

- I. This morning we are going to begin with an experiment. This sanctuary is the lab. And we have guinea pigs. In fact, over one hundred. Any guesses who they are? Maybe referring to you as rats is preferable to pigs, I don't know. You tell me. But are you ready for this? I am going to have you close your eyes for just a second and I want you to think about...wait for it...nothing. Yes, nada. No problem, right? In reality unless you are like a Zen master or an ex Abbot you will not be able to do this very well. So let me make it slightly easier. Think of an image of a lake, stream, mountain, favorite YouTuber or basket of fruit or basketball team, whatever but nothing else. Go ahead and choose your image. Got it? Okay, here is how it is going to work. As soon as your mind wanders to something else, put your hand up. I want to see how long you can go without another thought creeping in. Get ready, get set, go! Okay, I would say by that little experiment that none of us should consider becoming monks, or Jedi Knights for that matter. What was all that about? We are continuing our "Be Still...For A Moment" series where we have been talking about slowing down and intentionally investing in experiencing God on a daily basis. Last week we talked about "saying no to a good thing so we can say yes to the best thing," as in spending time with Jesus. How many of us said "no" this week...at least to ourselves...so we could have a few minutes of God time? Today we are going to take it a step further and not only talk about being still before God but how to deal with all the noise in our life. And I am not just talking about literal noise from our smart phones, TV's, teenagers or boom boxes (80's reference), but the internal noise. You know what I am talking about...it is the endless thoughts that keep our minds on hyperdrive.

- II. We are going to look at this through the lens of a guy named Elijah. Elijah was a prophet who did his prophesy thing about 800 years before Jesus. We don't know much about Elijah. All the bible tells us is he was a Tishbite. This sounds like an insult. "Oh you are such a Tishbite!" But it really isn't. Most scholars believe it refers to a region in southern Galilee (**image**). This is where Jesus spent most of His time in ministry. But some scholars believe the title wasn't referring to his hometown but rather describing his status. In the original language of the Old Testament, Tish means "stranger" like "Howdy, stranger!" I think this is most fitting as you look at Elijah's life...to quote Moses who came generations before, Elijah was like a "stranger living in a strange land." He was always on the outside looking in. At the time, Israel was divided. (**image**) The Northern Kingdom was the Kingdom of Israel; and the South, the kingdom of Judah. King Ahab, not of Moby Dick fame, but as in the real guy minus the whale with the bad attitude, was one mean monarch. Among many things that Ahab did wrong, including killing as many of God's priests as he could get his kingly hands on (which is a personal affront to me), he set up altars to other gods throughout his kingdom and married a foreign princess named Jezebel. You know nothing good could come from marrying a gal with that name! For Ahab's wicked ways, God withheld the rain from Israel. This started a chain of events that led to a battle royal between Elijah and the prophets of Baal. Baal was one of the popular Middle Eastern gods that Ahab and his wife Jezebel worshiped. You can find all of this in 1 Kings 18. But let me give you the gist. Elijah and the prophets of Baal, almost numbering one thousand, go up to a mountain along with a good chunk of the Israelites, to watch the showdown. And Elijah sets up the contest. (**image**) They would lay out some beef on an altar, complete with logs and kindling...but

they wouldn't be allowed to light it. That part they would leave up to their own respective God/god. Elijah, being a gentleman, has the prophets of Baal go first. (Okay, he is not that much of a gentleman because he taunts them after they call on Baal a few times and nothing happens.) More time goes by and they resort to cutting themselves, thinking the bloodletting would wake up Baal from his slumber and get his fire casting on. But again, nothing. This goes on for hours. Finally, they give up and turn it over to old Elijah who seems to be having a grand old time watching their epic fail from the sidelines. Just to not rub but scrub salt into their wounds, he has his assistant drench the burgers and wood with water. So much they are practically floating in the dug-out altar. He steps back and calls on the God of the bible. Any guesses what happens next? It's like a fireball from heaven falls upon the altar and everything is consumed in the blaze...even the stones around it. There is no question who the winner is, the God of Israel. It would be like me stepping into the ring with the UFC champion. No contest. Now you would think Elijah would be running victory laps and giving high fives to the spectating Israelites who finally realized the error of their ways. But that is not what happens. Instead he gets word that Jezebel wants to do a Freddy Kruger on him so he hightails it. Now let's read our Scripture.

