

“The Sound of Crushed Silence”

Scripture: 1 Kings 19

In today’s Hebrew Scripture lesson, we find the prophet Elijah cowering in a cave. And we have to ask ourselves – as compassionate, thinking people – what is wrong with Elijah?

Let’s go back a bit: the prophet Elijah lived after David and Solomon, about 850 years before Jesus. He was from the northern kingdom of Israel. Ahab was the king. According to the Book of Kings, Ahab was a compromised and failed leader, because he had forsaken God for the worship of Baal, the fertility god introduced by the queen, Jezebel. As a consequence, a severe drought had enveloped Israel (1 Kings 18).

Three years into this famine, the country on its knees, Elijah met with Ahab. Believing the issue had to do with false worship, Elijah challenged Ahab to a showdown, asking the people of Israel, and the prophets of Baal to assemble on Mount Carmel. At stake: Israel’s allegiance to God.

Two altars were erected, one to Baal and one to God. Whoever’s deity sent down fire to burn it up would be proven to be the true God. The prophets of Baal did all that they could, but no fire came down to burn their offering. Yet even when Elijah doused his altar with water, fire from heaven came down and consumed everything. The stunned crowd fell to the ground, proclaiming, *“The Lord is the true God.”* The story ends with the deaths of the priests of Baal, and rain falling on the land.

Ahab, who had witnessed everything, returned to Jezebel to explain what had happened. She was furious, and vowed to get revenge against this prophet who preached that her god is not the true God.

The narrative now takes a sudden turn. Our text begins with the prophet on the run, fleeing, not only from Ahab and Jezebel, but also from his place of ministry and the struggles it entails. Up until this point, Elijah had been a prophet “in charge,” confronting the king and followers of Baal, and performing miracles.

Elijah struggled with many things, but nothing more than himself. By all reasoning, this should have been the moment of his greatest triumph. Yet he was far from feeling the thrill of victory. He was tired, frightened and had fallen into a deep malaise of self-doubt. He feared that his work had been for nothing and would have no lasting effect. Perhaps the words of the Psalmist capture such feelings, *“Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me?”*

This is part of Elijah’s story, just as it can sometimes be part of our story. We can find ourselves most at risk when we are feeling most invulnerable. At such times, we may find ourselves wanting to run away from everything and everyone; if not literally, then at least spiritually, to a place where we can think, nurse our wounds, and hide away from harm.

Elijah escaped to the wilderness, a place of deep, theological meaning for the Hebrew people. He sat down under a broom tree and prayed that he might die.

What happened next was the quiet intervention of grace. First, Elijah was given sleep – sometimes a remarkable gift. As he slept, a messenger of God – an angel – touched him and said, “Get up and eat.” He looked about, and there, beside his head, was a cake baked on hot stones and a jar of water. He ate and drank, and lay down again. A second time, “Arise and eat, or the journey will be too much for you.” The angel neither condemns nor coddles Elijah. Instead, God’s angel recognizes Elijah’s fatigue and offers him respite and recovery – the basic sustenance of food and water, but more importantly, practical pastoral care, as this provision allowed space for Elijah to be still after the frantic flight from Jezebel. And let us not miss the role of touch in this story. Twice the angel touched him. It is

with the strength from that meal Elijah travelled forty days and forty nights as far as the mountain of Horeb.

Elijah climbed the mountain and entered a cave. There he is confronted with *"the word of the LORD,"* and a divine question to answer. *"What are you doing here, Elijah?"* *"Why are you here?"* Clearly, *"here"* is not where Elijah was supposed to be.

Elijah did not give a direct answer but evades and equivocates, implying that the work that God had begun centuries earlier had now come to nothing, and that his own work was fruitless. He complained bitterly about the Israelites' unfaithfulness. *"I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away,"* he replied. In Elijah's mind, instead of a threat from the queen, it is all the Israelites who are seeking to take his life. Sometimes when we are in crisis, it does feel as if we are alone. *"I'm all alone."* *"Everyone is against me."* In Elijah's despondent state, this is what feels true to him.

