

# Sample Sermon

## “A Still Small Voice”

(1 Kings 19:11-13)

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Mary Williamson is a pediatric hospital nurse in Kirbyville, Texas. Several years ago she had a new patient, a little boy, whom she had neglected to tell how his hospital room intercom worked. Soon his light flashed. She called his name and asked what he wanted. There was complete silence. She repeated herself. After a long pause he said, “Jesus, I hear you but I don’t see you. Where are you?”

Where is the divine presence? What is God saying to me? How can I know God’s will for my life? How can little old me be competent to ask these questions and receive answers from the Omnipotent, Sovereign One? Jesus, where are you? These are the questions that our text presents to us. These are the kinds of questions rolling around in Elijah’s mind as he stood in the mouth of the dark cave he had run to.

This act in the divine drama comes off like a solo act, but wicked Ahab and Jezebel are lingering in the shadows, off-stage for the moment but very much in the story line. They considered Elijah a kind of political terrorist, so they are hunting him down like our hunt for Osama bin Laden. This hero of Mount Carmel has now run away 350 miles into the Sinai wilderness. He has run as far away from Ahab and Jezebel as he can, and as near to God as he thinks he can.

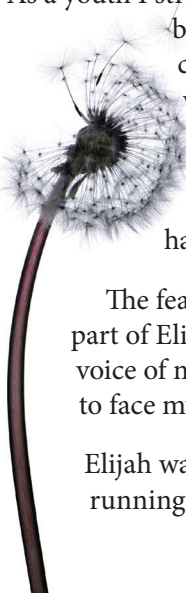
I have never quite gotten James’ point when he describes Elijah as a person of like nature with ourselves (5:17). My nature certainly isn’t to revive the dead, stop and start the rain, and call down fire from heaven! But I certainly feel of like nature with Elijah as he runs in fear into the wilderness cave! I particularly have felt that way as it relates to hearing and interpreting God’s call on my life.

As a youth I struggled to find where Jesus was in my life and what Jesus’ plan was for my future. The possibilities as they began to present themselves were rather frightening. I could not see myself up to what it seemed God was calling me to. At a critical juncture in my discerning God’s calling, a spiritual mentor gave me a Bible and wrote II Timothy 1:7 in the front: *For God hath not given us the spirit of fear; but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind.* That has become something of a life verse for me—at least a life’s calling verse. A kind of still small voice that has continued to say to me, “Out of the cave of fear and into the world of service!”

Every time I participate in a ministerial ordination service I whisper this verse in the ordinand’s ear as I lay hands on him or her.

The fear of incompetence. The fear of failure. The fear of inadequacy. The fear of being alone. I understand that part of Elijah’s nature. I know what it feels like to run away and hide in a cave. But I also know, from the still small voice of my life’s verse, that such a feeling is not of God. God calls me to receive power, love, and clarity. God calls me to face my Ahabs and Jezebels, again and again.

Elijah was called from that cave to anoint two kings—Hazael as king of Syria and Jehu as king of Israel. Not exactly running away from Ahab and Jezebel anymore! A calling can be a dangerous, disconcerting thing! These were



*a still small voice*  
1 Kings 19:11-13



further acts of sedition, acts of blessing rival kings, acts that actually led to Ahab's overthrow. These were acts of pushing past the fear.

Where are you, Jesus? Often, Jesus is to be found at the point of our fear. In the cave. On the run. Amidst our insecurities. Out of the depths of our desperate cries unto him. So, if you are a person like Elijah and me—a person who can be paralyzed by fear—hear the Word of God, the still small voice of God. Follow His calling and receive His power, love, and mind! Do not let fear keep you cloistered!

Elijah ran as far away from Ahab and Jezebel as he thought he could, and God found Him there! But Elijah also ran as near to God as he knew to run. And there he experienced a renewal of his calling, but not at all in the ways he expected. Not at all in the ways that Moses had encountered God on that same mountain.

“Horeb” is another name for Sinai, the Mountain of God. Moses' mountain. This was the place of the burning bush, of thunder and lightning, of earthquakes, of storms. This was the place where Moses went alone and hid at the mouth of a cave—the cleft of a rock—and encountered God in a direct, dynamic way. This was the place where the law was given and Moses spent 40 days and nights.

You cannot miss the parallels in the text. Elijah is following the “Moses trail,” seeking a kind of spiritual mentoring from this heroic leader of hundreds of years before. Like Moses, Elijah has stood up to a despotic king. Like Moses, Elijah goes alone to Sinai, spends 40 days and nights, and experiences there earthquake, wind, and fire. Like Moses, Elijah stands there at the cleft of the rock and encounters God. Like Moses, the Mentor!

