### “A Still Small Voice” Steve Finlan for The First Church, August 13, 2023

**1 Kings 19:9–13 (verse 12 in RSV)**

9At that place he came to a cave, and spent the night there. Then the word of the Lord came to him, saying, “What are you doing here, Elijah?” 10He answered, “I have been very zealous for the Lord, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away.”

11 He said, “Go out and stand on the mountain before the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by.” Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking 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; 12and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a still small voice. 13When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave.

**Romans 10:5–10**

5Moses writes concerning the righteousness that comes from the law, that “the person who does these things will live by them.” 6But the righteousness that comes from faith says, “Do not say in your heart, ‘Who will ascend into heaven?’ (that is, to bring Christ down) 7or ‘Who will descend into the abyss?’” (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). 8But what does it say? “The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart” (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim); 9because if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. 10For one believes with the heart and so is justified, and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved.

We’re going to talk today about spiritual living, and a little bit about spiritual *listening*.

Now, First Kings is not where I usually look for deep theological reasoning. The book is full of fighting and the rise and fall of kings, but here we find an important religious message, set up dramatically. The author uses a story to make a theological point. The story of Elijah demonstrates that God does not show up in a great wind, an earthquake, or a fire, but only in a still small voice that Elijah can hear. I use the RSV for that verse because it preserves the phrase “still small voice” that has become familiar, but which is abandoned by other translations more recently, for instance the NRSV, which has “a sound of sheer silence,” or the NIV, which has “a gentle whisper.” An important theological point is wrapped up in this narrative. It is saying that God does not communicate in loud and flashy ways but in intimate and coherent ways. It might possibly also mean that God does not communicate like an external voice, but like a voice that one hears inwardly, although we cannot be 100% sure if that contrast is part of the intended message.

An inward voice or “word” is found in the Paul passage, in the letter to the Romans. Paul is quoting Deuteronomy 30, where the word is not in heaven or across the sea, but “it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe” (Deut 30:12–14; see Rom 10:6–8). We do not have to *seek* the word; Paul says it is with us and *within* us, already. The word is near to you, even in your heart. Paul says it’s the belief that Jesus is Lord and that God raised him from the dead (10:9); these are the words of God, and if you believe them, then you are saved. So Paul is making a point about what the central belief needs to be; he’s not mainly making a point about how we get access to that belief or how we heard it in the first place. But it is certainly implied that you *heard* this preaching somewhere, and that you were able to take it into your heart.

Now you should access that belief in your heart and express it with your lips, so that others may hear it. It is a word that has power, which can sink into other people’s hearts and take root there, leading to their salvation. In this way we see God’s love for mankind going full circle, from our Father to human hearts and then out into the world. The act of sharing God’s love creates love ripples in the universe.

So in both biblical passages we have the idea of a deeply important message from God. In Elijah’s case it has to do with where he should go, whom he should anoint as king, and whom he should anoint as the prophet to succeed him, Elishah being the one (1 Kings 19:16). In Paul’s case, what’s exceedingly important is “the righteousness that comes from faith” and the word that *speaks* that faith, first in your heart and then on your lips (10:6, 8). He says “one believes with the heart and so is justified, and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved” (10:10).

In the verse immediately preceding this excerpt from Romans, Paul says “Christ is the end of the law” (Rom 10:4). In Greek, as in English, “end” can mean either the *finish* of something or its *purpose* or goal. He could be saying Christ brings the law to an end, although he does not say that elsewhere. More likely he is saying Christ was the purpose or goal of the law. In other words, Christ completes the law, brings it to its intended goal.

And that goes along with what he writes earlier in Romans, that Christ came “so that the just requirement of the law [or the “good thing” of the law], might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit” (Rom 8:4). Living according to the Spirit and according to faith enables one to fulfill the good thing of the law. It’s not so much the particular laws, but the overall thrust of the law that matters, and faith enables one to fulfill the overall purpose and thrust of the law. If you are walking in faith, seeking to follow God’s will, then the Law, based on God’s love, is fulfilled in you. Spiritual living is the end to which the law was pointing. And in that way, if we are fulfilling the good thing of the law, then *we* have become the “end of the law.”

Elijah hears God speaking in a still small voice. Paul hears him in the gospel word that he knows in his heart and utters with his lips. How do you hear the word? Do you hear it when you read the Scriptures, or hear them read? Do you hear it when you pray, especially if you are praying deeply? Do you wrestle with the word, seeking to understand it clearly, or do you get the main point, the main *spirit*, and just go with that? Can you put that into words that others can appreciate, or is it more personal than that, something that you cherish in your privacy? What happens with the word that is in your heart? In what way does it bubble up to affect your conscious mind and your social living? It will be expressed differently by each one of us, but it surely will find expression. As Jesus said in John 7, “Out of the believer’s heart shall flow rivers of living water” (John 7:38). The word cannot stay dormant in your heart, but will flow up into your mind and your life. Today, let the gift of the Spirit, the everlasting waters, flow through you and out to others. Let this circle be unbroken.