III. 1 Kings 19:9-13 NIV. So what does the brave Elijah who faced down a thousand prophets of Baal do? He puts his tail between his legs and runs. He ends up not by coincidence at Mt. Horeb where Moses met God and gave Moses the Ten Commandments almost a thousand years before. Elijah the courageous goes and hides in a cave. He then cries out to God like a 10-year-old boy away at summer camp. You can almost imagine him saying this in a whiney voice. "God, I did everything you told me to do... so why are they still picking on me?" It's interesting. God doesn't give him some "Ra Ra" speech...like, "Elijah you just need to pick yourself up, dust yourself off and get back on your prophetic horse." Instead of any motivational speech, God essentially says, "I am going to pay you a visit so get ready." And all of this build up to get to this part of the story. When God comes, he doesn't come in the gale force winds that almost render the mountain in two. He doesn't come in the earthquake, nor the firestorm or the thermo-nuclear explosion. Okay, I might have made one of those up. But God is not in any of it. Where is God? According to the NIV version, God is present in a quiet-whisper. But in the original language it actually says, "the sound of silence." Sound of silence? That's an oxymoron, right? Like Army Intelligence (I can pick on the Army), "seriously funny" or "Microsoft Works." What this means here is that Elijah didn't meet God in any of the expected flashy events, but in the stillness. And the silence is almost deafening after all the fireworks. This is where Elijah encounters the Lord. God has finally gotten him at a place...physically, emotionally and spiritually...that he can listen. And in his listening, Elijah finds the strength and courage to go on.

IV. You might be thinking, "Ron, that sure was a lot of set up for such a small pay off. In short you are just saying we get away from the crowds and be quiet, so we hear and experience God." My response? Exactly! But this is much easier said than done. We are bombarded by thousands of advertisements each day thanks to our smart phones, computer, billboards, commercials and (my personal favorite) advertisements placed above urinals in the men's room. (Talk about having a captive audience!) Not only do we have this external "visual

noise” we have our own internal noise as well. Our worries and fears. Maybe we don’t have a bloodthirsty crazy queen with a questionable name after us but we might have to deal with a belligerent boss whom we never can seem to please. Perhaps we have anxiety over how we are going to pay the dentist, manage to save enough to take the family on a short vacation, or how to afford college. Or maybe our fears have to do with relationships. A grown child that no longer talks to us. Or we don’t know how we are ever going to get past the grief of losing a family member. Or we worry about our marriage that is slowly unraveling. Or if we are ever going to find a spouse. All these worries and fears become an internal soundtrack that can drown out everything else, including the voice of God Himself. So what do we do? Most of us are a little bit like Elijah...we run. Go, go, go and try to tune the internal noise out...until late at night or early in the morning when it comes, to quote the bible, “like a thief in the night.” Our worries and fears sneak in during those quiet hours to rob our rest and steal our peace. Until we wake up and start running again.

