



FIRST (SCOTS) SERMONS

“Enduring Sacrifice”

Scripture Lessons: *I Kings 19:9-18; Acts 2:1-21*

*This sermon was preached by The Rev. Dr. L. Holton Siegling Jr.
on May 28, 2023, at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church
in Charleston, South Carolina.*

I Kings 19:9-18

Elijah Flees from Jezebel

⁹ At 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 with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away.”

Elijah Meets God at Horeb

¹¹He 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 ¹²and after the earthquake, a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire, a sound of sheer silence. ¹³When 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?” ¹⁴He 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.” ¹⁵Then 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. ¹⁶Also 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. ¹⁷ Whoever escapes from the sword of Hazael, Jehu shall kill; and whoever escapes from the sword of Jehu, Elisha will kill. ¹⁸Yet I will leave seven thousand in Israel, all the knees that have not bowed to Baal, and every mouth that has not kissed him.”

Acts 2:1-21

The Coming of the Holy Spirit

²When the day Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. ²And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. ³Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. ⁴All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, so the Spirit gave them ability.

⁵Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. ⁶And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native

language of each. ⁷Amazed and astonished, they asked, “Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? ⁸And how is it that we hear each of us, in our own native language? ⁹Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea, and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, ¹⁰Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, ¹¹Cretans and Arabs – in our own languages we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power.” ¹²All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, “What does this mean?” ¹³But others sneered and said, “They are filled with new wine.”

Peter Addresses the Crowd

¹⁴But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, “Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. ¹⁵Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o’clock in the morning. ¹⁶No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel:

- ¹⁷ ‘In the last days it will be, God declares,
that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh,
and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,
and your young men shall see visions,
and your old men shall dream dreams.
¹⁸ Even upon my slaves, both men and women,
in those days I will pour out my Spirit;
and they shall prophesy.
¹⁹ And I will show portents in the heaven above
and signs on the earth below,
blood, and fire, and smoky mist.
The sun shall be turned to darkness
and the moon to blood,
before the coming of the Lord’s
great and glorious day.
²¹ Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.’

Enduring Sacrifice

There was a man whose name you probably don’t know ... it’s Ralph Henry Johnson. Johnson was a United States Marine who hailed from right here in Charleston, South Carolina.

When he was 18 years old, Johnson decided to enlist (that was 1967) ... and in March of 1968, he died.

It happened that Johnson and his fellow Marines were behind enemy lines and were attacked by a much larger North Vietnamese force. His was in a small strategic fighting zone (a “fighting hole,” it was called) ... and a grenade landed among them.

Without a second thought, Johnson covered it with his body and took the full impact of the blast, saving his fellow soldiers and preventing the enemy from taking their position. Johnson was posthumously awarded our nation’s highest military decoration, the Medal of Honor! He is one of a

great many about whom that famous hymn asserts - “who more than self their country loved and mercy more than life.”

On this Memorial Day Weekend, there are festivals and there are parades; but, at the end of the day, there is the blessed measure of honor that is due those brave men and women who, despite the risks and the dangers, determined that they would do what needed to be done in order to ensure our freedom ... even if that meant losing their life.

As a citizen on this Memorial Day Weekend, it is humbling to look back and consider how many people over the years have dared to proceed, even when the odds were not in their favor ... and yet they performed their duty.

As a pastor, I think about Memorial Day in similar ways, but I tend to look back also upon the life of our Savior, and consider how it was that he chose not to reside in heaven, but to dwell among us, full of grace and truth ...

To that point, Jesus didn’t wonder or worry about what would happen ... he knew what would happen. He knew what needed to happen. He knew the consequences for having made his redemptive journey ... and he made it anyway!

We see examples of diving purpose and human heroism and we begin to realize just how timid we really are ... we shudder to think what others might think. We wonder what’s around the corner ... when that other proverbial shoe is gonna drop ... we wonder about the security of our place in this world, financially, relationally ... you name it!

Nevertheless, despite our sin-sick aversion to holy risk, we worship and serve a God who was tempted in every way as we are ... but who was without sin.

And so when we doubt God’s commitment or God’s ongoing presence in our life, when we are challenged by our experience to doubt that God is still with us ... still loving us ... still advocating for us, let us listen again to the words of the Psalmist: “I come to the end – I am still with you.”

And praise be to God, nothing can change that ... nothing can separate us from God’s love. In the end, we really are with God. But know this – we are with God precisely because God has determined to be with us.

What I’m saying is that God in Christ is the one who lives and dies and rises again. God is the one who shows up first ... loves us first!

In fact, God is always that first agent of change ... and this blessed day of Pentecost affirms as much.

There they were, people from all over the known world, gathered in one place. It was as if God was saying, “This message of salvation is for everyone!”

