

Morrison Zion Evangelical Lutheran Church

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August 7, 2005
12th Sunday after Pentecost
1 Kings 19:9-18
Pastor Randy Ott

First Lesson: 1 Kings 19:9-18
Psalm of the Day: Psalm 73
Second Lesson: Romans 9:1-5
Gospel: Matthew 14:22-33

Pay Attention to Gentle Power

As you watch the news or read the newspaper or listen to the news on the radio, do you encounter things that just make you shake your head and say, "What in the world is going on?" This last week I heard on the radio, as I was driving somewhere, about a mother of a kindergartner. I think it was in Florida, but I don't remember the state exactly. She was talking about suing the city police because they put her daughter in handcuffs at school. You think, "Why in the world would you have to put a kindergartner in handcuffs?" Then you start thinking, "Have these police run amuck?" Then you start thinking, "Who wouldn't be ashamed to have to sue because their daughter was so unruly in kindergarten that they had to call the police on her?" What is the state of things that you have to call the police because a kindergartner isn't minding? Do you see things like that and shake your head and wonder what is going on?

Or you see the things that surround the debates that rage about beginning of life issues in our country and end of life issues in our country and you shake your head and get mad or angry about some of the things that are said and say, "How can people say that? We have got to change this. We have to do something." Do you think to yourself sometimes that if we elect the right people and get the right laws passed we will be done with some of these things that just must make God furious?

Well, if you have ever started thinking along those lines, you are beginning to understand the point that we find Elijah at in our scripture lesson this morning. Elijah was at a point in time in his life when he wanted to say to God, "God, why aren't you doing things differently? Why are you letting things go the way they are? Things need to change. Things need to turn around, and it's just not happening fast enough." Elijah wanted some of God's power revealed in dramatic ways as he had seen it happen in his ministry. But he was also frustrated because it had happened and things didn't seem to change. So now he is just ready to chuck it all.

What God reminds Elijah about this morning, and what he wants to remind us also, is that when we think we need to change things with the Law, that is not where God's power lies. As we see this morning, God's power is found in gentleness—in the small voice of quiet is literally what it says in Hebrew. This morning we want to see that we need to, as Christians, pay attention to God's gentle power, because it is the power that he has entrusted to us. As we consider this power that he has entrusted to us, first of all this morning we see that it is a power that really is unexpected and it is not the kind of power that you and I are looking for at times, but it is God's power. Secondly, we see that it is a power to do the unexpected, and that unexpected involves us.

When we started reading from 1 Kings 19 we found Elijah in a cave. This takes place shortly after they had that great bull sacrifice contest on Mt. Carmel. You remember the 750 prophets of Baal and Elijah there chopped all the bull up, called on their god and whoever consumed it by fire that was the true God. You remember what happened? The fire came down from heaven when Elijah called on the Lord and consumed the whole offering and the people said, "The Lord is God. The Lord is God." And they grabbed some spears and ran through the 750 prophets of Baal. Elijah tucked in his cloak, ran in front of the chariot back to the capital city of the Kingdom of Israel, the Northern Kingdom, and he expected now things were going to change. "That wicked king and that wicked queen, Jezebel, now they are going to start paying attention to the Lord because they have seen that the Lord is God. They have seen his power. They have seen what he has done."

He gets up the next morning and here comes his local delivery man, and what is it that he gets from Queen Jezebel?—an apology for having killed the prophets of the true God? A "what do you need to get things set straight in our country" message from Queen Jezebel? Well, no. He gets a message from Jezebel that says, "You are going to be just like the rest of those prophets that I have killed. Within 24 hours you are going to be dead."

Talk about getting the air let out of your tires, huh? Expecting all this change and you are going to be a dead man. "I don't care what your God did, I am going to kill you because I worship Baal"—so much for revival and reformation and renewal in the Northern Kingdom.