- V. You might be like, “Great, thanks for describing the problem, but what is the solution? How can we silence our minds, hear God’s quiet voice and find some degree of peace and experience His presence? Stop the deafening internal noise?” I believe we need to do what we see in our story this morning with Elijah. **Practice the ancient Christian spiritual discipline of solitude on a regular basis.** Say what? Am I telling us to go get our lonely on? Sit by ourselves at lunch, stay home in the evenings and eat Bon Bons while marathoning “This is Us?” No. There is a world of difference between loneliness and solitude. According to Richard Foster, **loneliness is forced on us and leaves us feeling alienated and empty; solitude on the other hand is something we choose to do so we can be filled.** Filled by God’s presence. We see that in Elijah’s case because of his fear and anxiety he ended up practicing solitude...accidentally. If we were to read the rest of the passage, in his solitude he experiences clarity and direction to continue his mission from God. He was able to tune out the internal voices that had become deafening and once again hear God’s quiet whisper. **Solitude then is intentionally stepping out of our daily rat race to be alone with God and hear His calming voice above the rest.**
- VI. Here is the thing. For many if not most of us the idea of being still and alone sounds worse than sticking our finger into a light socket. I mean this literally. I read this past week about an experiment at the University of Virginia where this was proven. Subjects were given the option to sit in a room in silence for 10-15 minutes doing nothing. Or sit in the same room for 10-15 minutes administering small electric shocks to their body. Two-thirds of the men chose to shock themselves rather than sitting and being still. No surprise, women did somewhat better. But how crazy! Why do we fear being alone with our thoughts...so much so that we would rather electrocute ourselves? Why? Here is my theory. When we intentionally stop and get away from all the noise, we are forced to reflect on our lives and answer the big questions...like “What am I really doing with my life?” or, if we are a Jesus follower, “Am I living my life in a way pleasing to God” ...and often find ourselves lacking. Too often we don’t like the answers. But also in the silence we encounter our fears and anxieties head on without an iPhone or friend to distract us. Going back to Elijah, in his solitude he comes to terms with his great fears. Let’s read verse 10 again **1 Kings 19:10**. Not

only is he scared of Jezebel but maybe even his greater fear is that he is feels alone and remains so...as in he believes he is the last man in Israel still worshipping God. He says the same thing again in verse 14. But it is in his pouring these fears and worries to God that he finds the strength, the courage, and the peace to go on.

- VII.** So what might solitude look like for us non-ancient bible prophet types? Do try this at home. Start with only 5-10 minutes a day. It could be early in the morning when you get up, at lunchtime, evening time, or when you go to bed. You don't need a cave to do it. Your back porch, backyard or even closet will work. But make sure you don't bring anything with you except your bible. Close your eyes if this helps...or not...and pray a simple prayer like "God speak to me, I am listening." And then be still. As someone said, expect to have monkey mind...where your thoughts jump all around. Things you need to do, things you forgot to do, and perhaps what you plan to eat for breakfast or dinner. That's ok. Ruth Haley Barton a Christian leader who specializes in Christian practices says, "Imagine you are at a dock and each of these thoughts are like ships on the sea. Acknowledge them but let them pass you by." She goes on to say that if you must, have a paper and pen and write them down if you feel like you are going to forget about something. But better yet, trust that God will bring these back to your mind if they are important. After our to-do list sails by, often on its tail end comes our worries and fears that have been keeping us up at night. Like Elijah, lay them at God's feet. Go ahead and tell them to God verbally or mentally. And then just be silent. You can read a Scripture at this point or simply be still. Don't expect to hear anything audibly. And you might not even hear anything internally but expect God to speak if in no other way than by offering you the peace of knowing He is present and can handle anything you've got. I then suggest, if you haven't already done so, read Scripture like the devotion we have been providing. In closing your time, ask God to help you live out anything you have read and heard. Here is the thing. **These few moments can change how you face the next 24 hours.** It can turn down the volume of those deafening internal noises. It can lead us to walk calmly rather than be driven by our fears.
- VIII.** Since today is Father's Day, I have been reflecting on how well I have been pulling off the whole dad thing. In reality on most days I would give myself a C- or D plus at best. Fathering teenage girls, I am constantly on their case about how they dress, cleaning their bedroom, studying for tests, and lately thinking of ways to keep the boys at bay. I confess, I don't encourage them enough, tell them how proud I am of them for the beautiful young women they are becoming, or just pull them aside enough to tell them they are the most precious God-given gifts I or their mother have ever received. So I wonder what kind of example I have been. I never will be a war hero, a celebrity of any stripe, wealthy investor or even a popular pastor who writes books with my face on the cover. But my hope and prayer is that I can at least model for them what it means to follow Jesus. A man who, despite his daily failings, isn't running a rat race driven by fears, or chasing after things that our society tells us are important but in the end are anything but. And the only way I can be this kind of man, this kind of father, this kind of Jesus follower, is by practicing solitude regularly with my Heavenly Father. So I can tune out the external and more importantly internal noise so I can hear His gentle voice reminding me He is with me, and what life is really about.