

Listen! Hearing That Still, Small Voice and Finding Your Own

Part 1: Find Your Cave

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Scripture: I Kings 19:9-16

At that place Elijah 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?"

He 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 with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away."

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 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.

When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. Then there came a voice to him that said, "What are you doing here, Elijah?"

He 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 with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away."

Then the Lord said to him, "Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus; when you arrive, you shall anoint Hazael as king over Aram. Also you shall anoint Jehu son of Nimshi as king over Israel; and you shall anoint Elisha son of Shaphat of Abel-meholah as prophet in your place.

Years ago my pastoral mentor, the late Rev. Bruce Van Blair, found it hard to sleep one night. He simply could not stop thinking of a friend he had neither seen nor heard from in months who lived two hours away. Something nagged at him in a way that suggested that his friend was in deep trouble. Every attempt to sleep backfired, and he'd find himself sitting up in bed thinking about his friend. Finally, around 1:30 in the morning, he sheepishly awakened his wife and told her he needed to visit his friend.

Naturally, his wife thought he'd gone crazy. For that matter, so did Bruce! But he got in his car and drove out into the night. Arriving at his friend's doorstep at 3:30 a.m., Bruce felt awkward and foolish: "This is insane!" he told himself. "He's never going to think of you as rational again. You don't even know if he's home!"

Gathering his courage, Bruce knocked at the door. No answer. He knocked a little louder. Still no answer. Figuring his friend might be deep in sleep, he knocked a third time more loudly. He could hear footsteps approaching. The porch light came on. After a brief pause, the door opened, revealing his friend looking more than a little bewildered. "Bruce?!"

Bruce entered his friend's house, explaining what had brought him there. His friend looked no less bewildered, saying, "Thanks, but I'm fine." They sat and drank coffee for over an hour. They had both moved from Paxton, Massachusetts, about the same time and had not seen or spoken to each other since the move. At last, Bruce rose and left. If Bruce had a tail, it would have been solidly between his legs as he returned home, frustrated that he'd been so impulsive. He tried to put the thought out of his mind.

Three months later, Bruce's friend was driving down from Maine and stopped by his house in Andover, Massachusetts, for an unexpected visit. He had come to tell Bruce that he hadn't been honest with him the night Bruce showed up on his doorstep. He had been awake when Bruce knocked. Wide awake.

"I was sitting in the dining room in the dark with a loaded revolver in my hand."

What Bruce's friend said next he has never forgotten: "You didn't have to say a word. I knew only one power in the universe could have brought you to my door at that particular moment. I had drifted far from God, but in that moment I knew God still cared about me. So I decided I better hang around a little longer to see what God wanted me to do."

Bruce first told me of this experience, which you may already be familiar with if you've read my book, *Gifts of the Dark Wood*, over 40 years ago, shortly after I'd had the mystical experience that is responsible for me going into the ministry. Due to my experience, I was already convinced that God really exists, and is aware of us, and is able to communicate with us. Yet, I had never realized that the stakes of this communication could be so high.

How do you discern God's voice from all the other voices running around in your head? And if you feel like you've heard God telling you to do something that sounds illogical – like drive two hours to pay an unexpected visit on a friend in the middle of the night – how can you be so confident it is God nudging you to do this?

Realizing that the answer to these questions could literally be a matter of life or death, I determined to become a student of spiritual discernment, or the practice listening to all the voices within you and discerning the voice of the Spirit from among them.

As my wife and children can attest, being a student of spiritual discernment for 40 years does not make me an expert or some sort of spiritual guru. Moment by moment, I rarely can tell with high confidence what God is trying to tell me, or you. Yet, looking back over these years, it is clear that the Holy Spirit has been able to guide me and others, one faulty step after another, to some fantastically rich and fulfilling places.

In my experience, most of the guidance the Holy Spirit sends has to do with discerning between the right good, and the wrong good. If you heard my sermon on Jesus's temptations, you know what I'm talking about. Our biggest challenges in life tend not to be doing good versus evil, but doing the right versus wrong good thing. By "wrong good thing," I mean doing those things that we later look back on and realize were a significant waste of our time, our energy, and our interest and skills ... in short, our life. When we harm others, it is often through trying to do the wrong good as well – for them or us.

