

June 26, 2022 – 1 Kings 19:9-21

When I was 11 years old, I did something that I would live to regret. I joined the Boy Scouts. Now, setting aside any current issues we may have about the Boy Scouts of America, back then the main problem for me was far more simple: I am about as far away from an outdoorsman as a person can be.

I don't camp. I don't fish. I don't hunt. To be perfectly blunt, I don't do outdoors. I am perfectly content enjoying a beautiful summer day from the inside of my house. And that doesn't really work for Boy Scouts.

And as a result, I never really fit in among the boys in our troop. They were nice enough boys. They tried to be welcoming, I think. But we were very different people and I really didn't develop any close friendships among them.

So when my first summer camp rolled around, I was miserable. I hated every minute of it. Begged and pleaded with my mother to take me home. They called it "homesickness." And there was probably a little of that in it.

But, really, I hated my time there because I was so completely alone. I was surrounded by boys my own age that I had grown to know quite well. My day was filled with camp activities. And yet, a loneliness set in that left me depressed and anxious for the entire week.

Have you ever felt like that? Surrounded by people and yet totally alone? New experiences can do that to us. A new school, a new job, a new home, a new church. Or, sometimes, it's the people around us. Friends and family who really don't understand what we're going through.

Sometimes we're isolated by shame or guilt. Sometimes by anger. Sometimes by grief. Loneliness is bad enough, but when we're surrounded by people and still feel lonely, I think that makes it so much worse.

Loneliness is something that the Bible talks about fairly often. The Psalms are full of David's loneliness and despair. Surrounded by his loyal troops, and yet alienated from his own son. We can hear the loneliness in Jesus' voice as he talks to His disciples about his coming crucifixion, and yet they somehow remain utterly oblivious to their Lord's mission on this earth. And in our Old Testament lesson this week, we find Elijah struggling with a similar sense of loneliness.

Elijah was a prophet to the people of Israel during a time of great paganism and idolatry. A time in which the king himself worshipped a god called Baal and tried to kill Elijah. Kill him simply for speaking God's Word and proving the impotence of false gods. And the people... the people were letting it happen. They were lining up behind the king in support of him. Ordinary citizens. Priests of the temple. Other prophets, even.

And so Elijah is forced to go on the run. He's surrounded by his fellow countrymen. Fellow Israelites who should be devout followers of the one true God. But they're now strangers to him. Elijah should have felt at home. But instead, he feels utterly alone.

So he flees the country. Travels across the desert. Finally collapses in exhaustion in a desolate cave. And makes one final prayer to God. "Lord... What do I do? I want to serve you. But I've got no one to help me. The people I thought I could trust are tearing apart your altars and killing your prophets. I'm the only one left. And pretty soon, they'll kill me too."

So God takes Elijah outside the cave. And there's a huge windstorm that tears at the mountain. And a massive earthquake that shakes the cave. And a raging fire that sweeps over the hillside. All very Godlike acts.

Winds rushing to separate the Red Sea. A pillar of fire leading the Israelites through the desert. Earthquakes shaking Mt Sinai as the Lord descends upon it. These were all events that in the past had been direct signs of God's presence. But this time, God wasn't in any of them. No, he was in the tiny, almost undetectable whisper that appeared in Elijah's ear.

Because sometimes things aren't what they seem. Sometimes the thing that you would think would be the absolute best evidence of God's presence isn't God at all. And sometimes the way that God is actually working is almost totally undetectable to you. We expect God to come as he did in Exodus. In wind and earthquake and fire. We expect God's kingdom to be blatantly visible to us.

And what we get is his Son, hanging dead on a cross and his disciples looking on in despair and thinking, "He abandoned us. We're all alone now." We expect a God who makes perfect sense to us. But what we get is a God who's working in completely unexpected, invisible, whispered ways for the good of his people.

