

Remember Junior High English class? In the days before we got to high school and started reading *Great Expectations*, *The Scarlet Letter* and *Moby Dick*, Miss Williams, our 7<sup>th</sup> grade English teacher tried to teach us the parts of speech and diagram sentences. She would make us go the blackboard and put a sentence on the board, underlining the subject and the predicate, drawing lines for the adjectives and adverbs, and prepositional phrases. Then we had to conjugate verbs to get the tenses right, the present, simple past, past perfect, future and future perfect, and I confess that I did not get it at the time. When I took high school German I began to understand, but it was not until I got the New Testament Greek in seminary that I finally began to understand the importance of what Miss Williams had been talking about.

One day I was standing in the seminary hallway reading the bulletin board when Dr. Jack Suggs, professor of Greek and New Testament walked by, saw him standing there, stopped and said, "Yonker, conjugate *blepo*." *Blepo* the Greek verb "to see." Suddenly taken aback by the man whom we called "The Bear," I started in, *Blepo, blepeis, blepei . . . blep . . .* and that's all I could do. After a minute Dr. Suggs spoke up, "It's an easy verb, the present active indicative is an easy tense in regular verbs. You need to get the verbs right if you want to learn to read the Greek New Testament." And then he walked away leaving me there face to face with the announcement of the fall semester picnic in the seminary hallway. His words ring in my ears every time I dust off my Greek Bible. "You have to get the verbs right if you want to read the Greek New Testament."

Here is the question before us today raised by the famous story of the prophet Elijah hiding in the cave in the desert –

Can we recognize the present tense of God in this world?

Can we learn to see and recognize the signs of God's presence with us in these days?

Can we learn the present tense of God?

Some of us have learned to see God in the past tense. Sometimes it is so much easier to see God in the past tense!

Some time ago one of my friends told me the story of his first pastoral crisis in his ministry. He was just a young minister, still wet behind the ears, in the first year of his first pastorate, one day at home during the noon hour when the phone rang, "Did you hear about Bill? He didn't come home for lunch. We heard that he committed suicide." He dropped the phone, jumped in the car, raced over to his house and found his wife and son in utter shock. The rumor was true, Bill had taken his own life in act of desperation, apparently to

escape a growing mountain of debt and a battle with alcoholism. The next few days were a blur of making phone calls to in-laws and cousins, family meetings with the undertaker, planning the funeral, and arranging the luncheon.

My friend had never gone through anything like that before, and the family had never gone through anything like that. He didn't know what to say or what to do except to throw his arms around them and pray for them. He did not know how he made it through it until one day a couple of weeks later one of the little ladies of the church stopped him after a C.W.F. meeting. "We have been praying for Bill's family. And we have been praying for you." Her words struck him like a slap on the face, and suddenly he knew it, that's he made it. Somebody had been praying for him. And Somebody had been with him.

Sometimes we can see God in the past tense; like looking in the rear view mirror, looking back, we can see God as we remember the glimmer of light on the horizon on some dark day. We can recall the wind at our back pushing us along the path, giving us strength we never dreamed possible. We can hear the whispers of God amidst the confusion which has clouded our minds and washed over our ears. Sometimes we can see God in the past tense.

Some of look for God in the future tense. Lots of Americans are looking for God in the future tense in these days. A recent *Newsweek* article featured the apocalyptic predictors of the end of the world, Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins, authors of the popular "Left Behind" novels. Perhaps you have read one of their stories about the coming end of the world, in which true believers are snatched up away from the world, to live in eternal bliss with God and Jesus, while the rest of us are abandoned, fated to live in this world filled with corruption and confusion, careening toward destruction.

Their first book was published in 1995, but following the terrible events of 9/11 sales began to take off, their latest volume that year became the best-selling novel of the year. And now their books have now sold 62 million copies, mostly in the south and mid-west.

Because people are fed up with the present, because people have given up hope on the present world and become convinced that their only salvation will come in the future.

I don't know what you think about all that; I think LaHaye and Jenkins have completely mis-read the Bible. But I can understand all the fear and frustration which is causing people to buy their books; these are tough times; we have real problems, and there are no easy, simple solutions. Often times hope in the future, sometimes our only hope, is the only thing which keeps us going.

The creators of M.A.S.H. portrayed future hope perfectly in one of my favorite episodes. A beautiful news reporter comes into camp and immediately falls in love with B.J. Honeycutt. It is not unusual for women to fall in love with B.J., he is handsome, intelligent

and a great guy. That's why his name is Honey-cutt, and not Hawkeye. B.J. is married, of course, and very much in love with his wife, Peg, who waits for him back home. But she is in California, and the young, beautiful reporter is right there in camp, near the front lines of Korea, in the midst of the suffering and dying. B.J. finds himself strongly drawn to the beautiful reporter, and she makes herself very much available to him. One evening, B.J. finds himself in her tent, she comes close and he does not back away and they embrace. The nurse is crazy about him, and for a moment he is carried away by her love. But suddenly he pulls away from her, he cannot go on.

"What's wrong?" she asks. "I find you very attractive, and I thought the feeling was mutual."

"The feeling is very mutual," he replies.

"Then why shouldn't we love each other now? We have no promise for tomorrow, we have only the present."

B.J. pulls a picture of his wife and little girl from his wallet, and answers, "You're wrong. I have only the future, I have no present. And this is the only thing which helps me stand the present."

And that's the way it is sometimes with us; hope for the future, the future tense of God is what carries us through the present.

