

As we gather together this morning we find ourselves perched on the edge at the end of another new year, turning away from the sunset of 2017 and turning towards the sunrise of 2018; leaving behind what has been and straining ahead towards what will be; opening our hearts and our minds and our souls to the movement of the Holy Spirit – so that by the Word of God we might know the will of God for our lives and our families and our church and our community and the world we live in. We consider this day in the context of the season of Advent we have just gone through. The time of expectant waiting and preparation for the celebration of the birth of the long-promised Savior had been fulfilled. The Words that God had given to His prophets for His people were true. The good news of the gospel of God’s presence, power, pleasure, peace and praise had come in Jesus Christ!

One wonders what those who lived at that time, who knew what had just happened, were thinking. Right after the beginning of creation, the man and woman God created in His image rejected God by rebelling against God. And though God punished them for doing so, it was also God’s will that He would restore fallen humanity back to Him. And so God promised He would send a Savior into the world to do so. And throughout the history God reminded His people of His will and His promise through His prophets, until 400 years before Jesus was born, when He spoke His last words of promise through the prophet Malachi: *“But for you who fear my name, the sun of righteousness shall rise with healing in its wings. You shall go out leaping like calves from the stall. . . . “Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes. And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers”* (Malachi 4:2; 5-6).

As God began to fulfill His will to restore His people back Himself through His promise to send a Savior, God once again began to speak to His people not only through prophets, but also through angels and wise men and shepherds and godly men and women. And after the Savior was born and grew into a man, God continued to speak to His people through Jesus, the Son of God, who was and is and always will be God. And after Jesus Christ died on a cross in our place for our sins, so we might be forgiven and redeemed and restored back to God, God continued and continues to speak to His people regarding His will and His promises for His people through His Holy Spirit and through the Bible, which is the Word of God, the manifestation of Jesus as “the Word of God.”

And so, as we as God’s people, as followers of Jesus Christ, make ready to step forward into the new year before us, the question begs to be asked: “What is God’s will for those of us here at Arrowsmith Baptist Church in the year 2018? What are the promises of God that God seeks to fulfill through us as follows of Jesus Christ in the twelve months and beyond that lay before us? In what ways is God calling us to sacrificially live out our mission statement to “passionately proclaim the glory of God in Christ for the joy of all people”? What is God telling us to do next year?

Maybe a more appropriate question would be: “Can we even hear God what God is saying to us today?” One could argue, more often than not, we can’t. The reality is we all live in a very noisy world - not only with the constant noise of our Ipads, cell phones, televisions, computers, and internet - but also the constant noise of the busyness of our overscheduled lives. Always on the move, riding the ever-changing overflow of our schedules, we hear the constant sound of our soft, inward rotating thoughts, fears, and attitudes - which trick the ears of our hearts into hearing not what God is saying but rather what we want to hear. It’s hard hear God’s voice today because we live in a culture that is so saturated with narcissism, entitlement, and self-interest - that we tend to confuse our opinion with God’s opinion. Those of us who claim Jesus as Lord and Savior are not exempt from this; our culture and our fallen sinful nature will convince us that that our voice is God’s voice. We know that’s true because many of us who claim Christ are living out our lives no differently than those who don’t want to have anything to do with Jesus and the Christian faith.

In the midst of the constant noise in our life and in our fallen hearts we have lost the art of listening to God. There are some who believe that God no longer speaks as He did in the times of the Bible. That is simply not true - God speaks just as loud, just as burning bush clear, as He did in the Bible. You see it's not that God is silent; the problem is - we just can't hear Him above of the noise of our own voice. The sweet music of God's heart has been drowned out by hard rock being played by our self-driven lives. The only difference between the Bible times and our times is that we have lost our ear for God. The orderly harmonies of God's voice reflect the love of the Jesus' humble sacrifice of the cross, in contrast to the loud, demanding voice of personal privilege that we live in. As a child of the sixties I grew up saturated with that kind of spirit. To some degree that spirit has infected us all and sadly to some degree it's also contaminated and corrupted the church. We wonder today why the Christian faith is so hard to understand and to live out, why we have so little spiritual power and authority. It is because we listen to that which is not of the Spirit of God.