Everyone needs a mentor—someone like my mentor when I was a teenager. Someone who can give you the *apples of gold in pictures of silver of a word fitly spoken* (Prov. 25:16). Someone like Moses was to Elijah—someone who can help you find the trail that leads to God's plans and purposes for your life. Everyone needs a mentor, and everyone needs to mentor someone. It has been well said that every Christian needs to be like Paul with a Barnabas and a Timothy in their life. Barnabas mentored Saul to become Paul, and Paul mentored Timothy to *stir up the gift of God* (II Tim 1:6) that was within him. Everyone needs a Moses and an Elisha. Not only did Elijah leave Mount Horeb to anoint two kings; he also left to go anoint and cast his mantle over Elisha, his successor.

Being mentored and being a mentor have been important parts of God's calling in my life, as they were with Elijah. My calling has been clarified by Moses and Barnabas figures on the journey. And I have sought to further my calling by trying to bless an Elisha and Timothy along the way.

But, like Elijah, my sense of calling has been very much my own. My callings have not been like my mentors' callings. The text is so powerful here: *Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces 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; and after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence.*

At the end of the Moses Trail, Elijah may have even found Moses' cave. Who knows, but he certainly encountered some of the same things Moses did. But, unlike Moses' experience, the Lord was not in them. Not in Sinai's storm. Not in Sinai's earthquake. Not even in Sinai's fire.

Nothing and no one else can end our journey for us, can settle a soul's inner restlessness. Only my personal encounter with the living God can give my free soul a resting place. A religious ceremony cannot do that, no matter how much water you use nor where you put it. A pastor or priest cannot, no matter how trustworthy that person is. Saying some biblical words cannot do that; even the demons say they believe in God and tremble. Having someone pray for me cannot do that. Having parents or children who are at rest in the Lord doesn't do it. Not my mother nor my father, but it's me, oh Lord, standing in the need of prayer.

It is what we Baptists have called “soul competency.” It is the priority of the individual over the institutional, the priority of the personal over the sacramental, the priority of my experience over even Moses'. It is praying, not “saying our prayers.” It is the sacredness of individual choice. It is what preacher and author Brownlow Hastings called “the secret of the soul's naked presence before God alone.” It is the feeling behind Elijah's ministerial exaggeration, spoken twice in this passage, that he alone had not bowed the knee to Baal. It is that overwhelming feeling of responsibility and accountability, of

standing alone and naked before God at the mouth of a cave in the wilderness! It is what is called by various people with various shades of meaning “soul liberty,” “the priesthood of believers,” “direct access to God.” It is the reason that Paul raised the question to the Corinthians: “*For why should my liberty be subject to the judgment of someone else’s conscience?*” (1 Cor. 10:29). It is standing at the mouth of the cave and getting it for ourselves.

It is the reason that we Baptists do not believe in a hierarchical religious class system that elevates the clergy over the laity. It is the reason we believe there can be no proxy religious experience—parents cannot do it for a child, a mentor cannot do it for a mentee. It is the reason we do not baptize infants. It is the reason we believe you can pray directly to God through Jesus Christ. It is the reason we believe you can read and interpret the scriptures for yourself. It is the reason we believe you can confess your sins directly to God without the aid of any human mediator. It is the reason we do not want the state, the church, a creed, a pastor, a seminary president, a denominational leader, or anyone or anything else to cast even a shadow between a free soul and God. It is the reason that in all our services we call people to make personal commitments to Christ. It is the reason we are having a “Consider Your Call”® Sunday—for the whole church, clergy, and laity alike!

It is the reason Elijah left Horeb a renewed, recalled person. Moses’ experience wasn’t good enough. For Elijah, the Lord was not in those cataclysmic events. Elijah heard a calling every bit as profoundly as Moses, but in his own language—a sound of sheer silence. And who knows what that means! Probably not even Elijah! The translators and interpreters don’t. It has been variously called “a still small voice,” “an eerie silence laden with a sense of holiness,” “a gentle breeze,” “a light whisper.”

What does it mean? I’ll tell you: It means mystery! And I, for one, can handle a good bit of mystery in my religion! It means that our callings come not only as we face our fears and are mentored and mentor others. Our callings come not only as we stand at the mouth of the cave and have our own competent soul’s naked presence and encounter before God alone. Our callings come shrouded with mystery, wrapped in the mantle of unmerited grace, whispering our name and our future, touching us with holiness and wonderment!

A little boy got out of the car at night when his family stopped at an overlook on the Skyline Drive. It was a moonless, cloudless night, and every star was twinkling brightly. He threw his head back and his arms wide open and shouted for all creation to hear: “God wonders me!” He had found on that mountain the mouth of Moses and Elijah’s cave!

“Jesus, I hear you but I don’t see you. Where are you?” Jesus is to be found in the calling. In the overcoming of paralyzing fear. In the gift of others who mentor and whom we can mentor. In our own experience, our own encounter with the mystery. Our own still small voice!