

**Christ Presbyterian Church
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Lee Hanssen
God Questions Elijah
1 Kings 19:9-13**

Good morning, everybody. My name is Lee Hanssen and I serve here as the Director of Student Ministries. I don't know about you, but when I saw that picture of what the original CPC looked like, it kind of gave me goose bumps. Just this last week, we did our annual review. Once a year we kind of look at all that God has done. Just in our Student Ministries department, it was nine pages long. Pretty fun to think about that little building and the building we are in now and all God has done between then and now to get us this place. It's pretty miraculous and a lot of you got to be a part of it. Pretty cool!

If I were to tell you two of my favorite people in the Bible, it would have to be Peter and King David. I've studied their lives at great length, and I'm really drawn to their stories for a lot of different reasons. I love King David. He wrote many of the Psalms we find in the Bible. I love his honesty and all the emotions he experienced and the way he was able to process those things with God. And I love Peter. Peter was kind of a shoot-ready-aim type of guy. Reminds me a lot of myself, not a lot of brain but a lot of passion. These men had a lot of Godly attributes and things that I want to be a part of my life, but then as I think about it more, these guys did a lot of really stupid stuff. As I peeled back those layers of why I'm drawn to these stories, yes, I'm drawn to them for their Godly attributes, but I think at the heart of it, too, I'm drawn to their stories because these guys make me feel pretty good about myself.

I think about King David, this man after God's own heart and yet he committed adultery. Then to cover up his affair, he had the guy murdered. And Peter, one of Jesus' closest friends, who denied he ever even knew Jesus. Not once, not twice, but three different times. I read their stories and I think, sure, my eyes might wander from time to time or I might let my thoughts go to places they shouldn't, but I've never had an affair. And sure, I might have let a choice swear word slip off my lips or told a little white lie, but I've never denied that I know Jesus. One of my favorite commentators, Dale Ralph Davis, says this. "We are strangely, perhaps perversely, fascinated by weaknesses in prominent people. Peter the Great was fearless of assassins, but petrified by cockroaches. We lesser mortals receive secret comfort from seeing a point of weakness in a man of fabled strength."

We are in the story of 1st and 2nd Kings and I get to talk about a story I've always been drawn to for a lot of the reasons I mentioned. We find Elijah, one of God's most celebrated and talked about prophets, at what appears to be not his most shining moment in history. I think about this story I'm going to share and about the stories of Peter and David and other men and women in the Bible where we get to see them at their worst and I wonder, why would God include those stories in the Bible? I have to believe that God doesn't tell us these stories to make us feel

better about ourselves. Instead, I believe He uses them as an opportunity to teach us right living and to reveal His character in the midst of our sin and our failure.

I got to choose this text almost two months ago and as I was getting ready this summer, I was thinking it was going to be one of those texts that I was going to read and study and feel better about myself. Well, I was so wrong. I feel way worse about myself now and I will tell you the reasons. The story is in 1st Kings, chapter 19.

9 There he came to a cave and lodged in it. And behold, the word of the LORD came to him, and he said to him, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" **10** He said, "I have been very jealous for the LORD, the God of hosts. For the people of Israel have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword, and I, even I only, am left, and they seek my life, to take it away." **11** And he said, "Go out and stand on the mount before the LORD." And behold, the LORD passed by, and a great and strong wind tore the mountains and broke in pieces the rocks before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind. And after the wind an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake. **12** And after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire. And after the fire the sound of a low whisper. **13** And when Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his cloak and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. And behold, there came a voice to him and said, "What are you doing here, Elijah?"

As Kari Dubord mentioned in the children's sermon, it is interesting as we look at the broader story of what came before this text. We find Elijah, one of God's most celebrated, brave, courageous prophets, witnessing one of God's most amazing miracles. He literally calls down fire from heaven. Elijah had encountered these people, the Israelites, God's chosen people, who had kind of turned their backs on God. They were worshipping other gods. Elijah, essentially, says to all these people, 450 prophets, he says, "Let's create a scenario. You make a sacrifice to your god and I'll make a sacrifice to my God and let's call upon our gods and whoever reigns down fire, let that God be the one true God." I bet you can guess what happens. They set up their sacrifices and it says that these 450 prophets scream and wail and call out. Elijah gives them all day long but no fire. Even in the midst of this scene, we see Elijah's heart as he calls upon the Lord, "God, I want You to rain down fire."

³⁷ Answer me, O LORD, answer me, that this people may know that you, O LORD, are God, and that you have turned their hearts back [1st Kings 18:37]."

The Lord sends down fire and consumes the sacrifice and Elijah proves to all these people that God is the one true God. We see this picture of Elijah as brave and heroic, seemingly not afraid of anything with total trust in God. Then we fast forward a chapter and we find Elijah hiding in a cave. There seems to be such a huge contrast between the Elijah on Mount Carmel and the Elijah we find at Mount Horeb. You have to ask yourself, well, how did he get there? What happened? How did Elijah find himself in this place? In 1st Kings 19:1-3, immediately before our main text today, it says this about Ahab, the king at the time, who was speaking to his wife Jezebel,

19 Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done, and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword. ² Then Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah, saying, "So may the gods do to me and more also, if I do not make your life as the life of one of them by this time tomorrow."