Let’s not forget that Jesus told us that it was coming. Told us that the Holy Spirit would come upon God’s people and that ours would be an Advocate, an agent of changes swelling in our hearts and minds, reminding us of the old and teaching us the new. And here’s the best part of all ...

That same Holy spirit, which, from the beginning, was coexistent with God and which moved so profoundly in the lives of those who gathered in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost – that same Spirit which was so altogether formative for the early Christian church ... **it is still with us!**

Ah, to be certain, God’s Spirit is no less instructive / no less present!

At one point in the Prophet Elijah’s life, he, too, had a hard time sensing the nearness of God, and I’m sure that had to do with the fact that everything in Elijah’s experience seemed to suggest that he was alone – his fellow prophets had been killed, and Jezebel was out to kill him too ... and so he fled ... he ran away!

Elijah’s insecurity was real ... the darkness of the night and the accompanying fears ... they were real! And they caused this man of God – this “major prophet,” as we refer to him – they caused him to question God’s faithfulness, and to doubt God’s presence.

But the Bible makes it clear that Elijah could neither leave God’s presence nor could he hide from God, even in that cave of his.

The Bible tells us that God eventually revealed himself to Elijah, not in the wind or an earthquake or a fire ... all of which were booming and burning. No! This was not like that cacophony of voices that would one day accompany Pentecost ... God’s revelations came to Elijah in the sheer sound of silence – that equally profound voice of God, but which sounds more like a whisper!

And isn’t it just like God to enter the troubled hearts of those who love him in such a way? Not in the sound of thunder or in the flashes of lightning; ah, this God who chose to dwell among us in all the glitter of a manger and in the cries of a newborn child ... His voice is often so gloriously ... gentle!

So gentle, in fact, that if we are not careful – if we don’t pay attention – we might not hear God’s voice. The reason I say that is because, in the business of our lives, there are so many noises and distractions; indeed, we become so busy, and so active, and so worried about this or that ... that we all but drown out the voice of God.

It is a learned skill, a faithful ear. It is a spiritual habit ... to listen ... and to listen well is even harder to

do, and yet the Bible implores us to “be still” and to know that God is God!

I have shared with some of you the story of a student at Columbia Theological Seminary who was in tears as she told her professor that story of how she had walked into the commons area at the Brooks Center where she saw a friend reading something.

“I was busy getting some money out of my purse to get a drink out of the machine and I said to my friend over there, ‘How are you doing?’”

She told her professor that it wasn’t until later that she realized that her friend had briefly told her about the letter that was in her hand ... the one that spoke of her mother’s malignancy and how she was going to have to go home to help her.’

With a broken heart she told her professor, “I didn’t hear her. I just went on and got my drink, came back out and I asked her if she had anything planned for the weekend. ... I didn’t hear a thing.”

I suspect something like that has happened to each of us at some point in time. What’s more, sometimes the one we ultimately fail to listen to is the very Christ who came and dwelled among us ... the one who gave his life for us as an atoning sacrifice for our sins; the one who actually is himself that “Balm in Gilead” ... the very cure for the malignancy of sin!

But, oh, how cavalier we are toward God! How quick we are to pass God in the hall and casually share the news of our lives ... we get our drink from the machine, and as we turn to head out the door, perhaps as a matter of course, or maybe out of a kind of spiritual obligation, we say something akin to the seminary friend of ours ... “So, God, what have you got planned for the weekend?” When all the while God has been talking to us ... and all the while ... we didn’t hear a thing!

But don’t be distressed! We all do that from time to time, and God knows that we do that; and yet, even when we find it difficult to pay attention to the presence of God in our lives, God has determined never to leave or forsake us; but rather to continue loving us, correcting us, challenging and affirming us ... that’s the work of God’s Holy Spirit ... and it never ever stops!

King David had it right when he said, “Where can I go from your spirit or where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there. If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast.”

In this way, God makes it very difficult for us to hear him at all because – simply put – God is wherever we are. In fact, there is no where we can be where God is not.

And so perhaps one of the best ways to tune ourselves to God's voice is to remember just how loud and clear God spoke in the person and work of Jesus Christ, His Son, our Savior.

... To consider again, the great lengths to which God went to love us ... to linger long enough at the foot of the cross and behold the pain and agony – so that we may see, in the sacrifice of Christ, the fullest measure of God's faithfulness; a faithfulness which, in spite of our sinfulness and by virtue of the inward witness of the Holy Spirit, says to us today, "I am still with you."

The voice and the power of the Holy Spirit is far from a memorial ... it is alive and well and it endures! Can we hear it? If not, keep listening! Keep listening and be reassured in the knowledge that the more we humble ourselves before the throne of our gracious God, the more we yield ourselves to Jesus, the more we praise the word of the Lord – and the more we actively listen for God – the far more audible God's voice becomes.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

*The above sermon has not been edited by the author; therefore, there may be discrepancies. When in doubt please refer to the audio version of the sermon on this website.