, and his power is at work in your weakness in ways you cannot see and may not see until the last day. And when you feel the temptation of I alone am enough, you are reminded that it was never about your fire or your earthquake. It is his whisper. His Word. His work. And it is more than enough.

At the close of service, we shall sing, “Lord, dismiss us with your blessing.” That is exactly what God does with Elijah at the end of this text. He sends him back into the world, back to the work, equipped with a promise and the knowledge that God has been at work all along, in the hidden remnant, in the whisper.

“What are you doing here, Elijah?” God met Elijah in the cave, in his despair, in his exhaustion. And then He sent him back out. He will do the same for you.

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