³ Then he was afraid, and he arose and ran for his life and came to Beersheba, which belongs to Judah, and left his servant there.

If you have your Bibles open, turn to 1st Kings 19 and you'll see something very important. There's been an age-old debate on the way this text has been translated, specifically in verse 3 where it says, "Then he was afraid." I've talked to you about how our English words sometimes fall short of the original Hebrew text and in my opinion, this would be one of those cases because there is a footnote that says "or *Elijah saw*." Instead of Elijah running because he was afraid, it says "or *Elijah saw*." I think it is so significant because I don't think Elijah was running out of terror at all. I think Elijah left because he *saw* that nothing was going to change. He saw that Israel's heart and Israel's leaders' hearts had gotten so hardened and in such an ugly, desperate, sinful place that even though the Lord would send down fire, their hearts would remain unchanged. Elijah *saw* the state of Israel and knew he had to experience God and seek God in a new and fresh way.

The story of Ahab telling his wife Jezebel what Elijah had done, but her remaining unchanged kind of reminds me of *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*. Has anybody ever seen that movie? Well, there's a woman in it who is getting married and one of her friends says to her, "Oh, honey, yeah, you know, the man is the head of the household but the woman is the neck and she'll make that head turn whatever way she wants." If you're married, that's a knowing laughter and if you're not married, you will know this.

It says in the text that Elijah took a 40-day journey to Mount Horeb. He didn't end up at this mountain by accident. He intentionally traveled a long, long time, out of reach of Jezebel, out of reach of where she would have been given any sort of credit for his death. This mountain where Elijah went to seek God is the very same place where we know Moses encountered God face-to-face. That's where this story picks up.

There is a word that comes off of Elijah's lips all the time if you read through 1st and 2nd Kings. Elijah was a prophet, which means he was someone who brought God's Word to people. Before he would deliver a message, he would say, "Thus says the Lord before whom I stand." I love that. "I have stood before the Lord and here is what He says." Elijah saw the state of Israel and knew he needed to stand before the Lord in a significant way and that's where we enter into this story.

I would like offer you just two simple observations that I think are very relevant for us today. One is, as we read through this text, I think **Elijah shows us what Godly sorrow looks like**. This is what Elijah says when God asks him, "Elijah, what are you doing here?"

¹⁰ For the people of Israel have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword, and I, even I only, am left, and they seek my life, to take it away [1st Kings 19:10]."

"God, I'm here because I'm broken. I'm here because it seems like I'm the only one who loves You anymore. They are throwing down your altars. They are worshipping other gods. All these people have turned their backs and I don't know what else to do. That's why I am here, God, because I'm broken about it." He is broken over Israel's leadership. Wouldn't you think that if you were Jezebel and Ahab that you would have changed your tune after fire came down from the sky and consumed a sacrifice right in front of your face? Wouldn't you think that would have

been enough information for you to maybe want to rethink the way you are living? I think this is so important and relevant for us today because we live in a culture and a society that thinks if we can just get people the right information, if we can get the graphics a little bit sexier, if we can get the message a little bit sharper, if we can make the production a little bit grander, they will change their hearts and minds.

It's easy for us to point our fingers at Ahab and Jezebel, but we do the exact same thing. We know God's promises and yet we choose to worship ourselves. We know the destructive habits in our relationships and our marriages and yet we choose them over and over. We understand the consequences of our sin and yet we flirt with it on a daily basis because here is the deal: Unless the Gospel of Jesus Christ permeates people's hearts, unless we experience and encounter the one true God in a personal way, no amount of information will ever be enough.

The same behavior we engage in today is the same behavior that broke Elijah's heart and filled him with Godly sorrow over Israel's leadership. I believe that Elijah was broken over Israel's sin as a whole. Here Elijah sees 450 prophets of other gods and these are God's chosen people. They are the same people He rescued out of slavery. They are the same people He provided for over and over. Elijah sees this and realizes they have forgotten about God's covenants and promises. They have turned their backs on the Lord and it burdened Elijah's heart.

I became a believer about 10 years ago. I had a pretty radical encounter with Jesus. I was *that* guy in the fraternity. I was big man on campus, whatever that would be, and there was, literally, this conversion moment for me. In that moment, Jesus was so sweet to me. He was my everything. I remember specifically losing sleep over men and women in my life, friends and family who didn't know Jesus. I would weep over their salvation. I would see the sin on my college campus and it would burden my heart. I don't know if it's because I've been in ministry for ten years and now it is my job, but if I'm honest with you, I think I've lost a piece of that. I know I want it back and I want it for you, too.

