

## “When in Doubt - God Speaks”

Scripture: 1 Kings 19:1-18

Graphics: Elijah, still small voice,

Big Truth: The people of the Panama UMC are invited to be encouraged by God in times of doubt. Doubt comes in many forms - doubts of faith, self-doubts, and doubts about the future. This series will look at the lives of Elijah and Elisha as they faced doubts about their futures. They didn't doubt God, but doubted themselves. God spoke to Elijah and Elijah went where God sent him. Elijah died and passed the mantle of leadership to Elisha. Elisha followed God's plan and was used to heal Naaman. When we doubt ourselves and the future, we're called to listen, pick up the mantle, and follow God's plan.

Focus Phrase: When I am in doubt, God will speak.

### 1. Introduction

- A. Sheldon Vanauken wrote this, “Between the probable and proved there yawns A gap. Afraid to jump, we stand absurd, Then see behind us sink the ground and, worse, Our very standpoint crumbling. Desperate dawns Our only hope: to leap into the Word That opens up the shuttered universe. (A Severe Mercy, HarperCollins.)
- B. The word picture here is of a person - maybe you - standing on something like a glacier or in a vast desert. As you have been walking along, you've been confidently taking one step after another - a metaphor for your life. Yet, in a moment, a crevasse opens up - a gap, too maybe great to jump over. Then, the ground on which you've been walking begins to fall away, as if it never existed at all...coming closer to where your feet are on solid ground...for now. Do you stand firm and hope the ground stays firm or do you leap and trust that safety will be yours.
- C. In a word, this is all about a struggle with doubt. Should I stay or should I go, to quote The Clash song from 1982.
- D. Doubt is defined as *a feeling of uncertainty or lack of conviction*.
- E. A couple years ago, I preached a series of messages called Faith and Doubt. In that series, we acknowledged that we all have doubts about God, about how God works in our lives and in the world. We concluded that even though we have some doubts, we will not let that stop us from worshiping God, praying, serving, and loving others. Doubt can't stop us from growing as disciples.
- F. What Sheldon Vanauken writes about is not a lack of faith or even doubt in God's work in the world. Sheldon focuses on a different aspect of doubt, which is **doubt in my path or my future**. It's doubt as a feeling of uncertainty or lack of clarity about where God is calling you to go next.
- G. Over the past couple years, I've had plenty of doubts about ministry. Through a global pandemic, family changes, denominational challenges, and a world that seems to be spiraling, I've spent time at the edge of the gap between the

proven and the probable. I suspect that I'm not alone in that experience, even though the reason why you've come to that gap may be different.

- H. The GOOD NEWS is that Vanauken is right, "Desperate dawns Our only hope: to leap into the Word That opens up the shuttered universe."
- I. What seems cloudy or even impossible, is possible when we turn to God in every time of self-doubt or confusion about the future.
- J. This new series is called When in Doubt. We'll focus in on the lives of two Old Testament prophets - Elijah and his protégé, Elisha. Both of them had significant seasons of doubt - doubt about where they were to go, what they were to do, how they were going to do it, and what God wanted from them.
- K. We'll begin in 1 Kings 19. Elijah is on the run after angering King Ahab and Queen Jezebel. Elijah was in doubt, but God spoke.
- L. Here's something to write down in your bible or your notes: **When I am in doubt, God will speak to direct me.**
- M. Before we do anything else, though, let's PRAY and prepare our hearts to listen to and hear the Word of God this morning.
- N. PRAY!
- O. Turn to 1 Kings 19, starting in verse 1...

## 2. Scripture

### A. READ 1 Kings 19:1-3

- i. Let me give us some context here, since we're diving into the middle of Elijah's life story, here.
- ii. Elijah was called by Yahweh God to be a prophet. We first meet Elijah in 1 Kings 17 when he told King Ahab - King of Israel - that God said there would be a drought in all the land of Israel. And, sure enough, the drought went on and on for three years. In 1 Kings 18, the Lord told Elijah to once again present himself to King Ahab, and God would send rain to the earth.
- iii. Now, King Ahab is considered by all accounts to be THE worst king that ever ruled over Israel. He married Jezebel, who was a pagan Phoenician woman who actually spent her days finding and killing the prophets of Yahweh God. She and her family, and King Ahab, didn't worship God but worshiped Baal, a pagan god of fertility and storms.
- iv. Elijah often spoke against what King Ahab was doing and certainly spoke harsh words about Queen Jezebel. The prophets of Yahweh were in hiding, and only Elijah was willing to speak to Ahab about God's judgment.
- v. In chapter 19, things came to a head when Ahab told Jezebel about something Elijah had done, which was to kill 450 prophets of Baal - who served Jezebel and her family. That was bad for Elijah, for sure.