So what did Elijah do? He went south. He went south back down to Mt. Horeb, also known as Mt. Sinai. That is the cave where we find him in our text. He is in the cave on the same mountain where 600 years earlier God had given the Ten Commandments to Moses. Maybe he has gone there to get away from it all. Maybe he has gone there to get something from God. We are not told. But we are told that God asks him, "What are you doing here? I called you to be a prophet to the Northern Kingdom of Israel, not way down on the southern part of the Sinai Peninsula at Mt. Sinai." You heard Elijah's answer, "*I have been very zealous for the Lord.*" There is no denying that. He served the Lord faithfully as a prophet, as any sinful man can. He served him faithfully. He had prayed to the Lord that there would be no rain and then for 3½ years there had been no rain. Then he prayed to the Lord again after that great sacrifice contest and the rain came back. He had been involved in God doing incredible, miraculous, powerful things through the ministry of Elijah. He had seen a lot of things. He had been zealous. But where had it gotten him? "The people have broken your covenant, they have smashed down your altars and they have killed all the prophets. I'm the only one left and you know what Lord? I've had enough. Things aren't changing fast enough. They aren't going the way I want. I want out."—that is almost what you can read between the lines, can't you?

So the Lord says to him—he doesn't address his concerns, he doesn't answer them piece by piece, he doesn't try to reason with Elijah—he says, "Go stand out in front there. I am going to pass by you." And here comes a wind that starts smashing rocks

to pieces and there is no weather reporter standing off to the side to report on it like you see on T.V. now. Here is a wind that is the Divine Power of God smashing things to bits and Elijah probably couldn't move, but God's not in the wind.

Then comes an earthquake. Maybe like the earthquake that close by to the mountain of Sinai had split the earth apart and swallowed up those who had rebelled against Moses. But God is not in this powerful earthquake that is moving the mountain again. Then comes a fire. God has been in fire before, hasn't he, when he lead the children of Israel at night? God had been in fire in his power when he consumed that offering on Mt. Carmel. But God is not in the fire. All the places that Elijah and you and I at times look for God to act in some miraculous, powerful way to snap people to and call their attention and get them to sit up and fly right, God's not in any of them.

But next comes the sound of thin silence which they translate *a gentle whisper* in our Bible. When he hears the gentle whisper, he pulls his cloak over his face because he knows that no one can see God and live and he goes out, because he knows that he is now in the presence of God.

Think of the lesson for Elijah. God's power is not always what you and I expect. God's power does not always act in ways that you and I would expect and at times the way that you and I demand in our prayers. Sometimes he does. He did with Elijah on Mt. Carmel. But he wanted to show Elijah that that is not where his true power lies. The true power to change hearts, to change lives, is not in the club of the Law, but it is in the gentle whisper of the Gospel—the good news of God's love, his unconditional love, his undeserved love, his unearned love. It is that gentle whisper of that love that is not waved around like a club but that comes to us in the message that Jesus lived in our place and Jesus died in our place. That is the gentle power that takes you and I who are born on the road to hell with no off-ramp that you and I can take on our own, no ability, just straight ahead to hell—that is how you and I are born. But our God through a splash of water connected with his Gospel promise, the gentle whisper of the Gospel, changes us, washes away our sins, gives us the gift of faith—through the gentle whisper of his Gospel that is in the Word that we can pick up any time of the day and read through, that we can listen to on tapes as we drive, that we can watch on video cassette players—the gentle whisper of the Word that is around us everywhere is what God works through. He changes hearts one at a time through this gentle whisper of the Gospel and he gives us the gift of eternal life. The most powerful thing that will ever happen in your lifetime is when the Holy Spirit gave you the gift of faith. That washed away your sins and gave you an eternity in heaven.

With something that powerful we might expect to have fireworks. We might expect to have something with it that we can look for and focus on and hang on to and some people spend a lifetime looking for that emotion or that feeling. But the truth is the gentle power of God is in God and not in our reaction to it. The gentle whisper of the Gospel assures us that our sins are forgiven.

