

## THE WOW SERMON

June 2013

In the summer of 2013, I was relatively new to the Geneva, New York congregation and forgot to prepare the children's sermon. The sermon subject was prayer and so, this the following turned out to be a memorable children's moment. Many adults have requested the sermon that is now, "The WOW SERMON". Other alternatives are "The Here and Wow" or "The Wow Factor".

### Children's Sermon

(Idea from a variety of famous theologians and preachers) I like the Lowry Loop as another illustration of spiritual movement. It ends with "Wheel!" or "Aha!")

Question to children: Can you think of a prayer that is only three or less words?

Here is one "Help me, God!" Give me an example of when you have asked God for help.

Illustration: Sports, Homework, tests at school.

I am going to give you three one-word prayers you can say anytime and anywhere.

HELP! THANKS! and WOW!

Please help me God.

Thank you for this day, for my friend, for life!

There are moments where you are so happy, so surprised, so amazed, that the prayer just jumps out "WOW". Wow, look at that sunset! Wow, this is great fun! Wow, I cannot believe it! Wow, I think God must be in this moment!

Prayer: Thank God for listening to long and short prayers, for thoughts whispered and shouted out and for surprising and wonderful events. Thank you for giving us Wow moments every day.

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(Can you think of any others? One person said, "Hallelujah!" I explained that means "Praise God!" Hosanna means "Save Me". Other Hebrew words shout a prayer using less than five syllables.)

**1 Kings 19:4-12** But he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a solitary broom tree. He asked that he might die: "It is enough; now, O LORD, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors."<sup>5</sup> Then he lay down under the broom tree and fell asleep. Suddenly an angel touched him and said to him, "Get up and eat."<sup>6</sup> He looked, and there at his head was a cake baked on hot stones, and a jar of water. He ate and drank, and lay down again.<sup>7</sup> The angel of the LORD came a second time, touched him, and said, "Get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you."<sup>8</sup> He got up, and ate and drank; then he went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights to Horeb the mount of God.<sup>9</sup> 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?”<sup>10</sup> 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.”<sup>11</sup> 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;<sup>12</sup> and after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence.

### **SERMON: Seeking God**

#### **Have you ever experienced a deep longing for God? Where have you gone to seek God?**

What happened? Childhood experiences, for me, seem most vivid. When my parents were arguing one evening, I walked to the Macalester Presbyterian Church. In those days, a college student lived in the tower as a custodian in residence. Therefore, anyone could ring the door and enter into the chapel for prayer. Seeking God’s comfort and peace, I entered into the dark and empty building. Like a dark cave with steps, I groped my way by the dim light hanging at the front of the chapel. Sitting in the pews by the organ, I was not the same as Sunday morning. The quiet was deafening. The shadows were spooky. I thought at some point, “What are you doing here?” The journey back to my well lit home was a small epiphany. A thankful prayer rose up in my heart.

The scriptures for today are two examples of our search for God when God seems far away. Psalm 42 is not a fast read. It is a slow contemplative, soul- searching, mind stretching prayer. This psalm and the one following have the power to carry you along, identifying your own spiritual hunger and questioning of God’s absence. “As a deer longs for flowing waters, my soul longs for the living God”. Later, in the psalms calls out for help, “My soul is cast down. God, why have you forgotten me?” Each lamenting refrain concludes with a faith statement to uplift the spirit, “Hope in God, for I shall again praise him” and then, the prayer of thanks, “My help and my God.” The phrase which captures my heart is embedded in the very poetic verse 7; “Deep calls to deep” It provokes a prayer that says, “Wow!” when you feel it.

Many years ago, I read a book entitled, *Whale Song*. It likened prayer to deep sea diving and hearing the haunting songs of whales. “Diving deep and rising” became my description of entering into prayer, deep and lengthy reflection on a scripture, a problem, and a question. Diving into my thoughts, writing, listening to answers from within and integrating the “interruptions” into the prayer time is a spiritual quest. I discovered the spiritual retreat does not need to be a journey...along a horizontal path. It may be a plunging into the depths of your soul, into your past, into the shadows, into the beauty of the ocean. When you return to the surface, it is because your spirit has been lifted up. Just like many lamenting psalms that begin with a cry for help, we end with an uplifting prayer of thankfulness. In Psalm 42, the pattern is to despair and then to preserve with the affirming refrain, “Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my help and my God.” and back in vs. 8- “By day the Lord commands his steadfast love, and at night God’s song is with me, a prayer to the God of my life”.

The psalmist repeatedly cries for a seemingly absent God, remembering a time when abundance, blessings and fullness of heart were evident. Repeatedly, what buoy him up are his memories of the gathering of believers in the temple, worshiping and singing.

The passage read today in I Kings is can be summarized in one phrase, “A still small voice”. God does not appear in the earthquake, fire or wind. Rather comes to Elijah the sheer silence or the still small voice. Yet, to understand Elijah’s search for God, one needs to understand the larger story. The passage begins after escaping Jezebel’s murderous grasp and the prophet Elijah escapes into the Wilderness and to Mt. Horeb. However, before this in chapter 18, we can see why. Elijah challenges Jezebel’s religion and prophets of Baal to a divine dual. In a spectacular demonstration of fire and water, Yahweh, the Almighty God wins over Baal, god of Thunder. Therefore, Elijah has their prophets killed. Therefore, in retaliation, Jezebel vows to do the same to Elijah. Thus, the mad dash to safety. Similar to Moses, Elijah spends 40 days and nights in the wilderness on the way to Mount Horeb, which is same as Sinai. Miraculously, God provides a small cake and water each morning and the encouraging directive, “get up and eat”. Some days that is all we need.

When he reached the Holy Mountain and cocoons in a cave, God asks, “What are you doing here?” Elijah says, I am passionately (zealously) seeking God. I am the last faithful person out there. Those people are trying to kill me.” Elijah is instructed by the Lord to stand at the entrance of the cave as Yahweh passes by. Up to the time of the Prophet Elijah’s leadership in the ninth century BC, God has shown up fire, wind, storms and earthquakes. Moses, So, when each dramatic event occurs, we expect God to show up. Not this time. This time it is in the sheer silence, the calm after the storm, the quiet pause...God’s voice speaks in a whisper....”What are you doing here, Elijah?”

You see, there is a theological shift represented in Elijah’s encounter with God. Now God is imminent and close at hand, not in a crazy and dramatic episode of nature. God is with us, Emmanuel. Feeding, encouraging, calling, challenging us with questions like, “Why are you here? Elijah answered God with the same ego centric and despairing thoughts. We all get that way. We may think, “I’m the only one who believes in God”. I am the only one who can do the job. Fear, lack of courage and discouragement reign in his soul...it happens. God’s answers...go back. The rest of the narration is about the next spiritual leader. Another prophet, Elisha takes on the mantle of leadership. Elijah is not alone. There is a next chapter of sacred history. God worked quietly to change the social and political landscape. Do not lose hope and trust in the God who seeks you out and guides you wherever you travel.

Ephesians 3:20, my favorite scripture : Now to God who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to this God be all glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

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