- vi. You can go back and read chapter 18 later today, but Elijah had personally killed the prophets of Baal, after challenging them to prove that Baal was real. They couldn't, of course, so Elijah chased them to the Wadi Kishon and killed them there.
- vii. (picture)When we were in Israel, we went to that place... which has a big statue of Elijah, holding a curved sword, with the severed head of a prophet of Baal as his feet. It's very uplifting...
- viii. To Jezebel, though, that act by Elijah was cause for her to say, "So may the gods do to me and more also, if I do not make your life like the life of one of them by this time tomorrow." Basically, she was threatening Elijah that he'd be dead that time tomorrow.
- ix. So, Elijah fled...with a servant...to Beersheba, which was in the land of Judah, away from the legal reach of Jezebel.
- x. It was at this point that Elijah began to experience doubt - an uncertainty about the future...a lack of conviction.
- xi. Elijah had been God's man. In fact, God did some amazing things through Elijah...rain to end a drought...killing 450 pagan prophets. Elijah had begun to feel pretty confident about himself. "I must be something pretty special for me to be used by God like that!"
- xii. Now, though...things were getting pretty rough and he began to doubt where this whole thing was leading.
- xiii. Let's go back to verse 4 to see what happened next...

## **B. READ 1 Kings 19:4-18**

- i. In his doubt about his life's trajectory, Elijah simply walked into the Negev Desert to sit under a broom tree. He prayed that God would take his life.
- ii. The words of the poem I read earlier come to mind: "Between the probable and proved there yawns A gap. Afraid to jump, we stand absurd, Then see behind us sink the ground and, worse, Our very standpoint crumbling..."
- iii. Elijah was confused and scared. He was depressed and feared Jezebel's wrath. He'd been working for so many years to preach to the leaders and people of Israel...to beg them to turn back to God...to stop worshiping pagan gods. Elijah was just tired...and wanted to give up.
- iv. Yet, God had other plans. In fact, in contrast to Elijah's doubts about himself and his life's work, God was all over it.
- v. First, God sent an angel to provide food and water. Twice!
- vi. The second time, the angel told Elijah that God had a plan - a journey - for him. God still wanted to use him.

- vii. But before God could give Elijah the mission, God needed to speak to him, directly. And, as it happens, apparently, God likes to do that on Mount Horeb (or Mount Sinai) - which is the same exact mountain on which, a few hundred years earlier, God spoke to Moses, directly. At THAT time, Moses was in doubt...unsure about what God was asking him to do.
- viii. So, Elijah went and found a place to hide in a cave on the mountain, he slept and then God asked him, "What are you doing, here, Elijah?"
- ix. Elijah's response? (whiny) "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."
- x. It doesn't SAY that God rolled his eyes, but I'm pretty sure God rolled his eyes. I'll have to do some research into that...
- xi. God wasn't impressed with Elijah's whining...nor was God impressed with Elijah's arrogance! One of the reasons why Elijah was in this predicament was that he'd begun to think it was all about him. And God shut the door for a season...so that He could get his attention...to speak to him.
- xii. God sent him out onto the mountain. A great and violent wind came up (reminds me of Pentecost!)...but the Lord was not in the wind. Then an earthquake...but the Lord was not in the earthquake. Then fire...but still no God.
- xiii. Then, sheer silence (it says in the NRSV translation). The Hebrew there actually means something more like, "the sound of as thin whisper." So after all the noise and wind and fire...then, the sound of a thin whisper. The KJV famously tells us that it's, "...the still small voice of God."
- xiv. In his doubt, and amidst the chaos of wind and fire and earthquake, Elijah finally stopped, wrapped his face in his mantle (his cloak), and went out to listen. God asked him again, "Elijah, what are you doing here?"
- xv. Unfortunately, Elijah gave the SAME EXACT response. You'd have think that Elijah would've been a little more introspective at that point. But he once again said he'd been faithful, and he's the only one left...blah blah blah...eye roll, eye roll.
- xvi. But we have a gracious God, amen? God had Elijah where he wanted him and could SPEAK to guide him!
- xvii. And, really, the only important word was, "GO!" "Go...anoint Hazael as King. Go...anoint Jehu as King over Israel (instead of Ahab). Go...anoint Elisha as prophet in your place." "Go..."
- xviii. The final promise God gave Elijah was that there WERE others...he was not alone in this. God would keep 7,000 faithful people, and God would rebuild a nation with that remnant!

xix. Elijah was in serious doubt about his life and calling. He was down and out, ready to give up and die.

xx. But he was faithful and sought the Lord in his doubt. God took the focus off Elijah and put it back on the mission. And Elijah listened and acted to resume God's work.

