

SERMON TITLE: "Awesome God: Voice in the Silence"
SERMON TEXT: 1 Kings 19:4-18
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: February 13, 2022, at First UMC

INTRODUCTION

I like to read the *Zits* comic strip. As you may know, *Zits* tells the story of a teenage boy named Jeremy. His Mom, Dad, and high school friends are regular characters too. Jeremy is usually portrayed as a rather unambitious fellow, who is often seen with his lanky body sprawled across some piece of furniture. In a strip from a week or two ago, Jeremy is sitting sideways over a plush chair, engaged with his cell phone. His mom asks him, "Any plans for the weekend, Jeremy?"

Jeremy replies, "I never make plans. If I do, I run the risk of missing out on some awesome opportunity that might pop up at any time."

His mom retorts, "So you'll just sit there staring at your phone for two days instead."

And Jeremy responds, "It's better than possibly doing something non-awesome."¹

Well, Jeremy does have a point. Awesome is pretty important, and we wouldn't want to miss it because we were too busy doing something else. During this month of February, we're focusing our worship services on the awesomeness of God. Last Sunday, we read the story of Isaiah's awesome experience of God's holiness in the temple. It was marvelous, terrifying, and grace-filled. It was a life-changing experience that directed Isaiah into a life of prophetic ministry.

Today, our awesome-God story comes from the Old Testament book of First Kings. As Peggy read for us, the story is about Elijah's encounter with God on the mountain. Let's lend an ear and listen carefully and see if we too can hear God's awesome voice in the silence.

1—WE HEAR GOD'S VOICE IN THE SILENCE WHEN WE ARE FEELING "DONE"

Some years ago I noticed a new expression people were using. When they were fed up, wiped out, or "so over it," they would just say they were "done." "I'm done," they'd say. "I'm just done." I think that's what was going on with Elijah in this 19th chapter of First Kings. And it's no wonder he felt that way. Goodness! He'd been very busy.

First Kings, chapter 17, tells us that Elijah predicted a drought. Elijah told Israel's King Ahab that only by God's word would this drought come to an end. The drought did come, causing famine and sickness. But King Ahab trusted in the prophets of the false god Baal instead of the true God of Elijah. So Elijah had to show Ahab the power of God. In chapter 18, Elijah had a big contest with the prophets of Baal to see who could get their god to send fire from heaven. The prophets of Baal failed, but Elijah succeeded. After Elijah prayed to God, the lightning fire came down, and soon after, the sky "grew black with clouds . . . and there was a heavy rain" (v. 45).

We might expect that, after such a successful display of God's power, Elijah would have been quite happy and energized. But it seems that these events took a huge toll on the prophet. There was major conflict between the worshipers of God and the worshipers of Baal, and they **all** took that conflict to horribly violent extremes. And so, Elijah ran for his life to the wilderness. He was truly "done." In spite of his success, he was exhausted, burned out, and depressed. He was saying, "Enough already!" Even though he had been the victor in the contest, Elijah felt like he was no better than his ancestors before him who had failed to accomplish God's purposes. Maybe because he could see that there was so much yet to do, Elijah was worn out and discouraged to the point that he was ready to die. In chapter 19, verse 4, Elijah says to God, "It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life."

Elijah felt horrible. He was in a wretched, dark place. He was "done." And, yet, that's exactly when and where God came to Elijah in an awesome way. God gave Elijah the gift of sleep. God sent an angel to provide food and water. The angel encouraged and prompted Elijah to get up and eat and to move on from that place.

Do you hear this important message? Our awesome God is able to come to us in the darkest places of depression, illness, discouragement, and trauma. Our awesome God cares for us and provides for us when we are exhausted and in need of deep rest and restoration. Our awesome God encourages us when the situation seems too difficult, and we aren't up to the task.

I've been taking Spanish classes on Friday afternoons. My teacher lives in Cuernavaca, Mexico, and we do the class over Zoom. This past Friday, Mario told me how he came to be a Spanish teacher.

He said that his family was poor, and their life was very difficult and complicated. He finished high school, but he didn't have any money to go to college. So he worked at a variety of low-paying jobs to try to earn whatever he could. Survival was hard, and Mario didn't see any bright future ahead. One of the jobs he happened to get was working in a school cafeteria. While Mario was washing dishes and serving food, he noticed that the school catered to foreign students who came to Mexico to learn Spanish. He thought that was interesting. It opened up ideas for him. And then, one of the teachers at that school noticed Mario's curiosity. She helped him get a scholarship to the university.

The scholarship only paid for half of his tuition, however, so Mario still had to work lots of daytime hours while he attended evening classes. That was exhausting and hard, but the teacher who helped Mario get the scholarship kept pushing him. When Mario often doubted his abilities and was ready to give up, she kept telling him to get up and keep going, that he could do it. With her constant encouragement, Mario was able to graduate and become a teacher. Mario gives thanks to God for that opportunity that came to him and dramatically changed his life for the better. In the silence of those dark and difficult places, in which we feel so "done," we can hear the angelic voice of our awesome God.