Faith in Jesus Christ that is understood and lived out *without the voice of God as truth* is nothing more than empty, dead morality. In many churches the Bible is now read a historical collection of stories about God and His people which are no longer relevant today; its pages no more than an accumulation of myths and legends that illustrate human values and general truths – rather than a living book written by the sovereign living God, which proclaims the deep truths of God which are applicable for all of life, a book written by a holy God to be read by humble, desperate sinners.

If we who claim Christ do not listen to the true voice of God, we will not experience the power of God. We may confess a deep love for God, but if we listen to our culture or ourselves - there will be little evidence of the supernatural power of God at work in our lives. With little belief in a little god we won't pray for miracles and so we won't see miracles. Without an ear for God we will live out a moralistic Christianity that believes that God has sovereignly given us faith in Christ so we might become better people and so we can then go to heaven. And beyond taking us to heaven, we won't really expect too much more from God; when that's true then we will get exactly what we expect.

Throughout history God has chosen and sent out His prophets, His preachers, His pastors to speak on His behalf, so that God's people might know God's will and the fulfillment of God's promises in this life and in the life beyond. This is how God's people hear God's voice – whether it be the will of God and the promise of God for a Savior, or the will of God and the promise of God for what God wants His people to do after the coming of the Savior – whether it be after the birth of Jesus or after the death of Jesus or after the resurrection of Jesus or after the coming of the Holy Spirit or after we gather together as a church, the people of God, the body of Christ, after December 31, 2017.

We at Arrowsmith, need to hear the true voice of God if are going to do the true will of God in the year of 2018. How can we hear the true voice of God? Today God's Word will tell us how we can hear the true voice of God in the life of the prophet Elijah. The Bible tells us that God called Elijah (whose means "My God is Yahweh") to speak on God's behalf in northern Kingdom of Israel, about 800 years before Jesus was born, at a time when God's people were wandering in their faith with God, most blatantly in committing the spiritual adultery of worshipping a false god called Baal, who was considered to the god of fertility, weather, rain, wind, lightning, seasons, and war. This was not only promoted but made as law by King Ahab, who had a temple built for Baal, and his wife Jezebel brought a large entourage of priests and prophets of Baal into the country.

Today we are looking at 1 Kings 19. Contextually, chapter 18 speaks of Elijah's defeat over the 450 prophets of Baal at Mount Carmel by calling down divine fire from heaven - and after their defeat Elijah had them all killed. He then gets down on his knees and calls down a thunderstorm onto Israel, a land where it hadn't rained for over 3 ½ years. The chapter ends with Elijah pulling up his robe and outrunning a chariot of horses - at a barefoot run all the 14 miles it took to get to Jezreel.

In 1 Kings 19:1-18 we then see the answer to the question: How do you hear God's voice? Our text for today will give us a number of ways to know the answer. How much easier it would be if we could hear God's voice as plain as Moses did in the burning bush. But most of us would not hear His voice that way, nor would we discern God's will with such clarity. But God's voice is heard in a much more subtle manner. Most of those in biblical times heard God speak in the very same ways that we hear Him today. God speaks in numerous ways - all of which confirm and affirm the other. Those ways and manners can be seen in our text for today, as God spoke to Elijah.

First of all, hearing God's voice is *born out of a passion for God*. In the previous chapters of 1 Kings 17-18, the Bible tells us that God had been doing some phenomenal things in Elijah's life. Even before the awesome power evidenced in chapter 18 of fire from heaven, of power over the weather, of superhuman physical capabilities, Chapter 17 tells us that Elijah replicated the miracles of Jesus of reproducing abundant food and raising someone from the dead. And in chapter 18 we then read that Elijah replicated the divine power of God by calling down fire from heaven, punishing evil by executing false prophets, opening the heavens of water to saturate a drought-weary land, and the super-human ability to out run a horse for 14 miles. God's Word tells us that Elijah's life bore such miracles because he was humbly surrendered and totally obedient to God. Elijah had a trust and a love for God which bore great and abundant fruit. Simply put, he had a *passion* - a desire, hunger, thirst, craving for God – which caused him to surrender all to the God whom he obediently loved.

