

Selected Sermons #12

The Festival Half of the Church Year by E. Schaller

I Kings 19:9-18 4th Sunday after Epiphany

There he (Elijah) went into a cave and spent the night. And the word of the Lord came to him: “What are you doing here, Elijah?”

He replied, “I have been very zealous for the Lord God Almighty. 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.”

The Lord said, “Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by.”

Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake came a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper. When Elijah heard it, he pulled his cloak over his face and went out and stood at the mouth of the cave.

Then a voice said to him, “What are you doing here, Elijah?”

He replied, "I have been very zealous for the Lord God Almighty. 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."

The Lord said to him, "Go back the way you came, and go to the Desert of Damascus. When you get there, anoint Hazael king over Aram. Also, anoint Jehu son of Nimshi king over Israel, and anoint Elisha son of Shaphat from Abel Meholah to succeed you as prophet. Jehu will put to death any who escape the sword of Havael, and Elisha will put to death any who escape the sword of Jehu. Yet I reserve seven thousand in Israel – all whose knees have not bowed down to Baal and all whose mouths have not kissed him."

Fellow redeemed in Christ, the Lord of our hearts and lives -

Seven thousand were certainly not many. Out of several millions of people, only seven thousand still belonged to the Lord – and most of these, it may be, were old grandfathers and grandmothers or little children. In the land of Israel, God was on the bargain counter, held cheap. Nobody wanted him anymore. His chosen people had traded him off for Baal, the ugly idol of the heathen Assyrians because they could serve Baal by living in the

lust of their flesh – with wind, women and song, the more the better – and even the greatest of all, the prophet Elijah, could do nothing. He preached with a voice of thunder, but nobody listened anymore.

Those were the conditions in the time of which our text relates. Today conditions are worse.

The Epiphany season, during which we have been speaking of the glory of the Lord as it was revealed in Jesus Christ our Savior, should also be a time in which we can point with joy to the Church of Jesus here on Earth, for in his Church his glory ought to be seen. People should be turning to Christ in great multitudes! There is no lack of preaching, and there is no hope elsewhere – but we find that, in a world torn by war and full of fear, people are turning to many things, but not to Christ. More and more the truth that is in Christ is being put aside even by those who still outwardly profess the Savior's name. The Antichrist is gaining in power; Baal's house of drunkenness, adultery, and lust has standing room only – but church pews hold less than half the members of the congregations once a week. What has become of the glory of God in Christ?

This exactly, was the question that Elijah wrestled with. He was ready to give up, until the Lord showed him where his glory really was. We may apply fully to our day :

What Elijah learned from the Lord in the still, small voice -

I. He learned why he had failed

II. He learned how to succeed.

I. “What are you doing here, Elijah?” Twice the Lord asked the great prophet this question when he found him, miles from his work, hiding in the tangled wilderness of the Arabian Desert at the foot of Mount Horeb (better known to us as Mount Sinai). All that way he had come to the holy, memorable spot where God had given his Law to Israel, where Moses had seen God years earlier in the burning bush which was not consumed. Israel was not here any more; Israel was in Canaan, far away. Here was nobody except Elijah, the man who should be preaching, turning the hearts of the people to the true God. **What excuse does Elijah have for being in this wilderness?**

We will let him explain: So he said, *“He replied, “I have been very zealous for the Lord God Almighty. 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.”*

Behind Elijah stood a long record of almost superhuman faithfulness, so when he said, *“I have been very zealous for the Lord God of hosts,”* he certainly put it mildly. In his zeal for the honor of the true God he had gone through the land like a fiery comet, a one-man army! There never was another prophet like Elijah; he knew no fear. He stood before the powerful King Ahab and his equally vicious, godless Queen Jezebel like an avenging angel from heaven and called down upon them the wrath of God. Nothing could silence him. Israel belonged to God, and with God Israel must stay! Elijah hurled the Law like lightning bolts and jarred people to their souls, to their knees. He cursed Baal, and no one dared lay hands on him.