2—WE HEAR GOD'S VOICE IN THE SILENCE AFTER THERE'S BEEN A LOT OF NOISE AROUND US

God's awesome voice in the silence may be more noticeable when there's been a lot of noise around us. In verses 11 and following, Elijah heard a great wind, so strong that it was breaking rocks and splitting the mountain. After the wind, there was an earthquake. (Remember when we had our earthquake two years ago? My first thought was that Hill Air Force Base was flying planes low over my house.) And then, Elijah witnessed a wildfire with an incredible roaring noise. God was not there in any of those loud sounds, however. It was after all that quieted down, when the silence came, that Elijah heard God's "still, small voice" (KJV).

This awesome-God experience in the silence reminds me of what we went through in the early months of the COVID pandemic. Do you remember, when everyone was staying home, how everything was a lot quieter? Without "heavy traffic, football games, rock concerts, fireworks, subways, mine

explosions, rock drilling, factories, jackhammers, industrial blasts, and other activities” sending “shock waves . . . around the globe,” suddenly there was enough silence to hear the birds singing. Geologists, who normally use their sensitive seismometers to measure the rumbles of the earth, perceived that human-caused noise dropped 50% during those first months of the lockdown.² In many places, it was possible to hear the sound of silence.

I know, for most of us, we probably thought that was the sound of the COVID curse, rather than the sound of an awesome God’s voice. But even in times of siege and sickness, God calls to us from the silence. Our awesome God is calling us to step out of our caves, to stop feeling afraid and sorry for ourselves, and to get back into life.

3—WE HEAR GOD’S VOICE IN THE SILENCE WHEN THERE ARE OTHERS TO HELP US

Of course, God isn’t calling us to step out prematurely or without some help. God’s message to Elijah from the silence included some very important data. Elijah’s assertion in verses 10 and 14 was wrong. He was not left all alone in his cause. That was misinformation that God wanted to clear up and set straight. So, in verse 18, God told Elijah about the 7000 Israelites who had not bowed down to Baal. God also instructed Elijah to anoint some new leaders. With Hazael as king over Aram and Jehu as king over Israel, the situation could improve. And God told Elijah (with a j) to anoint Elisha (with an s-h) as a prophet in his place. Elisha would be Elijah’s apprentice and helper. Elisha would learn from the older man and then carry on his important work.

It’s natural that we sometimes feel alone and burdened by responsibilities. In the silent caves of our own minds, we often exaggerate our individual role and feel the weight of the world on our shoulders. But God reminds us that we have a lot of friends and helpers who are on our side, working for the same good causes, serving God just like us. In the silence of our worries and struggles, our awesome God tells us about others who are ready to assist and help.

CONCLUSION

As I was working on this sermon, a 1960s song came to mind. Do you remember “The Sound of Silence” by Simon and Garfunkel? “Hello, darkness, my old friend/ I’ve come to talk with you again/ Because a vision softly creeping/ Left its seeds while I was sleeping/ And the vision that was planted in my brain/ Still remains/ Within the sound of silence.” As I looked up that song on the internet, I discovered the story behind the song. Apparently, Paul Simon wrote the song about a friendship that Art Garfunkel had with his college roommate Sanford Greenberg. All three of them were students at Columbia University in New York City. During the first fall semester, Greenberg’s vision went bad and he lost his sight. Understandably, he became depressed, isolated himself, and dropped out of school. But his close friend Art Garfunkel talked him into returning to school the next year.

Since all Greenberg could see was darkness, Garfunkel nicknamed himself that. Art Garfunkel was the “Darkness” who helped Greenberg walk to his classes and manage many details. Garfunkel also helped Greenberg learn to develop and trust his own abilities, so that Greenberg was able to graduate with multiple degrees and become a successful businessman. In fact, Greenberg’s money helped pay for the recording of the song “The Sound of Silence.”

The details of this story were told by Sanford Greenberg in his 2020 book titled *Hello, Darkness, My Old Friend*.³ I don’t know if Greenberg gives the credit to *God* for his friend Art Garfunkel who brought a life-changing sound into his silence. But I know I would. Our God is an awesome God who is able to work wonders. Through friends, angels, or any other means—let’s listen for God’s awesome voice in the silence.

¹Jerry Scott and Jim Borgman. I’ve lost the date it was published.

²<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/23/science/coronavirus-seismic-activity.html>

³I learned about this from Jessica Kneipp’s article at <https://www.nspirement.com/2020/10/04/the-untold-story-behind-simon-and-garfunkel-song-the-sound-of-silence.html> .