That's what happened for Elijah. He wasn't alone. He wasn't the only one left. Far from it. There were 7,000 men in Israel who were still faithful to the Lord. There was still a successor to the throne and a fantastic military general who would both listen to Elijah's message. There was still a young man named Elisha who would follow Elijah in his calling as prophet. Who would become Elijah's apprentice, and friend, and, really, his adopted son. Elijah wasn't alone at all.

Sometimes, as Christians, we feel alone as well. This past week, the Supreme Court issued a ruling that overturned the Constitutional right to an abortion. It was wonderful news and I rejoiced to hear it.

But at the same time, it also makes me a bit lonely. It makes me lonely to think that I'm rejoicing that our nation no longer considers it an inalienable right to murder your own child. How low have we set the bar for basic morality?

It makes me lonely to think that while I may live in a state that has outlawed abortion, I'm still only a 90 minute drive away from an abortion clinic. And that's not going to change. In fact, there will probably be even more popping up just across the rivers in Kansas City and St Louis.

It makes me lonely to think that our nation worships its own pleasure and libertine freedom so much, that people can talk about outlawing abortion as an attack on women. What is abortion but attacking a defenseless child? And yet, protecting those children is somehow considered an assault on the women who chose to conceive them.

Most of all, it makes me lonely to see so few people in church to hear this message. Oh, I'm not talking about the attendance rate of the members of Immanuel. I'm talking about the attendance rate of Americans in any church at all. I'm talking about the number of people who call themselves Christians in this country but believe nothing that the Bible teaches. Because abortion isn't the cause of our society's ills. No, it's a symptom.

Abortion is a symptom. Mass shootings are a symptom. Drug addiction is a symptom. Homosexuality is a symptom. Gender dysphoria is a symptom. Crime is a symptom. Divorce is a symptom. All of these sins are symptoms of a much greater disease. The disease of godlessness. Of idolatry. Of abandoning God's Word. The disease of self. The disease of sin.

When I think about the sinfulness of this world, a sort of homesickness can set in. Like what I felt at Boy Scout Camp. You're surrounded by people you know. And yet, they're so different from you that you feel alone in the midst of them. That's how I feel living in America today.

But I know that I'm not. I'm not alone. For one thing, I know I'm not alone because I'm here with all of you this morning. I know I'm not alone because I go home to a family that gathers in prayer before every meal and around God's Word every evening. But I know I'm not alone for one final, important reason.

And that reason was the lesson that Elijah needed to learn on that mountain. Elijah believed there was no one left but him. He believed that he was alone and that soon they would take his life too. But if that were really true, then that would mean that God had abandoned His people. That He had let His Church die. And that is something that simply will never happen.

Because, in the entire history of the world, it has never happened. God has always preserved His Church. Whether it was as small as Noah and his family, or as big as the thousands baptized at Pentecost. The Church has stood from the beginning of time and it will stand until the end of time. And I know this is true not because the people of the Church are so good or so powerful or because the laws of this country is so good or so powerful, but because the God who chose this Church to bear His name is so good and so powerful.

Which means we, the Church, are never alone. Not in the grand scheme of things. Somewhere, God is always preserving a remnant of His people. And no, it may not always be visible to us. Just as Elijah couldn't see the 7000 in Israel, we can't always see the places where God is working. His presence isn't always as visible as wind or fire or earthquake. Sometimes it's only a whisper. But it's still there.

And so we do our work for the Kingdom knowing that it is never in vain. We are never as alone as we think we are. We are never as far from home as we imagine. For our Lord is always with His people. Always listening to their prayer. And always waiting for the day when He will return. And for the day we will never feel lonely again.

The Lord who laid down his life to purchase his church from sin, death, and the devil will not simply abandon us to the world. Quite the contrary. He has made us his people so that we might spread His reign and His kingdom. He comes to us in the whisper of Scripture with words of comfort so that we might share that comfort to sinners who need his grace. So that those who feel lonely in their sin might know the fellowship of Christ and his Church. And might hear the whisper of his grace in their lives as well. Amen.