And then came the great moment – the hour of the test. On the hill of Carmel, Elijah faced the assembly of the entire nation; King and Queen were there and the priests of Baal. Who was the true God? It would be the God who sent fire down from heaven. This was one of the great scenes of history, when Elijah prayed for the glory of God to end the rule of Baal, and God sent lightning out of a clear sky in answer. The multitude, falling upon its knees, was forced to admit, *“The Lord, he is God.”* The priests of Baal were put to death on the

spot, their altar destroyed, and the people went home. Was not that a victory?

Or was it? Elijah surely thought so, yet a little more than a month later God found him hiding in the desert with the cry of failure on his lips. And what was his complaint? Israel has gone over to Baal, *and I alone am left*. Yes, friends, stare in wonder, but it would be exactly so today. Indeed, it is so, as we will point out briefly later, for the question was not – and is not, “*Who is the true God?*” That can be answered, but it will not change people. The real question is, “Which God do we want? Which one do we love? Whom do we want to serve?” Israel wanted to serve Baal, so they did – and Elijah had (apparently) failed.

God rouses the despairing prophet from his gloom with a sharp command, for Elijah must understand **why he had failed**. Let him experience in himself **what it is that moves and saves people**. *Then he said, “The Lord said, “Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by.” Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake came a fire, but the Lord was not in*

the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper. When Elijah heard it, he pulled his cloak over his face and went out and stood at the mouth of the cave.

Then a voice said to him, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" He replied, "I have been very zealous for the Lord God Almighty. 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."

It was a terrifying night that the prophet spent up there on Sinai among the wild crags that touch the clouds. Here in a few hours he learned what it means when God deals with people. Cowering in the cave, he met God's fearful, punishing power.

The God of Sinai spoke. Three times he spoke.

There was a storm that tore rocks apart, a nightmare of howling wind and inky blackness. Elijah did not move – he did not dare; silence followed. Soon the mountain began to rock as God took hold of the earth and shook it until it seemed that nothing could stand upright. Again silence. Next the mountain lit up as fire like rain swept across the desert and reached for the prophet with its long fingers. He was a man helpless, a man alone in the hands of a holy, almighty God. What horror!

But then there came out of the silence a still, small voice. Behold Elijah; as he hears the voice, he hides his face in his mantle, but he comes forth out of the cave. It is the Lord this time, the Lord unto whom people can approach, to whom they will come when their sins trouble them. **The still, small voice is the voice of mercy, of love, and of forgiveness.**

God can speak in many ways to people and he does. He fills their hearts with fear when he speaks from Mount Sinai with the voice of his Law – commanding, threatening. Every storm, each earthquake, war, pestilence, flood, blizzard, fire (and the daily papers are full of them) goes out from the Holy God, telling of his wrath over sin, of his power to kill and destroy. He forces people to listen to him, but he wins none. They shudder and bow before the storm, but after it is over, they are still where they were. Their hearts are not won; nothing is changed. So it had been in the experience of Elijah. Through him God had spoken on Mt. Carmel; everybody had understood, but nobody had changed. **Elijah called it a failure.**

And in this sense, the Church is failing today. God has been sweeping through the world with his terrible voice of war and destruction, but it has not swept souls into his arms. The Church has preached the Law of God; it has

showed God's will to sinners; it has warned and threatened – yet still even those who listen continue to serve Baal. Again and again we hear saints express the wish that sermons might grow sharper, that the Church would hurl thunderbolts at those who so gaily worship at the altar of the Baal of drink, divorce, and gambling. *“Let the Church crack down on people, frighten them as only the anger of the Holy God can frighten them; then the kingdom of God will come.”*

Dear friends, thunder and lightning will not stop people in their sins for long, and certainly it will never turn them to the Lord. A church that could preach nothing but the Law of God – either the Ten Commandments or the Sermon on the Mount – had better never been born. For neither the Ten Commandments nor the Sermon on the Mount were intended to turn me to God, but are given for God's people. As we heard today, love is the fulfilling of the Law. It is so in people who love God and trust in him. They have not been drawn by the fearful voice from Sinai but by the still, small voice from the fainting God upon the Cross. Our Lord is in the still, small voice that says, *“Come to me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.”* (Matthew 11:28) If Israel will not

leave Baal when it **hears this invitation** from the Lord, it will never leave Baal at all.