But the question before us today is today! What about today? Can we learn to present tense of God? And that brings us back to Elijah hiding in a cave. Remember Elijah? You thought I had forgotten about Elijah. You thought I was going to leave him hiding in that cave all morning!

According to the story, a severe drought had come over the land, and Elijah the prophet of Hebrew God Yahweh, had challenged the prophets of the Canaanite god, Baal, to see who could make it rain. When the prophets of Baal called out to their god nothing happened, Elijah laughed at them, saying, "Where is your god? Maybe he is meditating. Maybe he has taken a vacation. Maybe he is has gone to the bathroom. Maybe he is asleep. Maybe you should go and wake him up." They could not make it rain.

But then Elijah called upon Yahweh who rained down fire from heaven upon the altar where he had prepared a sacrifice and then brought rains to the earth. And Elijah sized the prophets of Baal and slaughtered them in river at the foot of the holy mountain. He really set back ecumenical relations in that county.

When word of Elijah's triumph over her boys reached the ears of Jezebel, queen of the land, she was not pleased. She was not pleased at all. She quickly sent word to Elijah, "I swear by God the same thing is going to happen you by this time tomorrow." And when Elijah received that threat to his life, he started shaking like a leaf, and running for his life.

He ran for forty days and night, all the way down to Beer-sheba, and hid in a cave.

And there in that cave Elijah discovered the present tense of God. While he was hiding in the cave suddenly there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting the mountains and breaking the rocks, but the Lord was not in the wind. Then there was an earthquake, a mighty shaking of the ground under Elijah's feet, but the Lord was not in the earthquake. And then there was a fire, a scorching heat hotter than your bare feet on the sidewalk on an August afternoon, but the Lord was not in the fire. And then there came the sound of sheer silence, and Elijah recognized the presence of God.

Let me pause right here; many of us remember the story a little differently. We remember that after the wind, and earthquake and fire there came "a still small voice." That is how the Hebrew words are translated in the King James and the Revised Standard Versions of the Bible which most of us grew up with. The New International Version, which has become popular recently, says it was "a gentle whisper." Another translation (the American Translation, University of Chicago, 1931) says it was "a sound of gentle stillness," and the New English Bible says it was "a low murmuring sound."

As soon as he heard it, whatever it was, Elijah got up, went out and stood at the entrance of the cave, and there came a voice asking him, "What are you doing here? What are you doing here? I've got work for you to do. I've got work waiting for you at Damascus. Get going." And just as quickly as he ran from Jezebel, Elijah responded to the voice of God and off he went.

We really don't know what Elijah heard in that cave, a still small voice, a gentle whisper, a low murmuring sound, a sheer silence. But whatever it was, it was not the wind, it was not the earthquake, and it was not the fire. And there ought to be a lesson there for us to learn on this fine June Sunday of ought four.

In that sound of sheer silence, in that still small voice, God is present. Here is a lesson for us who love the big screen Hollywood productions. Here is a word for us who love the stirring music and the sweeping scenes of Cecil B. DeMille, who loved Charleston Heston decked out to look like Moses, raising his staff high into the air over the mighty waters of the Red Sea, so that thousands of extras from the back streets of South California, can go streaming down through the ocean to safety, while the army of Pharaoh, more extras from the back streets of southern California, are drowned by the angry waters crashing down over them when Moses lowers his staff.

There is a lesson for us who look for signs, who ask for miracles, who think God always deals in dramatic displays of power and might. God was not in the wind. God was not in the earthquake. God was not in the fire. God was in the sheer sound of silence. God

was in the silence. God was in the still small voice which found Elijah hiding in the cave.

Listen! Can you hear the silence of God? Can you hear God in the silence?

“God is here!” wrote Fred Green in his hymn titled by those words. God is here, “in silence, as in speech, here, in newness and renewal, God the Spirit comes to each.”

Here is the present tense of God. When we are somewhere in a cave – when we are scared to death; when the world has become too much for us; when we don’t know what is going to happen to us; when we don’t think that we can go on; when it is three o’clock in the morning and we are wide awake and we think that dawn will never come . . . the spirit of God speaks in a still small voice, “It’s going to be OK. You are going to make it. You can stand it. You will make it.”

With apologies to Garrison Keilor, sometimes the present tense experience of God is like Powder Milk Biscuits, it gives shy people the courage to do what needs to be done! It gives people the fortitude to stand up and face the day – the gumption to get up and get back in the race.

In the back of that cave, hiding from the henchmen of Queen Jezebel, the Almighty God made an appearance for Elijah. But it was not written according to any Hollywood script, it was not a mighty wind, an earthquake, or a fire, but a silent voice whispering a question, “What are you doing here?”

And so it come to us if we stop and listen.

If you put hold your hand up, and put your finger in the air, you won’t feel any mighty wind blowing today. Things are pretty calm on this beautiful summer morning. If you will hold onto the pews you will notice they are not rocking and rolling, the ground is not shaking this morning, there is no earthquake this morning, everything is as calm and serene as it is on any Sunday morning in downtown Columbia. And if you look around you will notice that the place is not burning down. There is no fire sweeping through the pews and up into the balcony, there is no need for the fire department to come roaring in here this morning.

But if you listen carefully for a few minutes . . . if you listen closely, in the sound of sheer silence perhaps you can hear that low murmur, that still small voice speaking to you.

What are you doing here? Everything is going to be OK! It’s all going to be good.

Why don’t you get up and get going?

Why don’t you get on with the business of living?

Why don’t get going. I’ve got things for you to do!