A number of years ago I was blessed to have a pastor from Ethiopia whose name is Getaneh in my office, who has been imprisoned for a number of years and tortured for his faith in Jesus Christ. A number of times the Muslims have tried to kill him, but the power of God always intervened. In the worst of circumstances, Getaneh – because he has a *passion* for the Savior - continued to be obedient to the truths of God's Word. And many, abundant, amazing, superhuman miracles flowed out of his life. Getaneh told me the more obedient he was to God, the more he was blessed.

Over and over again we read of Elijah hearing God's voice and then of Elijah doing what he is told. Why do we not see the fire from heaven, power over nature, and superhuman manifestations in our own lives? Perhaps the answer lies in our modern-day manipulation of godly principles and biblical truths which are simply a refusal to obey the voice of God. Perhaps also our passions for the things of this world are much greater than our passion for God. His voice is hard to hear and obey when our opinions speak more loudly than His. Hearing God's voice is *born out of a passion for God*.

Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done, and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword. Then Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah, saying, "So may the gods do to me and more also, if I do not make your life as the life of one of them by this time tomorrow." Then he was afraid, and he arose and ran for his life and came to Beersheba, which belongs to Judah, and left his servant there.

But he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness and came and sat down under a broom tree. And he asked that he might die, saying, "It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life, for I am no better than my fathers." And he lay down and slept under a broom tree. And behold, an angel touched him and said to him, "Arise and eat." And he looked, and behold, there was at his head a cake baked on hot stones and a jar of water. And he ate and drank and lay down again. 1 Kings 19:1-6

In these words we also see that God's voice is also *affirmed by the circumstances of life*. Many times we see our circumstances in life as consequential to our own behavior. While there is some truth in that kind of thinking, the sovereignty of God allows for a broader range of theology. Brothers and sisters, our circumstances in life are under God's direction – either in His direct management or as He allows what might come for our greater good and for His glory.

Elijah had found himself in dire circumstances before – trying to stay alive in a land without food and water, and under the threat of death from 850 prophets at Mount Carmel. Here again we read that he finds himself in a tough situation; under the threat of death Elijah leaves Jezreel and goes to Beersheba. He leaves his personal servant there and continues on into the desert and things get tough again. Tired and lonely and hungry and thirsty, he again surrenders his circumstance to God, “I’ve reached the end of my rope Lord. Take me home.” Have you ever felt that like? Like you’ve reached the bottom and there’s no other place to go but to God? People have told me they’ve been there, but their lives do not reflect a true surrender; and they wonder why God has not responded. You haven’t reached the bottom until you’re willing to surrender it *ALL* into His hands.

Elijah was there, in fact he had been in this kind of circumstance before. Here we read Elijah surrendered again, and again God intervened. Notice God never took Elijah *out* of his difficult circumstances - He provided a way *through* them. What does the voice of God say in seasons of struggle? He says, “I’m in charge. Trust me.” What does God say in painful circumstances? He says, “I am with you. I will provide. I will be your strength. Seek my power instead of yours.” What does God say in times of trial? He says, “It’s time to surrender. I am God. You are not. Quit fighting *with* me. Let me fight *for* you.” God’s voice is *affirmed by the circumstances of life*.

