

I. Intro.

A. *(Crash test dummies audition ... carrying trash bag full of bike helmets & wearing my own helmet, plus a reflective vest)*

Good morning and welcome to the Acme Automotive Testing Grounds. I'm glad you came out for the audition this morning. I can tell you're eager to see if you have what it takes to be a crash test dummy.

This is the real thing, folks ... authentic 30-mph street crash conditions. None of those wimpy 7-mph tests for the bumpers. That's why I brought along these helmets. Here, take one. (Distribute helmets to audience) So go ahead and put them on, and strap yourselves in!

Why wear helmets, you wonder? I know you're only dummies, so what have you got to lose? But hey, if you make the cut, we want you to be in good condition for the BIG action: the 75 mph freeway tests! (smack hands together) That's where crash test dummies really earn their stripes! So trust me. You're in for a real bang-up time! Who's first for the audition?

(Back up to pulpit, but leave helmet on)

B. I'm sure by now some of you are ready to have ME checked out for a possible concussion

1. So what's with this silly imaginary audition? Bear with me for a bit: What if being a Christian meant expecting as much high-powered action from God as a crash test dummy expects?

2. A few years ago I came across a quote from Xian author Annie Dillard that called into question how seriously we take Pentecost in most North American churches

*Does any-one have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. Annie Dillard, *Teaching a Stone to Talk*, Harper & Row, 1982*

3. Three weeks ago we celebrated the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. Does anyone remember that? Does anyone care?

a) As Annie Dillard wonders – Do we believe a word of Pentecost?

b) Or are some of us secretly just fine with keeping some distance from Pentecost and indeed all things “Pentecostal”?

4. The prophet Elijah lived about 900 years before that first Day of

Pentecost that we celebrate from Acts 2.

- a) But he would have had no problem understanding why God’s people might need crash helmets in the presence of the living God.
- b) (This helmet illustration would have felt quite tame to him)

II. Let’s understand Elijah a little better

A. Based on some of our stereotypes of today, **Elijah would not have made a good Mennonite ... or a good Quaker!**

1. For Elijah, up to the time of our story today, there was nothing subtle about the God of Israel ... Whatever God did, God did in a big way, a bold way, an obvious way, sometimes a miraculous way!
2. BOOM ... BANG ... BLING!
 - a) That’s how Elijah expected God to reveal himself, and for the most part that’s how Elijah himself operated ... brazenly challenging political authorities of his day when God didn’t like what they did
 - b) Elijah put God to the test and expected God to come thru spectacularly

B. Let’s review how Elijah experienced God at work leading up to the time of our story today

1. Elijah 1st appears on the scene in 1 Kings 17, not long after Ahab takes the throne of the northern kingdom of Israel (17:1-7)
 - a) In the capital city, he prophesies to King Ahab of a 3-year drought sent by God ... not exactly starting off on a good foot with the king.
 - b) God sends Elijah out into the wilderness east of the Jordan River, where he lives by a little brook and God provides for him miraculously during the drought ...

ravens bring him bread & meat twice a day and he drinks from the brook until even its waters run dry ... BOOM
2. Then God calls him to go way up north beyond Israel’s borders to Zarephath, to a foreign land where everyone worships Baal and Asherah, the Canaanite fertility gods ... (17:8-24)
 - a) This is the land where Ahab’s wife princess Jezebel grew up, worshipping Baal ... Jezebel, who brought her foreign gods with her & pushed her husband to make her own religion prominent within Israel
 - b) Yet even in the stronghold of Baal, God’s authority over life & death

is dramatically proven in 2 stories:

When Elijah asks for bread from a starving widow & her son, she does so on faith; and her flour & oil miraculously never run out until the drought ends

Then the widow's son dies but Elijah prays over him and God brings him back from the dead ... BOOM

3. After that, in the 3rd year of the drought, God brings Elijah & King Ahab together, back in the kingdom of Israel

a) The meeting is not cordial: Although Elijah knows that God is about to end the drought, he clearly blames Israel's troubles on the King & his father who brought it on themselves by worshiping other gods.

