

“Earthquake, Wind, Fire, and a Storm:
2020 in a Nutshell”
1 Kings 19:9-18
Matthew 14:22-33
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Today’s children’s sermon is a synthesis of two classic Bible stories: Elijah hears the voice of God and Jesus Walking on Water.

There’s a story that is told about me when I was a child. It was New Year’s Eve 1979, I was eight years old and for the first time, I was allowed to stay up late to watch the ball drop. My parents were at a New Year’s Eve party, so I was staying at a friend’s house. As midnight was approaching, I was brimming with excitement, jumping up and down, tooting my horn while Christine was getting tired and was falling asleep on the couch. ... Christine was nodding off. The countdown began... 30, 29, 28... Christine was still sleeping... out of my frustration I said, “Don’t you even care!” Apparently not.

Have you ever felt that way... being excited or devoted about something and you feel like you are the only one. It happens in church a lot. You have a great idea for a youth program or Bible Study, or ministry, and you are the only one who cares. No one shows up, or shares your passion. When I was a Duke intern, there was a big controversy at the church I served. I remember trying to move forward with the youth group. I remember showing up on Sunday afternoon, sitting in the parking lot, and crying because I was the only one there.

Elijah, too, was dealing with feeling alone with his passion and love for the Lord. He was depressed. Elijah had single handedly defeated 450 prophets of Baal in a divine dual. While escaping the hand of Jezebel, Elijah has just received bread and water out of nowhere from God’s own hand. He felt alone. Yet, Elijah was so emotionally drained and depressed he slept instead of running for his life. He asks God to take his life, for “I am no better than my ancestors.” God asks Elijah, “What are you doing here Elijah?”

Elijah says, “I have been very zealous for the Lord, the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, I am the only one left, now they are trying to kill me.” Whoa is me, I am the only faithful person in all of Israel. Have you felt that way? You are the only one who wants to do what is right?

Elijah is so caught up in his depression. That is all he says to God. He says it twice, he repeats himself... verbatim, as if he is rehearsing it in his mind as he climbs to the top of the mountain.... “I am very zealous for the Lord, I’m the only one, nobody likes me, everybody hates me.” That is the noise that is going on in his head, and it is so loud that it drowns everything else out, the wind, the earthquake, and fire, and almost even the voice of God. Elijah was so caught up in his self pity, that almost nothing was going to snap him out of it. Except for the still, small voice of God.

It is the silence, the deafening whisper of God that causes Elijah to finally pay attention and listen to what God has to say. First, God reminds Elijah that his work is not done. As a prophet, he has some responsibilities. Like Samuel before him, he is supposed to anoint kings, so God tells him to anoint Hazael as king over Aram and Jehu as king over Israel. This reminds us that though we may be stuck in a rut, we are still called to be God's people. We all have vocations.

Second, God tells Elijah to anoint Elisha as his successor. This should be a comfort to Elijah, who is nearing retirement age, that all his work is not in vain. I have already heard and witnessed that some of you are concerned about the future of the church. Is God going to rise up prophets, choir members, Sunday School teachers, to take our place? The answer is a resounding, "Yes."

Third, God reminds Elijah that he is not the only faithful person in all of Israel. For God says, "Yet, I will leave 7000 in Israel, all the knees that have not bowed to Baal, and every mouth that has not kissed him." Because Elijah has been wrapped up in self-pity, he does not see that there are thousands of others just like him, trying to be faithful in a disgraced land.

If we let God speak, he will remind us that we are not alone. Not only is God present, but God reminds us that there are others, just like us, trying to be faithful.

We, like Elijah, we must attune ourselves to hear the still, small voice or the gentle whisper of God. We must tune out the chaos, and seek to hear God's silent whisper.

Just as Elijah heard the voice of God not in the earthquake, wind, or fire, we can only hear God's voice only if we train our hearts and minds to hear God's voice. We do that through consistent prayer.

Prayer allows us to overcome fear and gives us the courage of what needs to be done

Now we turn our attention to the disciples in the gospel lesson. They, too, had just witnessed miraculous feeding. While Elijah received bread and water out of nowhere, the disciples had just witnessed Jesus feed thousands of people with five loaves and two fish.

They wake up in the middle of the night, in the middle of a natural phenomenon: For Elijah it was an earthquake, wind, and fire. For the disciples, it was a storm. They were afraid not only because of the storm, but Jesus was not with them.

And when they see Jesus coming out to them on the water, they think he's a ghost.

My friend, John Thornton, deduces that when they see the ghost they think it is a ghost because Jesus is dead. Earlier in chapter 14 we learn that Herod kills John the Baptist. Imagine the fear that must have come over them in that moment. They leave Jesus alone for one night and Herod gets him. Putting an end to the Kingdom of God once and for all.

The disciples fear that Jesus is not real anymore. He's a ghost, an idea.

We need to know that Jesus is real.

If Jesus is just a ghost, a nice idea tacked on to a stable life of retirement after a career, well then you can keep him. We want to know that Jesus has a body.

We spend a lot of time looking at screens.. We want to know that Jesus matters, that Jesus' life has material to it. And so, like Peter we venture out to see if this is Jesus or just some nice idea.

First, the church must speak with clarity and truthfulness about the reality of depression and the complexity of the storms we see.

We want to hear people speak to what's happening in the world. We need people to help us make sense of the confusion we feel in the storm. The church must foster an awareness of depression that would not be depressing by speaking with clarity about the state of the world.

That is, the church cannot be content to brush aside this depression or paper it over with slogans about good attitudes. This is not to say the church must be a depressing place. But it must be a place that preaches grace.

We must be prepared, like Jesus, to face up to the death that Herod imposes. Only then, might we be able to see the cracks of hope the resurrected Lord shows us.

Second, like the disciples, we must remain together. I know all too well that the church for many in the world is a place of pain. I too often times think it might be better to abandon it. Test out the open waters. Swim for shore. But in reality, we have nowhere to go. What we need in these is a way to overcome the forces that pulls apart. A generation raised learning more words from a screen than from a mother has to in small ways to unplug, to sit and listen. We need to learn how to regain a sense of empathy that comes from listening to the unspoken, reading faces, making eye contact. The church must be a place that unplugs itself from technologies that divide. We need less screens and more of each other's eyes. In this way, the church must become the small boat tossed about on the water. It may not be effective. It probably won't produce world changers or global managers, but it might just stay afloat waiting on Jesus to show up.

Lastly, the church will have to endure risk to find Jesus and to be close to him. Often times Jesus will appear dead. We must prove to the world that the Jesus we believe in is not a ghost. We spend most of our time looking at pictures we can't touch, reading words on computer screens. Those of us going on after the future desperately want to touch something real, something with a body, something with a laugh we can hear. We, like Peter, want to know Jesus is alive.