And the angel of the Lord came again a second time and touched him and said, “Arise and eat, for the journey is too great for you.” And he arose and ate and drank, and went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights to Horeb, the mount of God. 1 Kings 19:7-8

Here we read that hearing God’s voice is not only born out of our passion for God and is affirmed by the circumstances of our life, but *is also clarified by the counsel of others*. God speaks to us through others at times; here an angel came to Elijah and gave him direction. But it rarely comes in such a divine way. More often God uses the counsel of those in our lives - sometimes positive, at other times negative - to speak to us. Remember in verse two God spoke to Elijah through Queen Jezebel – “When I get my hands on Elijah, he will have no tomorrow.” The phrase “Heaven hath no fury than a woman scorned” is not appropriate here. God was speaking to Elijah through Jezebel! He had a plan to get Elijah to Mount Horeb and he wasn’t going on his own. Under the threat, the counsel of Jezebel, Elijah ran to the desert. Stopping again, God sent an angel to provide and then God spoke again through an angel: “Get up, eat and get going. You’ve got a long way to go yet.”

In the New Testament, instead of an audible voice, the voice of God often emerged from within the Christian community. The affirmation, direction and discipline of God came out of the body of Christ and through it’s appointed leaders. Even Paul was trained and sent out on his missionary endeavors under the authority of the churches leadership and those who knew him. The voice of God is does not come out of a vacuum; it is created and heard out of our interaction with others.

Many times God will speak to us through others, but beware of those who announce they are speaking for God. Notice neither Jezebel nor the angel said to Elijah, “God has sent me to tell you something.” Rarely those who are speaking for God know they are doing so. Many times people have told me God has spoken through me – and then they’ll quote something which I either don’t remember saying or I didn’t say at all. God just seems to do things that way. Also remember that the counsel of others is not exclusive to God’s voice, but rather often the counsel of others simply will “clarify” what God is saying. We must still use the guidance of the indwelling Holy Spirit and the truths and principles of the Word of God to discern what is God’s voice and what is the voice of opinion or control. We must also be *wary* of the counsel of others; if Israel had been functioning under a democratic system or committee, they would have voted to return to Egypt. Praise the Lord that Moses sought the counsel of God over the voices of others.

There he came to a cave and lodged in it. And behold, the word of the Lord came to him, and he said to him, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" He said, "I have been very jealous for the Lord, the God of hosts. For the people of Israel have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword, and I, even I only, am left, and they seek my life, to take it away." And he said, "Go out and stand on the mount before the Lord." And behold, the Lord passed by, and a great and strong wind tore the mountains and broke in pieces the 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. And after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire. And after the fire the sound of a low whisper. And when Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his cloak and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. And behold, there came a voice to him and said, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" He said, "I have been very jealous for the Lord, the God of hosts. For the people of Israel have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword, and I, even I only, am left, and they seek my life, to take it away." 1 Kings 19:8-14

This text also tells us that hearing God's voice is confirmed *through the Word of God*. "There he came to a cave and lodged in it. And behold, the word of the Lord came to him, and he said to him, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" By the power of the *Word of God* the heavens and the earth and all of creation came to be: "And God said, 'Let there be light,' and there was light" (Genesis 1:3). By the power of the *Word of God* we have come to have salvation: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made. In him was life, and the life was the light of men" (John 1:1-4). It is by the power of the *Word of God* that we can live for Jesus Christ as sinners in a fallen world: "For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart" (Hebrews 4:12).

Brothers and sisters, the Word of God, the Bible, is God's inspired infallible, inerrant holy words which carry His power and His authority. This is His voice! "All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work" (2 Timothy 3:16-17). When we read our Bibles, when we learn, study it, follow it, and are obedient to it - we are then listening to the true voice of God. Just as Elijah heard the voice of God, so shall we. The voice of God spoken in Elijah's life is this book. How do we hear God's voice? God's voice is heard and confirmed through the Word of God.

We read here also that hearing God's voice is validated by a *servant's heart*. Elijah heard the call of God for his life through the voice of the Jezebel and an angel and he went. At Mount Horeb we see Elijah's servant heart in his response to God's question of, "What are you doing here, Elijah." Paraphrasing his response – "I am here to serve you Lord. Many have forsaken you, but I have not." Under the threat of death from his own people, Elijah still sought to serve God, because he had a true heart of a servant. God calls us to serve him out of our love for Him, not out of duty or obligation or compassion or worthiness. Hearts open to God serve with humility and surrender and obedience. That was Elijah. Hearing God's voice is *validated by a servant's heart*.