b) Next we see Elijah the great showman

He challenges Ahab to a grand showdown of deities:

(a) Elijah as the prophet of YHWH vs. the 850 official prophets of Baal and Aherah, all gathered by the sea on Mt. Carmel, with a huge crowd of Israelites out to witness the spectacle

(b) Both sides prepare bulls on altars as sacrifices; both pray to their god; and whichever god can send down fire to burn up the sacrifice will be proven as the true god

Elijah not only wins this showdown when YHWH's fire from heaven burns up every trace of the sacrifice, he makes an emphatic statement by having the Israelites seize these prophets so he can kill them all and rid Israel of these evil influences

BANG

c) And after the big showdown on Mt. Carmel, God does finally send rain, growing from a small cloud out over the sea into a great dark storm

By God's miraculous power, Elijah is able to run faster on foot back to the town of Jezreel than the king is able to go in his royal chariot! (ch. 18)

More BANG

4. And that brings us back to our Scripture story today ...

a) as I said before, Elijah was very used to seeing God in boom & bang & bling, although bling was not his own personal style, since Elijah preferred simple rough clothing and hung out in the desert a lot

b) Elijah didn't go for bling himself, but he certainly expected that the

almighty God deserved some bling,

And there was plenty of that in the famous gold & bronze furnishings of Solomon's Temple in Jerusalem.

And Israelites who didn't want to cross into the rival kingdom of Judah to worship could also find impressive bling if they came to the shrine in Bethel, where King Jeroboam had placed golden calves

III. So now 1 Kings 19 picks up right after Elijah's showdown on Mt Carmel

A. You can imagine Queen Jezebel is not happy that Elijah killed all her favorite prophets ...

1. In fact, it marks a very personal war between her & YHWH's bold prophet ... she threatens to kill him within 24 hours

a) Fearing for his life, he flees from the angry queen, going south to Beersheba in Judah, where Jezebel can't get him

b) The queen's threat must have taken a lot out of him, because after all his public successes as the "man of God", his bravery is now gone

c) He's depressed ... in fact maybe suicidal:

He's done being God's prophet, believes he's the last one left & wants no more of it

He wanders off into the desert by himself, & goes to sleep, begging God to let him die out there

2. Even though Elijah has no more boom or bang left in him, God still does:

a) thru an angel God provides him bread and water, miraculously giving him enough strength to travel 40 days to Mt. Horeb, which is also known as Mt. Sinai, where Moses had gone to be close to God ... BOOM!

b) Still depressed, Elijah's up on the sacred mountain where God had met Moses with fire and earthquake and given Moses the 10 commandments

3. Elijah is more than ready for God the miracle worker to do spectacular things once again

a) Once again it appears Elijah will not be disappointed

b) Once again there are all the telltale signs of YHWH's awesome presence on Mt. Sinai: Gale-force winds ... An earthquake, shaking the

holy mountain ... Fire appears, perhaps like it did a few weeks earlier at Mt Carmel

c) The boom and the bang are all there for God to show himself to Elijah ... only this time God is NOT in the boom, or in the bang.

There is no exact English translation for where God was instead:

- (a) the good old KJV gave us the phrase “a still small voice”.
- (b) NIV says it was “a gentle whisper”, while the NRSV pushes the contrast even further by calling it “a sound of sheer silence”
- (c) We cannot definitively say if it was audible or not, but we can definitively say this was NOT what Elijah was expecting

No BOOM ... no BANG ... no BLING: The big, awesome God does not always speak in big, awesome ways!

B. What did this surprising encounter with God mean for Elijah?

1. Well unlike how Bible readers often interpret it today, the implication of this quiet revelation on Mt. Horeb was not simply a call for Elijah to listen to his inner voice.