As Howard Thurman once observed, "Don't ask what the world needs. Ask what makes you come alive, and go do it. Because what the world needs is people who have come alive." The

purpose of this series on spiritual discernment is to offer some principles for discerning the right good from the wrong good by discerning what brings you most fully alive from that which drains the life out of you. By extension, it is also meant to help us collectively learn principles for discerning the church's future direction: what brings our congregation most fully alive, and what does not.

It's not as easy as it may sound. Think of Bruce's experience. Had he not been versed in the subtleties of spiritual discernment, he may very well have felt the Spirit prompting him to visit his friend in the middle of the night, but likely he never would have left his bed, as he would not have recognized these prompts as coming from the Spirit. As Bruce found, time spent learning some basic principles can go beyond bringing you most fully alive. It can also save lives.

I. Enter the Cave

The first principle of spiritual discernment is to **find your cave**. The story of the prophet Elijah is the preeminent story in the Hebrew Scriptures that teaches what this principle is about.

Elijah was a Hebrew prophet who got into a great deal of trouble with King Ahab and Queen Jezebel in the ninth century BCE. Jezebel had sworn an oath to kill Elijah, and Elijah was pretty convinced that she would do just that if he didn't escape to the wilderness wastelands in the south of Israel.

At the time of this story, Elijah is feeling pretty lonely. Most of the other priests and prophets of Yahweh have either been killed already by Jezebel or have decided that the pressures are too great to continue.

In his loneliness and desperation, Elijah goes deep into the wilderness until he reaches Mt. Horeb, which other biblical passages know as Sinai, where the Ten Commandments were originally given. In the English translation of the passage, it says that Elijah went to "a cave" on the mountain in order to connect with God. But the Hebrew text literally says that Elijah went to "*the* cave." This is the writer's way of indicating that Elijah did not simply go to any random cave to connect with God, but that he went to the one that every Hebrew worth their (kosher) salt would have known was the ultimate cave for meeting God. It was the very cave that Moses was said to have stood at the entrance of when he asked to meet God.

Do you remember Moses' story? The mythological imagination that informs it is some of the best—and funniest—in scripture. As the story goes, Moses wants a face-to-face meeting with God. He's tired of God always descending in a cloud to meet with him. He wants clarity. Certainty, even. When Moses persists in his request despite God's objection, God finally concedes, but in a little different manner than Moses was expecting. God commands him to stand at the entrance of a particular cave (the same one that Elijah stands in centuries later). There, God will cover Moses' eyes with God's hand, so that he doesn't see God's face, which is apparently so glorious it would kill him. Then, once God walks by, God lifts God's hand and Moses see's "God's back." The Hebrew actually says that Moses sees God's "backs." The word here is a dual plural form, indicating that what is seen is two "backs" of equal proportion. The quiet Hebrew humor here, which runs throughout the Old Testament but is almost always missed in translation, is wonderful. What the story is trying to tell us is that Moses sees

God's rear end. It's like God is saying, "So you want certainty? You want clarity? Then you can kiss my ..."

So, Elijah travels in the wilderness for forty days and forty nights to this cave. He goes there because it's the one spot he can think of where God has made an appearance of some sort, and he's so desperate at this point that he'll take anything he can get.

II. Listening for God's Voice

Again, the mythological imagination behind this story is dynamite. Provided you're not looking for an account of something that happened long, long ago in a land far, far away, but are looking instead for what *keeps happening on down to our present day*, the story will speak great wisdom to you.

For instance, the story notes that God asks Elijah twice to name why he's there. Is this because God can't read Elijah's thoughts, or that God has a short memory? No, it's the story's way of telling us that when it comes to seeking guidance from God, it's helpful to be quite clear as to what kind of guidance you are looking for. If you're looking for a specific response, then ask a specific question. And make sure it's one that actually matters, deeply, to you. Chances are, if it matters deeply to you, it matters even more deeply to God. Often, asking the right question is as important as listening for an answer.

The fact that God's response is not found in the wind, earthquake, or fire is also significant. These are three of the great metaphors in the Bible for the voice of God. You may even recall Jesus comparing the Holy Spirit to the wind: "The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes." (John 3:8)

The story is trying to tell us that God's voice does not necessarily come with the ancient equivalent of flashing neon signs. Rather, it often comes to us in such subtlety that the only way you tell anything has happened is that your perceptions of your surroundings have changed ever so slightly.

