

Sell the Sizzle

A Sermon by The Rev. Ken Calhoun

First United Methodist Church Athens, Texas

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1 Kings 19:9b-18

Then the word of the Lord came to him, saying, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" 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."

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; and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence. When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. Then there came a voice to him that said, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" 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." Then the Lord said to him, "Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus; when you arrive, you shall anoint Hazael as king over Aram. Also you shall anoint Jehu son of Nimski as king over Israel; and you shall anoint Elisha son of Shaphat of Abel-meholah as prophet in your place."

The Word of God for the People of God. Thanks be to God.

Many years ago I was serving as the pastor of The First Methodist Church in a very small town up near Texarkana: Hooks, Texas. I thought I had heard of every little small spot in the world until my DS called me and said, "You're going to First Methodist Church of Hooks." The first words out of my mouth were, "Is that in Texas?" But while I was there, I met a man from Texarkana whose name was Ron Griffith. Now Ron Griffith and I became very close friends for a variety of reasons. But Ron was a salesman. Now, I don't mean he was like a salesman. Ron was a *salesman*. He was the consummate salesman. This guy could sell anything to anybody anywhere anytime. Even knowing he was doing it, he could sell it to you, and I was fascinated by his ability to do that. I remember one of the first things he told me about sales. He said, "The single most important thing you've got to remember if you're going to be a salesman is this. You sell the sizzle, not the steak." You sell the sizzle, not the steak.

Perhaps the most important and the most amazing aspect of this story from the Old Testament, which is one of my all-time favorites Old Testament stories, is not that God was not in the earthquake, and not in the fire, and not in the windstorm. If you have read the Old Testament up to this point, that

should not come as a surprise at all. But what is amazing is that Elijah, being a human being as we all are, was not so taken and captivated by these events pouring forth in front of him across the valley, that he was taken up by them and went rushing off instead of waiting, waiting 'til they passed, waiting for—and I take this from Simon and Garfunkel—waiting for that sound of silence.

There's a lesson here for us all. How many of us have missed the opportunity to hear God calling our name only because we were so mesmerized by the power and the majesty of the windstorms, and firestorms, and the earthquakes in our world that we went rushing off and never waited for that moment of silence when we might have heard that voice.

Recently I read an article in a news magazine about an author—I don't remember who he was: somebody important, I suppose—but he was outlining what he presumed to be the five most significant changes in American culture since the year 2000, the first decade of the new century. Number One of the changes he outlined, he listed as the most significant change in American culture, he defined as “The Loss of Boredom.” We're never alone. Between telephones and cell phones and televisions and computers and iPods and iPads and iPhones and iWhateverelse, we're never alone. We never have the opportunity to be bored. My wife gets tickled at me. She'll see me playing with my phone, and she can tell I'm not doing anything I should. She'll say, “You're playing Solitaire, aren't you?” “UH...maybe.” But we're never alone. We never have the opportunity to be bored.

Now, in addition to the loss of boredom, in the midst of having lost that, we've lost something else. We've lost the opportunity for quiet, for prayer, for meditation, and for what this author, writing about it, called “critical thinking.” We don't do critical thinking anymore. And the bad part of that is that it makes us easy prey for the salesmen of the world, whatever they're selling, whether it's toothpaste or cars or cultural change. It makes us easy prey because we've forgotten how to be quiet and listen and think—just think.

I was listening to Bill Cosby a number of years ago—everybody loves Bill Cosby. He was talking about the difference between how God sees the things he creates and how we see the things we create. Thin about it. In the opening verses in the Bible, the opening verses of Genesis, God creates the entire universe, the whole cosmos, stars and planets and all of this stuff, and he looks back, and what does he say about it? It was good. That's all. Just good. He makes the earth, the land, the water, all the animals, even man, and he looks back at it and says, “It's good. Good thing. That's OK.” Now, you contrast that with the way we talk about our creations, the things that we discover or build. Why, when we create something, it's wonderful, it's stupendous, it's fantastic, it's fabulous, it's terrific, it's the most monumental thing to happen in human history. Man creates the automobile and it's going to change life as we know it. Nothing will ever be the same. You've got to have one of these. Some guy invents the refrigerator. World's not going to be the same ever again. This is the neatest thing since we discovered fire. Wheels go rolling off the automobile and the refrigerator dies in the middle of the night and all your frozen food thaws out and your lettuce turns brown. Meanwhile, millions of years later the cosmos is still rolling right along just like it always has. Earth's still going around the sun; earth's still turning on its axis. Even rabbits work like the original model.