### 3. Application

- A. And that's the same pattern for you and I as followers of Jesus! In fact, the mission IS Jesus. And when you and I are in doubt, God will speak to direct us.
- B. Think of the graduates that we honored earlier...some from high school...some from college. I remember those days, when things were exciting, but there were also massive doubts about the future. I remember wrestling with college decisions, career decisions, relationships and decision about the future.
- C. Each one of us has times of doubt - confusion about the right next step. This season of being a human may not be harder than in past generations, but BOY is it confusing. We do the best we can with the information before us, even while wondering if our decisions or choices will have consequences that will affect us or someone else.
- D. If the decision is big enough or if the consequences will affect more than just today (other people or where to live or finances), then the doubt is always right there waiting.
- E. When that happens, you can go back to the promise: **When I am in doubt, God will speak to direct me.**
- F. God wants to get your attention. God wants to direct you. God wants you to thrive in His plan. What He doesn't want is for you, in your own strength and abilities, to problem-solve and buy or work yourself into your own future apart from Him.
- G. So, how can you and I learn from Elijah, when in doubt? How can we be ready to listen to God as He speaks to us?
- H. It starts when you **Seek God's counsel.**
  - i. There are two phrases that impact me more than any others. One impacts me in a negative way, and the other in a positive way. The first is, "Pastor, just so you know..." (oh boy...) The second, though, is the one that every pastor and ministry leader lives to hear, "Pastor, I've been praying about this and..." Hallelujah!
  - ii. Whenever there's doubt or a decision or something that's unclear, SEEK THE LORD! Go to the mountain alone or with some prayer warriors.
  - iii. The bigger the decision, the more prayer it's going to take...deeper, traveling prayer - prayer like Jesus in the Garden before the crucifixion.

Prayer from the gut is what's needed when the way forward seems completely blocked...and you're frustrated and tired and want to give up.

iv. Seek God's counsel.

#### I. Second, **Take the Focus off Yourself**

i. Look, we're inherently selfish people. We want what we want and we want our lives to be content, easy, and uneventful. Now, that may be an overreach, but not much.

ii. When in doubt, you and I tend to focus on how the decision will affect 'me'...maybe the immediate family or this particular moment.

iii. God's view is infinitely bigger...and He wants to begin to show you more than this moment. God wants to turn your eyes to Him. God wants to open your vision to the bigger picture - the longer view. He wants to give you binoculars to see farther away, to see more of the truth about your circumstance.

iv. God wanted Elijah to stop thinking about how sad it was that he thought he was the only one left. God knew that wasn't true. What about Elisha, and Jehu, and Hazael, and the 7,000? What about your brothers and sisters in Christ? What about your family and friends?

v. You're not alone...take a look around, and take the focus off yourself.

#### J. Finally, **Listen and Go!**

i. Elijah went from that mountain to find Elisha. Next week, we'll talk about how Elijah passed the mantle to Elisha, just as God commanded.

ii. You can't stay on your knees forever, hemming and hawing about something when God gives you the answer to your prayers and the bigger vision. Get up! Go!

iii. Go to college. Go to the academy. Take that job. Retire. Get married. Start a family. If God gives the guidance, then do it!

iv. The answer might be to stay where you are and be faithful where God has planted you until He says otherwise. It may be that there's a barrier in the way that He wants you to work though before you can fully commit.

v. But Listen! Two ears...one mouth. God gave us that ratio for a reason. Let your ears and heart hear the Holy Spirit's "sound of a thin whisper."

vi. And then have the courage and faith to go...let the clouds lift and the joy return in God's timing.

### 4. **Conclusion**

A. This week, send me your testimony about this process works for you...of seeking the Lord, taking the focus off yourself, and listening to go. I want to know

how that's worked in your life. Maybe I'll share those testimonies with your permission.

B. When we're in doubt...God will speak to guide us. That goes for our church as well! Seek the Lord, take the focus off us, and then listen for God's plan to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

***C. Desperate dawns Our only hope: to leap into the Word That opens up the shuttered universe.***

D. May the universe that God has created be open to you, especially in your doubt, so that you meet Him on the mountain and hear Him speak the words of life to you!

E. Let's pray...