And lastly, our text for this morning tells us that hearing God's voice *flows out of a heart for prayer*. Elijah had seen great and amazing works of God in and through his life; he had always been sensitive to God's voice. Even in his current situation, he believed he was listening to God. All of the elements of hearing God's voice were manifest in his life, but still something was missing. Here he sat on Mount Horeb, hiding in a cave, crying out to God – "I'm all alone." God had been speaking to him in so many ways, yet Elijah still didn't seem to be clearly hearing God's voice.

And so, God said: *“Go out and stand on the mount before the Lord.” And behold, the Lord passed by, and a great and strong wind tore the mountains and broke in pieces the 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. And after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire. And after the fire the sound of a low whisper.”* A great wind, of tornado/hurricane force blew apart the mountains, but *no voice of God*. An earthquake shook the world for miles around, but *no voice of God*. Fire from heaven, just as Elijah had seen before, descended to the ground before Him, but still *no voice of God*. Then *“the sound of a low whisper.”* In the Hebrew this phrase is literally translated as “the sound of a small, gentle voice, a whisper.” Elijah was unable to hear the “sound of the small gentle whisper” of God’s voice in the noise of the wind, earthquake, and fire; but in the quietness of the true presence of God, Elijah heard his voice. *“And when Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his cloak and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave.”*

When God truly speaks to us brothers and sisters, we will be humbled by it; we will hide our faces and crawl out of our self-made caves and stand humbly before God. God’s Word tells us that when Moses heard the voice of God in the burning bush, when Isaiah heard his voice in the temple, when Peter truly understood that God was speaking to him in the form of Jesus, they fell on their faces before Him in surrender. The theologian E. Stanley Jones once wrote “Prayer is surrender – both a surrender to the will of God and cooperation with His will. If I throw out a boat hook from a boat and catch hold of the shore and pull – do I pull the shore to me, or do I pull myself to the shore? Prayer is not pulling God to my will, but the aligning of my will to the will of God.”

God said, *“What are you doing here Elijah?”* God knew what he was doing there. In asking to know God’s will for his life, in seeking to hear God’s voice, even Elijah found himself far from where he should be – because he was seeking God’s voice in the noise of the world rather than prayerfully seeking God and prayerfully listening for God’s voice as to his next step. Before we can speak for God and live for God and serve God we must first hear the voice of God. And in order to hear God’s voice we must first humbly and honestly confront our assumptions about God and about ourselves - and acknowledge and confess that most often we are reaching self-centered conclusions. In faith, we must begin to learn a new language, the language of *“the sound of a low whisper”* that is not of our voice and not the voice of the world. We see that in our text as God questions Elijah again, it is clear that as Elijah has restated his case again, he has heard the voice of God; he covers his face and fully gives his heart to God. When it seems like nothing makes sense and nothing we do matters we must humbly listen to God’s voice and embrace His powerful presence.

In the verses that follow Elijah once again heard *“the sound of a low whisper”* voice of God and God recognized and affirmed Elijah’s change of heart. God tells Elijah that he is not alone and he is not the only one who is serving God. He tells Elijah to anoint three men; in doing so God is telling Elijah that He will also call others to work with him as instruments of God’s power and grace. Elijah was not being called upon to do the work alone. God sometimes does great things through individuals but most of the time He does so through teams or groups of people. God accomplishes His greatest work and purposes through His people. There are no *Lone Ranger* Christians - the church is a people of God who live together and work together and serve God together.

As we speak for God and live for God and serve God we must never forget that God is sovereignly working in us and through us together – whether it be 3 or 4 or 7000. Which means God will use us in His way and in His time. It’s been said: “Sometimes the Lord calms the storm, and sometimes He lets the storm rage and so He can calm His children.” We may not understand how or why but we need to listen to God and not to share our own opinions and set our own agenda. We need leaders and we need one another to hear God’s voice. We need leaders to speak into our lives and we need to listen to each other – so we might hear the voice of God over the noise of our hearts.

