

God at 3 am

Dr. Stephen D. McConnell



1 Kings 19:1-13

I don't know about you but there are certain times of the day I prefer than other times of the day. There are certain readings on the clock that I look at with greater enthusiasm than other readings on the clock. For example, I like it when the clock reads 6:00 – morning or evening. I like 6:00 in the morning because I am a morning kind of guy and that's when the day gets going. Time to get out of bed and tackle the world – or be tackled by the world. I like 6:00 in the evening because it is generally the end of the workday. Work is slowing down and it's time to pack up for the day, unless of course you have evening meetings. I like 9:00 because 9:00 in the morning means that the world is fully awake and at work and going about its business. I like 9:00 in the evening because I'm usually home by then and that's when the world is starting to think about settling in for the night. I like 12:00 because 12:00 means either lunch or midnight. So I'm either filling my stomach or hopefully dead asleep. But I'm not a big 3:00 guy. 3:00 is not my favorite reading on the clock. If it's 3:00 in the afternoon it means that lunch has been digested and despite how many cups of coffee I've had I'm starting to feel drowsy and I find myself doing whatever I can to keep myself awake. All I want to do is curl up on the couch, but because I have this thing called a job I typically don't. Typically, I do take some inspiration from the fact that Winston Churchill took a nap every afternoon during World War II and he still managed to win the war! Of course, those naps were likely alcohol induced.

But my least favorite time on the clock is 3 am. I am not a big fan of 3am because if I'm looking at the clock and it says 3am it means that I am awake when I want to be sleeping. And when I am awake at 3am, I am often thinking. And when you are thinking at 3am you are thinking about a lot of things. Your brain sort of goes into hyper drive. All the uncertainties of life creep into your brain at 3am. At 3am you think about what you have to do the next day. At 3am you wonder about your bank account. At 3am you think about the leak in your roof. At 3am you go over what your doctor told you when you last saw her. At 3am you hear sounds in the house you've never heard before. At 3 am you think about your children and what will become of them. At 3am you wonder will Michigan ever beat Ohio State again. At 3am you wonder when the bull market will cease being the bull market. At 3am you entertain doubts that you never entertained before. At 3am you are left alone with yourself. Nobody to distract you from thinking and feeling and worrying and wondering.

Maybe you don't know what I'm talking about. Maybe you sleep like a rock every night and if that's the case I don't like you. But if there should ever come a time when you do in fact wake in the middle of the night and you toss and turn and your mind starts going a million miles a minute - it puts us, as it turns out, in pretty good Biblical company. Lots of things happen in the middle of the night in the Bible. God does a lot of speaking in the middle of the night. Jacob has his famous dream in the middle of the night. Pharaoh has his dreams in the middle of the night. Samuel, as we learned a couple weeks ago, hears God's voice in the middle of the night. Joseph, Mary's betrothed, hears the angel speak to him in the middle of the night. The wise men are warned to go home another way in the middle of the night. Nicodemus has a conversation with Jesus in the middle of the night. As lonely

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and as anxious and as frustrating as 3am can be – sometimes, maybe most of the time it is the middle of the night that gives us the greatest chance to hear the quiet whisper of God.

Consider one Elijah. The great prophet of Israel. But in our story this morning, Elijah doesn't feel so great. What he feels is the burden of the world on his shoulders. What he feels is that he being chased by the enemy. What he feels is that he is all alone. What he feels is that maybe he and the world would be better off if he could somehow end it all here. He is tired and he is hungry and he is losing hope. And he runs away – and when he can go no further he collapses. And he falls asleep. And before he knows it an angel is waking him and feeding him some breakfast. He gets up...and eats. He falls asleep again and before he knows it an angel is waking him and feeding him breakfast. “Get up,” says the angel, “and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you.” That's all. Have something to eat, Elijah, and let's keep moving. Let's put one foot in front of the other. And Elijah gets up and puts one foot in front of the other and keeps moving for another 40 days and ends up on Mount Horeb in a cave and there the Bible says he spent the night. And sure enough it is in the middle of the night that Elijah awakens with the world on his shoulders and the fear and uncertainty of his

future commanding his thoughts. It is in the middle of the night when he feels all alone, all alone.