Elijah was looking for God's power in different places. You and I at times look for it in other places. We want God to act in this way or that way. We want him to change hearts and change lives now. You know how it is if you shared the Gospel with

someone you dearly love and they do not seem to believe or seem to have been straying from the faith. You want God to change their hearts right then and there. When he doesn't at times it is frustrating. You might think to yourself, "There has got to be something else I can do—something more powerful than just the Gospel." We might want God to snap them to with maybe a near death experience or something that reminds them that they need God. But God tells us his power is in the Gospel. He entrusts us to just keep proclaiming it faithfully, lovingly, and then also to live it so that people see its effect in our lives. Because the gentle power of the Gospel does have the power to do the unexpected.

Elijah went out there with that cloak over his head and stood there with God's glory in front of him and God again says, "*What are you doing here, Elijah?*" Maybe Elijah didn't quite get it yet because he gives the same answer, "I have been very zealous. They have broken your covenant. The altars are smashed. They killed the other prophets. Now they want to kill me, too. So you are powerful, God, but I still don't see the results."

Once again, isn't it interesting that God doesn't rationalize with Elijah and explain to him, "Here is the answer to this point and this point and this point"? He simply says to him in essence, "You are my prophet. I have called you to do my work. Here is the work for you to do, and as you do the work you are going to see the gentle power of the Gospel at work." He tells him, "Go and anoint Hazael king over Aram. Also anoint Jehu, son of Nimshi, king over Israel. Anoint Elisha, son of Shaphat, to be the prophet after you."

The king of Aram was going to be a thorn in the side of the Kingdom of Israel. The next king, Jehu, would depose Queen Jezebel and King Hazael by very brutal means. God was going to be working against those who had rejected him is what he is saying, but God is also going to continue to work through the small, still voice of the Gospel as Elisha carried on the ministry of the prophet that Elijah had had. God was going to still be at work, and his work was still going to be done, and it wasn't always going to be done in glorious fireworks, but it was going to be done by faithful servants faithfully carrying out the task God had given them. And then as far as to Elijah's whining that he was the only one left, the Lord says here, "Listen to this closely. I still reserve for myself 7,000 who have not bowed down to or kissed Baal." God's gentle power of the Gospel was still working even when Elijah could not see the visible evidences of it. It still was working. God was telling him, "Don't focus on what you can see. Focus on what I have called you to do. And trust me for the results."

But that is hard to do, isn't it? Trust God for the results of what he has called us to do? We are not always eager to do that. Our sinful nature at times has better ideas for how God should be doing things. It happens all the time in a congregation, doesn't it? You get behind in the budget and what do we often hear? "If everyone gave their fair share"—and their fair share is usually defined by if there are x number of households or families or people and if they each give x number of dollars, we will meet the budget—which is whatever it is. That is Law motivation. That is not the small voice of the Gospel.

Maybe we fall behind and say, “You know there are a lot of families that are making use of our school and they are not contributing to the work of the church. Maybe we ought to start charging tuition. That way they will give their fair share.” Whether you charge tuition or not can be done for good and godly reasons, but if you are doing it so that other people pay their fair share, you are trying to accomplish with the Law what only the Gospel can accomplish—which is to change hearts.

The Law can produce results. If I throw a cat in a pool, the cat is going to swim to the other side and get out, right? Is it going to come back the next day and decide that was cool and refreshing and jump back in? No. It’s not its nature. I can use the Law to accomplish a short-term result, but that doesn’t change the nature of who we are. What changes the nature of who we are is the Gospel—the still quiet voice of God’s love for us in Christ. Christ’s love compels us to do what we do. That is what we need to keep going back to. Christ’s love that compels us. That is the power that does the unexpected. It may not do it as fast as you and I would want it to, but you and I are called to trust it. You and I are called to proclaim it. You and I are called to live it. You and I are the most powerful creatures on the face of this earth because you and I have God’s love for us in Jesus Christ that forgives and saves.