In fact, that phrase which is translated "the sound of sheer silence" is actually untranslatable in Hebrew. Literally, the Hebrew reads "finely powdered silence." What is "finely powdered silence"? Hebrew Bible scholar, Walter Brueggemann offers the best analogy I have ever come across: it's like *freshly fallen snow*. Even if your eyes are closed, you can tell that snow has fallen not through its own sound, but from the way the snow subtly changes the acoustics of everything around you.

This is often the way the Holy Spirit communicates with us: by sending a thought, intuition, or idea that is not remarkable in and of itself, but subtly changes all the others within you.

Another point the story seems to be making about spiritual discernment is that to hear the voice of the Spirit one needs to surrender one's ego and expectations to God, allowing the Spirit to say anything, in any way, the Spirit chooses.

Elijah is deeply surrendered in this story. When God's voice doesn't come in the "usual" or "expected" ways, Elijah doesn't pretend that it has. He doesn't play ventriloquist. He doesn't put words in God's mouth to suit whatever desires he may have. No, Elijah is so

open to God coming in whatever form God chooses to that he refuses to manipulate the situation in any way. This is an important reminder for all of us. If you're going to ask God to communicate with you, you'd better be sure you're willing to let God show up in whatever form God chooses – even if it's not in the form you expect, or in the timeframe you presume.

Finally, don't be surprised if God responds with marching orders. When we connect with God, we may experience that connection as a tug into some form of concrete action. Not always. (Sometimes we're prompted into inaction!) But when we get a glimpse of higher ground, we eventually feel the tug to move toward it—whether that higher ground be into a relationship with another person, or out of a job that's driving us crazy, or simply into a state of higher confidence in what we're already doing.

Elijah's story suggests that the action into which God moves us may often seem unrealistic, like we're not capable of doing it. For instance, Elijah is to anoint two individuals as kings over Israel and Judah. It's not like anyone can just go and do that! Surely he would have been inclined to protest that he's not qualified for the job, or that the job is too dangerous. (It would have certainly put Elijah in danger from the competing candidates for kingship.) Remember: God always assumes that we're in this together, not alone. What course of action is too high or risky with the Creator of the Universe on our side? In God's opinion, none.

This coming week I invite you to try a special exercise meant to test if any of this holds water. First, like Elijah, find your cave. That is, find a spot where you can step out of the fray of life and find a little quiet time alone, preferably at the start of the day, but really anytime and any place you can do this with a high degree of intentionality. Examples may be your bedroom, or in a den or living room, or while you're out walking.

Next, find a question or need that's important to you right now. Make sure the question isn't too abstract or impersonal, like "What is the meaning of life?" or "Why is there evil in the world?" It should be highly personal and of enough importance that you'll actually remember it later. Finding a question both important to you and just your size will raise the chances of your not only sensing a response but *understanding* it!

Finally – and this is the hard part – *get willing* to hear an answer. Eighty percent of prayer is just getting willing. Get so willing that you can feel it in your gut. Get so willing that you will literally be open to "hearing" God in whatever form God chooses to address you, even if it's entirely unexpected or unconventional. Get so willing that you will remain watchful throughout the day for a response. Finally, get so willing that you will be prepared to make a few mistakes enroute to finding a response you find trustworthy.

Keep asking this same question or stating this same need each day. You don't need to spend hours in prayer; just find that cave and stay there long enough to be open, feeling in your gut that you are truly willing to receive a response. Ask God for it. Even demand it. Then, just go about your day. You needn't be overly concerned about finding an answer throughout the day. Let God do the action, not you. Like Elijah, simply be watchful. Pay attention to the music you're listening to; to the conversations you're having; to the inner voices running through your head.

Don't expect God to act on your timetable. A response you can trust may not come for days or weeks, or it may come before you've finished writing the question down.

Whenever it happens, a response *will* come. Listen. Listen for that still, small voice which, like gently falling snow, can't be directly heard, but changes the acoustics of your surroundings. And don't be afraid to make mistakes. For in the realm of prayer, intentionality is more important than technique. When we're intentional, even our missteps may be transformed by grace.