This is the great prophet of God. Great prophets of God don't feel alone. They always know of the wonderful presence of God, right? They wake up at 3am and just turn over and fall asleep again. No worries. We could never be more mistaken. For if there is anything the Bible teaches us, if there is anything church history teaches us – it is the prophets and the saints who experience most the lonely and terrible nights of the soul. Following Mother Teresa's death they found her diaries – this great woman of compassion and service to the poor – and so they expected to find in those diaries great testimonies to the presence and power of God. But what they found were years and years of worry and fear and the absence of God. Dietrich Bonhoeffer the great martyr to the faith and leader of the Nazi resistance after months in a Nazi cell working hard to put on an outward appearance of calm and strength for the rest of the prisoners to see, but in the quiet of his cell he writes that he is “a hypocrite before others, and before myself a contemptibly woebegone weakling.” C.S. Lewis after losing his wife confesses to a long stretch of time when in the middle of the night he yearned to hear the voice of God and all he could here was a door slammed in his face and the sound of

bolting and double bolting on the inside. The great prophets and saints experience what St. John of the Cross called, the dark night of the soul.

What then are we to say to these things? Perhaps first – at 3am when your mind is racing and your fears are swirling and your worries are advancing – perhaps you can take comfort in the fact that you are in the company of saints. You have joined the human race and you are experiencing what it means to be human. You are traversing the necessary steps of faith. For what is faith unless it is preceded by and often joined by our fears and our doubts and our worries? In fact it is in the middle of our fears and our doubts and our worries when we are perhaps most eager to hear the voice of God – when we are most desperate to feel the presence of God. If there is ever a time when we are apt to listen as a saint – it is at 3am.

Because it is at 3am when the world is quiet enough perhaps for us to hear the still, small voice. The still, small voice of God. It's at 3am when we are not checking our email, or scrolling Facebook or making our laundry list or texting our friend – it is the sheer silence of 3am that we can have the presence of mind to listen.

And what are we listening for? Well maybe what we are most listening for is for the still, small voice to remind us of all those times in the past when we were overwhelmed and anxious and doubtful – all those times when we wondered if we could go another step – that in those times God was somehow present and somehow we found the strength to get up and put one foot in front of the other. In other words, in those times angels came. Whether we saw them or not, whether we felt them or not, whether we heard them or not, the angels came and they got us up and fed us and they had us rest and they encouraged us to keep moving.

The still small voice in the middle of the night is there to remind us in the midst of the whirlwind of thought and fears – somewhere close by there hovers an angel.

John Claypool, the great preacher, tells of a time when his little daughter had been diagnosed with leukemia and after a brief remission had relapsed. It was an awful time from which she did not recover. Claypool talks about one moment in the middle of the night sitting next to her hospital bed he heard her ask, “Have you asked God when the leukemia will go away and what did he say?” What a terrible question for a father to have to answer. Talk about doubts and fear in the middle of the night. He told her that he'd been asking God a lot, but that he hadn't heard the answer. Later a friend asked, so where was God that night? Good question. And the preacher said, “You know where it says in the Bible, ‘Those who wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength. They shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint?’” He said – “You know sometimes God's greatest strength comes in our greatest weakness. And for me God was there just to get me up, to put one foot in front of the other, not to fly with eagles, not to run without weariness, but to walk and not faint. That's where God was that night.”

And suddenly, in the middle of the night, an angel touched Elijah and said, “Get up and eat for the journey will be too long for you.”

So the clock strikes three and we are awake with ourselves, our thoughts, our worries, our fears. Welcome to the company of saints and the presence of angels. And there doesn't need to be an earthquake for God to speak, there doesn't need to be a gale of wind for God to speak, there doesn't need to be a burning fire for God to speak – there

only needs to be a silence, a space for us to listen, to feel. The moment for us to know that even with all my thoughts, all my worries, all my doubts – that somewhere close by there's an angel who will do for me what has been done for me all my life. Enough strength for the day. Enough strength for the night. One foot in front of the other.



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Church of the Palms

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