2. Nor was it a call for him to go on a silent retreat away from all the boom, bang & bling.

3. It meant God’s work in the world could be accomplished thru quiet means as well as thru spectacle and miracle.

a) And what was it God cared deeply about? In the stories of the Old Testament Israelite kings and prophets, what especially matters is that only YHWH be worshiped, with no foreign gods and no mixed allegiances

b) The still small voice to Elijah meant God’s monotheistic mission could also come about thru political transitions ...

c) this explains the new prophetic commission Elijah is given:

to go anoint some new leaders: a different King of Aram, a change of king in Israel, and a new prophet to replace Elijah himself

these new leaders represent the “changing of the guard” that God will use for defeating Baal worship

4. So Elijah had to learn to recognize god working thru long-term behind-the-scenes processes, and not just in conspicuous dramatic ways ... Elijah discovered that God doesn’t always make everything right with quick-fix solutions

IV. And what might we discover from Elijah’s experience with God on the mountain?

A. At one level, Elijah is prophesying directly to all of us North Americans

1. When it comes to our attention span and pace of life, Elijah is amazingly relevant today.
 - a) We live in an instant gratification time, where we expect drive through fast food and instant Google answers
 - b) If we do a concert or a festival once, we feel pressure to do it bigger and better the next time around
2. For many of us in today’s world, if God’s going to be real to us, we want visible proof that God is at work, we want prompt clear answers to prayer, and we want a feel-good religion that doesn’t tell us things we don’t want to hear ...
 - a) BOOM ... BANG ... BLING
 - b) When we feel impatient, when we want clear proof, sometimes God’s presence is not in the instant answer or the miracle, but it comes in the thin whisper or the sound of sheer silence
 - c) We can easily miss it if we’re not listening for it.

B. At a different level, whether you identify with Elijah depends on your cultural or religious background

1. For most of us coming from European-based traditions, we don’t need reminding of the still small voice
 - a) Our worship is already very subdued & cerebral, simplicity is valued, and silence is encouraged.
 - b) Our lives are rather comfortable and controlled and we want God to keep it that way
 - c) We could actually use a little boom, bang & bling! We are the ones Annie Dillard was talking about, who should be wearing crash helmets because we underestimate the power of God

That’s why I didn’t remove my helmet this morning – to remind me God is not always “safe”

To most of us here, God thru the Elijah story might be saying,
“I’m glad you listen carefully for my still, small voice. I will keep speaking that way. But are

you blind or deaf to my earthquake, wind and fire? Beware: I will not be tamed by you, even if you try to make me a safe, comfortable God!”

2. But this Elijah story doesn't come across that way to all Christians

- a) Our brothers and sisters from Pentecostal, Latino & African traditions mostly identify very well with Elijah
- b) For them, if God's not doing big things and speaking loud and clear, they wonder if it's really the God of the Bible at all!

For example, 2 years ago the spiritual heirs of Elijah were present and welcoming us quieter types in Detroit when Community Christian Fellowship, a African-American congregation, hosted our Indiana-Michigan Mennonite Conference annual sessions

And some of you will recall the joint bilingual worship services we used to have with Comunidad Cristiana Adulam, where they have no problem with boom, bang and bling, thanks be to God!

And when Janette & I worshipped in churches in Benin 8 years ago, I assure you that we realized the “days of Elijah” are felt and celebrated every Sunday there!

C. My friends, it's not an either-or matter:

1. The God of whispers and silence is also the God who wants to rock your socks and set you on fire for Him!
2. But that same God can be working quietly right under your nose and you may miss it if you're always surrounded by speakers, amplifiers and electronic screens
3. The God of the Bible is BOTH the all-powerful creator AND the One who chooses to appear in quiet vulnerable whispers

V. Conclusion

A. So my real word for you from Elijah is this: Don't box God into only one way of communicating with you.

B. How is the surprising God of Elijah trying hard to get through to you?

1. Is it in boom, bang & bling?
2. Is it in silence and whispers?
3. Or are you just plain resistant to God speaking by any means?

C. Depending on your answer to this question, you better get your crash helmet on ... or put your hearing aide in!

D. When we allow the Spirit of Pentecost to draw us out of our comfort zones, God always has a powerful message for us!

Prayer: Indescribable God, fill us with holy fear that we may realize your awesome power. And then silence our overloaded minds and hearts, so that we may hear and respond to your quiet whisper. Amen