

Proper 7 C Sermon
I Kings 19:9-13
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The Sound of Silence
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⁹[When Elijah came to Horeb, the mount of God,] he came to a cave, and spent the night there. Then the word of the Lord came to him, saying, “What are you doing here, Elijah?” ¹⁰He 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.” ¹¹God 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; ¹²and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence. ¹³When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave.

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I love this text. It's one of my absolute favorite pieces of scripture. There's a bit of a backstory to Elijah's encounter with the divine on Horeb. You see, Elijah was a pain in the...bottom; one particularly divine bottom, to be specific, that of Queen Jezebel. Jezebel had come to Israel from the country of Tyre bringing her prophets and her religion. She made it her mission to stamp out the worship of Israel's god and she acted with brutality and

decisiveness. The queen was unpopular with Israel's people, to put it mildly, but she played first fiddle in the royal household.

In the Hebrew Bible, Elijah's story began when he announced to Jezebel's husband, the king, that a famine would come to the land and no rain would fall until Elijah himself gave the command. Then, he fled to the wilderness where he was brought food daily by ravens. After a time, he went and stayed with a widow and her son. As if by magic, the widow's meager grain and oil stores never ran out while Elijah was with her. Tragically, the widow's son died, but there are benefits to having a prophet in the house. Elijah brought the boy back to life.

After three years of drought and famine, Elijah challenged the queen's prophets to a showdown on Mt. Carmel. 850 of them accepted the challenge to see whose deity would consume the offering they presented—Jezebel's god or Elijah's. As you might guess, Elijah won and the queen's prophets were promptly... eliminated by Elijah and the onlookers. This did not sit well with Jezebel and on threat of death, Elijah fled into the wilderness for his life. There, he received heavenly instructions to go and wait for God on Mt. Horeb, the very place where Moses was believed to have met with God to receive the Ten Commandments.

I share this backstory with you this morning because it becomes fairly clear to see that Elijah was not a man of great subtlety. The windstorm, or the earthquake, or the fire all seem more his style, his language, and more likely to get his attention. "But," the text says, "the Lord was not in the wind . . . in the earthquake . . . in the fire." Then, there was a sound of sheer silence. And when Elijah heard it, he covered his face and went out into the presence of his god.

I've heard teachers say that when the students in a classroom get particularly unruly, the best way to regain control is not by raising

one's voice, but by lowering it. Speak in a whisper and they will strain to hear. Perhaps that was the divine strategy with Elijah. What strategy, I wonder, would work best with us.

Amidst the clamor of our lives, the endless debating of politicians, the screaming of impassioned masses, the cries of parents for slain children, the prognostication of economic recession, the omnipresent threat of war, we may wonder how the divine comes to us. We may ask: "Where is the divine in all this? Where is God?"

We are not wrong to ask. This was the cry of the biblical Job when his property, his family, and his health were gone in the blink of an eye. In anguish he called out, "Look, God passes by me, and I do not see them; they move on, but I do not perceive them," (Job 9:11). This was the cry of the psalmist, over and over again in the wake of personal and national tragedy. They prayed, "Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD. Lord, hear my voice!" (Psalm 130:1). This was the cry Jesus himself asked while hanging on his cross. "*Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?*" he pleaded. "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mark 15:34). Like them, like so many others, we may wonder: "Where is God in all of this?"

Elijah's encounter may offer us an answer, or at least the beginning of an answer. Perhaps, we will *not* hear God amidst the debating, the screaming, the cries, the prognostication, the threats. Perhaps, like Elijah, we *will* experience the divine elsewhere—in a still, small voice; in the sound of sheer silence. To go a step further, perhaps our charge is to *be* the divine voice whispering into the clamor a message of real unity, a message of reconciliation, a message of comfort, a message of hope, a message of peace. Perhaps, we, like the students in an unruly classroom, simply need to listen to hear those divine messages uttered by children, by neighbors, by people on the margins, by people around the world. Perhaps that is where God *is*, in the midst of all of this.

Truth be told, ministers don't actually have a phonenumber directly to God, so I couldn't say for certain where we will hear, or see, or experience the divine in the midst of the clamor of our lives and of our world. But I suspect that it will not be in the wind, or in the earthquake, or in the fire. I suspect it will be in something much closer to the sound of sheer silence.

The words of Pulitzer Prize-winning poet Franz Wright speak to me now so I share them with you. He writes:

*The long silences need to be loved, perhaps
more than the words
which arrive
to describe them
in time.*¹

If we are to hear, or see, or experience the divine in the midst of the clamor of our lives and of our world, I suspect that it will not be in the wind, or in the earthquake, or in the fire. I suspect it will be in something much closer to the sound of sheer silence. May we learn to listen. Amen.

¹ Franz Wright. "God's Silence," New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008. Pg. 8.