Before refrigerators, people used ice-houses to preserve their food. Ice-houses had thick walls, no windows, and a tightly fitted door. In winter, when streams and lakes were frozen, large blocks of ice were cut, hauled to the ice-houses, and covered with sawdust. Often the ice would last well into the summer and sometime the early fall. A story is told of a man who once lost a valuable watch while working in an ice house. He searched diligently for it, carefully raking through the sawdust, but didn't find it. His fellow workers also looked, but their efforts, too, proved futile. A small boy who heard about the fruitless search slipped into the ice house during the noon hour and soon emerged with the watch. Amazed, the men asked him how he found it. The boy said, "I closed the door, lay down in the sawdust, and kept very still. Soon I heard the watch ticking." God is always speaking! At issue is whether we are willing to be still enough, quiet enough, to hear His voice.

Psalm 46:6-10: *"The nations rage, the kingdoms totter; he utters his voice, the earth melts. The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress. Come, behold the works of the LORD, how he has brought desolations on the earth. He makes wars cease to the end of the earth; he breaks the bow and shatters the spear; he burns the chariots with fire. 'Be still, and know that I am God. I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth!'"* In the midst of the ambient noise created of our fallen, sinful world *"the sound of a low whisper"* destroys kingdoms, melts the earth and stops war.

While the voice of God is quiet as *"the sound of a low whisper"* – the voice of God is also gloriously powerful. In Psalm 29 the Word of God tells us: *"The voice of the LORD is over the waters; the God of glory thunders, the LORD, over many waters. The voice of the LORD is powerful; the voice of the LORD is full of majesty. The voice of the LORD breaks the cedars; the LORD breaks the cedars of Lebanon . . . The voice of the LORD flashes forth flames of fire. The voice of the LORD shakes the wilderness; the LORD shakes the wilderness of Kadesh. The voice of the LORD makes the deer give birth and strips the forests bare, and in his temple all cry, 'Glory!'"* (Psalms 29:3-5; 7-9).

The voice of the God is *loud* in His glorious power, but the voice of the God is *quiet* in its love. Jesus came into this world held in the *quiet* of His mother's bosom. He died in the *quiet*, all alone on a hill, when everyone had abandoned Him. It was in the *quiet* of the morning that Jesus rose from the dead, the promise of life through the *quiet* of God's love. The voice of God is *quiet* in its grace and mercy and love; we hear that in the low whisper of Jesus' words: *"Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do"* (Luke 23:34). All of creation was *quiet* as Jesus gave up His Spirit to our most sovereign God on the cross, opening the way for us to know the eternal, *quiet* of His sovereign grace.

Yet God *powerfully* created the world simply by speaking, in the thunderous ovation of the glory of His voice. That same God saved the world with the *quiet* gentle whisper, as life left the body of His Son Jesus at Calvary, as he died for our sins. But not long after Jesus *powerfully* rose from the dead! In these days of advanced computers and intricate telescopes, astronomers still have found they still get their best results and most dramatic discoveries by *listening* to radio waves. There is a radio telescope in Effelsberg, West Germany which is 326 feet in diameter, by which astronomers are now hearing things from the other side of the universe which have never been heard before.

I pray that would be true for us at Arrowsmith. In the days in the year before us, may the voice of God be so clear and strong and true - that we would hear things we have never heard before, see things we have never seen before, and may we do things we have never done before. May we humbly listen for God's voice and may we joyfully obey His Words. God is speaking, and we need to listen. But in order to do so we must slay our ego and dramatically slow down our busy lives and turn off our endless electronics - and open our Bibles and our hearts and pray with spiritual ears. God is speaking to us this morning. May we hear Him and humbly obey Him and joyfully serve Him and praisefully speak of Him through Jesus Christ to everyone we meet in 2018!