Such intensity and God-centeredness seems kind of strange to us. I have a friend named Jaron. He actually stood next to me in my wedding as one of my groomsmen. He loves Jesus so much that sometimes I find it annoying, but after I get over myself, I am convicted and want that for myself, too. I want what Jaron has because Jesus permeates and infects every part of his life, his thoughts, the way he spends his money, the way he conducts his relationships, the way he uses his time. Jaron is jealous for Jesus. I wonder what it would look like for us to be full of Godly sorrow for the church. What would need to change for us to go without and pray as we give to our partners in Africa so that Zambia could have clean drinking water? What if that was what kept us up at night? What if we lost sleep over our partnership with North Minneapolis Young Life because kids will never experience Jesus in their home life? What if those were the things that burdened us? I think Elijah gives us a great glimpse and reminder of what Godly sorrow looks like.

Second thing I love in this text is that it reveals **God's response and character**. God sees Elijah twice and asks him the same question, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" I love that He calls him by name. Doesn't it change the conversation when somebody calls you by your name, when they look in your face and call you by your name? There's this intimate beautiful picture of God calling Elijah by name and I want you to pay attention to how you hear that question. As you've read this text in the past or maybe as you are hearing it for the first time, pay attention to how you hear and read and interpret that question because it tells you a lot about how you

personally view and experience God. And our view of who God is directly reflects and affects how we relate to Him and, inevitably, who we are showing the world He is.

That's a really big deal. Try this on. If you read this text and you hear that question, "What are you doing here?" and you hear an angry, shameful God asking you that question, where does that come from? Or if you read that text and you hear a gracious, merciful God who is personal and intimate, where does that come from? I think about how I hear this question and I hear an intimate pursuer. One who is patient, loving, kind, gracious and long-suffering. I have to think back to my experience of who God is. So much of it resolves around the men and women in my life, the people I experienced in church, my youth pastors, Tim and Jerene Block, my parents who raised me up to know who Jesus is. When I hear this question, I think of Dale Davis' insightful quotation in Lange's commentary on the Book of Kings. Regarding the question God posed to Elijah, Davis describes it as "a question of tender kindness, to relieve the full, burdened heart of the prophet, that he, to whom the great privilege of being able to complain of his sorrow had so long been denied, might be moved to reveal his desire, to pour out his whole heart before the Lord."

Here is the deal. Our experience of who God is closely relates to the way we experienced church and the way we experienced our parents and our friends. I talk about this in Student Ministries all the time and it's not just true for Student Ministries. It's true for adults and Student Lay Care and Lay Care Ministries and Missions, We have the privilege of being Christ to people. If they don't know Jesus, they will learn more about who God is from the way we treat them and the way they experience us than anything we say. They will learn more about who God is by their experience growing up and what they experience when they walk in these doors than anything that comes out of our mouths. People have always been God's Plan A to restore a broken world. I believe that as parents, mentors, friends, members of this church, visitors, we have a chance to be a part of restoration.

As we read through this text, I love how God is not found in all the showy stuff. He's not found in the earthquake or the fire or the wind, but in the gentle, still, small whisper. So what does that mean for us? So often I'm approached by young men and women or older men and women who are going through a life change or who have just had some sort of conversion time in their lives and are looking for signs. They want flashy and they want big. They want miracles and they want God to talk to them. They want it written on the wall. None of that stuff is wrong. It's not bad to want to hear from God in a significant way, but if that is all we seek, I think we are going to be disappointed because I think more often than not, Christ is found in the gentle, still, small whisper. Sometimes we are not satisfied with that, but I think Biblical faith is content with the Word. I think Biblical faith is content with just Jesus, with resting in God's promises and knowing His character.

Elijah wasn't seeking a fire or an earthquake. He was seeking the Lord and that's what he got. The Word says that if we seek after Him like hidden treasure, we are going to find Him. Jesus invites us to ask and seek and knock and when we do, it says we are going to receive. So we have to ask ourselves, what are we seeking? Are we seeking an experience? Are we seeking an emotion or are we seeking the one true God? Are we seeking after Jesus Christ, our Lord and our Savior?

This isn't really a text about God speaking, but I will never forget something a good friend of mine, Steve Wiens, said a couple of years ago. Many of you might know him. I was in the midst

of a life transition and I had my charts and I had my lists and I had all the graphical information. Steve looked at me and said, "Well, that's all great, Lee, but what if God still speaks?" Such a simple question, but it kind of knocked me off my chair. What if God still speaks? I don't know about you, but I get frustrated sometimes because I don't always hear so well. It can be easier for me to read my Bible or listen to a sermon than actually have to talk to God. I love that Elijah was so intentional to take such a long journey to meet with the Lord. No wonder he heard from Him!

Also, If you're like me, sometimes you may leave here with the best of intentions, of processing for long times, of getting up in the morning and journaling, but then the phone rings and emails come and the kids start crying. Life happens and that time is gone and you're here the next Sunday before you know it. So even if just for a few minutes, we want to create some space in this room right now for you to just stand before the Lord. I have a few process questions up on the screen for you if you would like to mull over them, now or maybe some other time. Write them down. Take this time to stand before the Lord whatever that looks like for you.

1. What would it look like for us to be burdened for the church today?
2. How do I hear these questions? What does that reveal about how I view God?
3. How is God inviting me to respond?

The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.