II. Having learned that his great power as a prophet of the Lord did not lie in the lightning he could call down from heaven upon unbelievers but in a still, small voice, Elijah is now commanded to **go back to his work, in which he will succeed.** *The Lord said to him, “Go back the way you came, and go to the Desert of Damascus. When you get there, anoint Hazael king over Aram. Also, anoint Jehu son of Nimshi king over Israel, and anoint Elisha son of Shaphat from Abel Meholah to succeed you as prophet. Jehu will put to death any who escape the sword of Hazael and Elisha will put to death any who escape the sword of Jehu. Yet I reserve seven thousand in Israel – all whose knees have not bowed down to Baal and all whose mouths have not kissed him.”*

The running away of Elijah from his work had been entirely due to a mistaken judgment, for **God had never failed.** His work was going forward just as God wanted it to go forward. Elijah may have expected the whole nation to turn to God because God showed his power on Mt. Carmel, but God had not expected that nor intended it. God knew where his glory was; it was in a still, small voice. **And by this still, small voice the**

Lord had been quietly saving people all the while, so that at the moment he had seven thousand in Israel who had never bowed their knees to Baal.

These seven thousand did not cling to God because he had scared them into it – they loved the Lord, and they loved him because he had shown that **he loved them** – and he had used Elijah to proclaim this message to them. The prophet was not always throwing punishment and warnings about; he was not always bringing drought upon the land, or grasshoppers; he was not always killing Baal-priests. Most of his time was spent going from place to place declaring that . . . “The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin.” (Exodus 34:6-7) Elijah had preached much of the Savior, of God’s plan to redeem all people from sin, Satan, death.

The prophet himself came to feel that he did his biggest work when he preached hell-fire to Ahab and Jezebel. It was indeed the hardest work, but not the great work. By the gospel – the still, small voice – God had through Elijah won the hearts of seven thousand. **Therefore, actually, the prophet had not failed at all;** he had succeeded and would continue to succeed.

Did this mean that from now on he was to preach only the gospel? By no means, for his directions were to set up a new king in Syria, a new king in Israel after Ahab, and a new prophet to take his place. And these three - Hazael, Jehu, and Elisha - would slay by the avenging sword of the Lord all who believed not - for there are always many people who will listen to nothing else but the God of storm, earthquake, and fire. Once they harden themselves against the still, small voice. God can deal with them in no other way than by his Law and curse.

This he has been doing and will continue also in our day. The Earth will be swept by his anger time and again. He will rake the hearts of the unbelievers with brimstone, and the Church must be his voice also in this. The Church must testify against evil, against sin, and against unbelief. The Church must tell the disobedient what they can expect of the just God. The Church must preach as Stephen preached even to the high and mighty, until they gnash their teeth in anger. With the iron rod of the Law it is necessary to warn those who will not heed the Word of God, but all the wrath of God will have only one end; the last great judgment will enfold the world and destroy it.

The glory of the Lord will be revealed in this - that by the gospel the Church is quietly saving the few. Believe the Lord when he says that shouting damnation will not turn people! We can make more noise that way and cause a stir - but we succeed when the storm is over, and the still, small voice sets in, bidding people come to find peace in divine love. Then a few will come out of their caves of sin with hands over their weeping faces to reach out for Jesus the Lord in the still, small voice.

Only a few - but they are the chosen. Even so God will be here among us. Even our success with ourselves, dear brethren, will so be achieved. It is grace and love that give us power over our wayward hearts to turn from Baal and serve Christ.

**Oh, heed the gospel! That's the best we can do for ourselves and for one another; it is the best I can do for you, for it is the best the Lord God has done for all!
Amen!**

Thee will I love, my Strength, my Tower #399

Lo, many shall come from the East and the West #415

Speak, O Lord, Thy servant heareth #29