At the same time, as Elijah's experience testifies, being in such a crisis situation can bring new insight and awareness. God tells Elijah to stand at the edge of the cave and wait for God's presence.

What happened next is one of the holy moments of sacred history. We bow before its mystery. In the stark simplicity of the Hebrew language, this is what happened.

*"And there was a great and mighty wind,
not in the wind was the Lord.*

*And after the wind, an earthquake,
not in the earthquake was the Lord.*

And after the earthquake, fire.

The Lord was not in the fire.

And after the fire, the sound of crushed silence."

"And after the fire, a still small voice," is the translation we may have learned (KJV). In a translation both literal and poetic, what happened was the sound of crushed silence. A silence that was at the same time empty and full, an utmost silence that was at the same time the opposite of what was expected and more than what was expected, a quiet so all-encompassing that it enveloped and overwhelmed everything else around it.

Elijah had come, hoping for God to reveal God's self as before. Like the wind that parted the Red Sea and rescued the Hebrew people from Pharaoh's army; like the earthquake that had shaken that very mountain where Moses received the Commandments; like the fire, as Elijah himself had seen on Mount Carmel – all the expected modes of revelation came and went, and God was nowhere to be found.

Silence falls upon the mountain. God draws nearer than a whisper. The only response to Elijah's great turmoil is presence, a reminder that during difficult, painful times, God is still there. God is present in the silence that underlies all our noise, in the silence that is always with us – in the still small voice that underlies every moment of every day – in a small quiet whisper.

In the silence, God...

Elijah immediately covered his face, reflecting the awareness in the Hebrew tradition that no one can see God directly and live.

Then, God spoke the twin graces of re-commissioning and reassurance.

First, the grace of a new call. God reaffirms his calling. “Elijah, you still have work to do – there is an unjust king to challenge” – a reminder that it is in attending to the work at hand, the work that needs to be done through which life is renewed. To put this another way, Elijah, get back to embodying God’s love. Get back to speaking truth to power. Get back to comforting one another. Get back to the work of faithful community building.

And then, the grace of reassurance. In his spiritual malaise Elijah felt as if he were the only one left who still followed God. “*Go back to your people.*” God’s horizon for Elijah exceeds Elijah himself – there are seven thousand faithful people in Israel who will help him. God is sustaining them as well.

There is a message here for all of us. Even in those times when we would seek to hide ourselves, God finds us there. And God always has something for us to do. Our lives have purpose. You and I never work in isolation. We always work in community. We can trust that God is near, and God will be present to us in different ways on different parts of the journey.

How interesting that it takes attuning both our ears and our hearts to hear the voice of the One that seeks us out and comes to us right in the middle of all the noise and chaos, and speaks in a silence that is still, small, and crushing, “My child, what are you doing here?”

The good news is that God does speak to us in a still small voice that penetrates even the conflicting sounds of life’s chaos and confusion. Our challenge is to do what we can to turn down the volume on all the competing noise, so that we can listen closely, carefully, and prayerfully for that which is spoken in the silence. For in that silence is a voice that offers us comfort and hope when we need it most; strength and renewal when we feel as if our energies have long since passed; and love and mercy that bolster us for the journey ahead. Because when God speaks to Elijah in that still small voice, the first thing God says is to keep going, and do what you have always been meant to do.

Friends, the story of Elijah has a surprise ending. The scriptures say that Elijah does not taste death as other mortals do. He was taken up to heaven in the midst of a whirlwind, a chariot of fire drawn by horses of fire. As Elijah is lifted up, his mantle falls to the ground and his successor, Elisha, picks it up.

The prophet Elijah’s end points to a hope of life beyond this one, a resurrected existence. “Swing low, sweet chariot, coming for to carry me home,” is how the African-American spiritual appropriates the scene. These two hopes together, that God’s word will stand forever, and that life will find a fulfillment beyond life, are why Elijah is called The Prophet, and why Malachi prophesied that Elijah would appear again, preparing the way for the Messiah.

Only one who had seen God in the lightening on Mount Carmel and waited for God in the silence of Mount Horeb could prepare the way for the One who came to show God’s face, full of grace and truth, Jesus, the Christ. Thanks be to God. Amen