We use words like “incredible” and “marvelous” and “outstanding” and “fantastic” to describe our creations precisely because we--deep down inside—we know how truly ordinary they are. Like my friend, we're selling the sizzle, not the steak because we know in our hearts the quality of the steak is so poor. Too often the church gets sucked up in that same mental attitude, in that same approach,

using that same technique: everything has got to be bigger and better tomorrow than it was today. This year's got to be grander than last year's, and we've got to sell it that way, we've got to promote it that way. Years ago my grandfather who was a Methodist preacher in the old Arkansas Conference moved to a new church, much as I have, and as he was unpacking his stuff and what not, he opened up one of the desk drawers, and in that drawer he found a three-ring notebook that had all the sermons of the previous preacher in it. Now, this guy who had gone before him, I'm told, was known as a great preacher in the conference, and my grandfather called him up and told him what he had found in his desk, and the man thanked him profusely and made arrangements to come pick his sermons up in a couple of days, to retrieve them. And then my grandfather did what any honorable, decent Methodist preacher would do: he got those sermons and read them. Precisely because this guy was known to be such a great preacher. He said he had a unique style of writing his sermons. He would take a piece of ordinary note-book paper and put a dividing line right down the middle. On this side of that line he would write the sermon out in full manuscript. But on this side, in just little spots here and there, he would put in special preaching notes; notes to remind him of the use of his hands or to lean into the pulpit toward the people, to raise his voice, to lower his voice. And my grandfather noted that in one place he had written "Speak loud and forceful; argument weak."

Why does the salesman sell the sizzle and not the steak? Why do we have to boast in such elaborate terms about our creations? Why did that preacher feel that by elevating his voice and speaking more forcefully he could get a weak argument past? Why? Because it works. Because we will buy the sizzle and ignore the steak. The steak nourishes, but the sizzle tempts. The steak feeds, but the sizzle sells. And what is the sizzle? Why, it's a feel-good preacher who promises you that if you will only make the right professions, just say the right words, and, of course, give the right amount of money to his particular cause or ministry, then you're going to have perfect happiness; your life is going to be grand and wonderful. God's going to fix everything for you. You can't out-give God. God's going to give back to you tenfold, shake and press down and spilling over. It can also be the beauty of stained glass and vaulted ceilings and the comfort of cushioned pews.

By contrast, the steak is caring for the wounded Samaritan along the old Jericho road, serving on community groups to combat poverty and child abuse and injustice of all kinds, going with the youth on a mission trip, reaching out to the kid next door whose family has been dismembered by divorce, teaching a children's Sunday School class when where you would rather be is with your spouse in an adult class. It is seizing upon every opportunity that is given to you by God and by life to speak the Good News of God's love and grace with an open hand, and an open heart, and a compassionate mind.

I find it fascinating and interesting that Paul, the Apostle Paul, once wrote that he gave thanks to God that he was not an eloquent speaker, that he was not, in his words, "a man of many words," or the refined use of the ones he did know. He felt that those who came to hear him preach came not to hear a good preacher, but a great message. Now contrast that with the many congregations these days that send emissaries far and wide trying to seek out someone who is more eloquent, more polished, more extravagant than their current pastor. Maybe Paul also needed to give thanks that he didn't serve one of those churches. Otherwise, one day they would have sent out some emissaries to see how well Peter preached or Apollos or somebody else.

The steak can be tough. It can require quiet hours of preparation of that Sunday School lesson. It can lead you to moments of terrible exasperation over the kid next door and his resistance to your

efforts to help. It can be maddening when you give long hours of your life and your free time seeking justice and fairness for the least and the last and the lost of this world only to have your name vilified by those powers in whose interest it is to keep things the way they are. It can lead to time of tearful frustration over the many needs and the few resources.

By contrast, the sizzle's easy. A slick commercial; a cheap theology with no soul; clichéd words, bright colors and empty promises. But there's one other thing that I have noticed: the sizzle never fills you. It only leaves you hungry. It leaves you unsatisfied and always hungry for more. It only in the end reminds us of how empty our lives so often are.

Let me close with this challenge: do not be fooled into following the power of the earthquake, the mirage of the windstorm, or the brilliance of the fire. Let them pass. And then seek God in the quiet moments. If you can resist the temptation to fall into the parade with all its glitter and glory as it passes you by, if you can resist that and wait until it has passed, and then reach out a compassionate hand to those who can only follow from behind and see from a distance, then in that quiet, simple moment, in that moment when you offer God's grace, if you listen carefully, you might hear that same small voice, the voice of God calling your name. And as one who has heard that voice once, I can promise you it will change your life. You will never be the same. You will be full.