

“Listening”

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1 Kings 18 and 19

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We are all looking to find the holy in our world. There is something innately human about looking for God. There were many words shouted in our world this week in the name of God. In our lives, there are many words spoken trying to describe God. Many moments spent attempting to find God. In the face of all the noise in our culture - the rumbling of cars on the streets, the buzzing in our phones and on our desks, and in our desire to shout and shout back, the sacred is still found in our listening to the gentle whispers of our God. Let us pray.

Spirit of the Living God, fall afresh on us. Still our souls and allow us to hear your gentle voice and to feel your presence. In your holy name we pray. Amen.

“What are you doing here Elijah?” That is the question that God twice asks the prophet. Nine centuries before Christ, Elijah was larger than life. He brought about miracles, called on fire, stood up to King Ahab in Jerusalem. Elijah as we read about him in most of the Old Testament was self-confident and forceful. And yet in I Kings 19 we see a different Elijah. He is disappointed by the lack of faith of the people and was on the run, trying to escape death. He seems unsure of himself. God asks a question he himself might have asked, “What are you doing here, Elijah?”

That is a question we all ask in our own way. What is my purpose? Where do I find meaning? What am I doing here? I will never forget meeting a man on a tennis court in Boca Roton Florida in April of 1992 who struggled mightily with his direction in life. He was there to play tennis but kept saying over and over to me, “What am I doing here? What am I really doing here? I had no idea, I thought he was there to play tennis with me, and thought it was odd he kept asking it. But as I have grown older I have realized more and more how important self-reflection is whenever it comes. We benefit from time spent thinking about our course in life. We grow from looking inwards. We gain guidance when we go deep. And often when we reflect we find that, like for Elijah, God whispers something important to us.

In ancient times, people looked for God’s full presence outside of themselves in nature. In 1 Kings 18, Yahweh shows his power over Baal by demonstrating his mastery over fire, rain and water. So it’s no surprise that when Elijah goes to the mount he looks for answers and direction and guidance in the earthquake and fire and wind.

And have we changed so much? Most of the time, the messages we get that influence us come loudly and arrive from outside us. We turn on the radio and announcements tell us what to buy. On television, they turn up the commercials to be significantly louder than the program we were

trying to watch. Twitter and Facebook post opinions in real time. Billboards color the landscape with ideas. Now robo calls and political ads tell us how to vote. And in the Washington traffic there is so much stimuli we can feel overwhelmed. Like Elijah I sometimes have to get away from it all. With all the busyness in our world we wonder, where is God? Where do I fit in? What am I doing here?

And if we aren't careful, we can become overwhelmed with noise and stop listening, as if we don't know how to be quiet.

There is a story about Franklin Roosevelt at the White House who showed his frustration with a lack of listening. Roosevelt, who often endured long receiving lines at the White House, complained that no one really paid attention to what was said during these lines. So one day, during a reception, he decided to try an experiment. To each person who passed down the line and shook his hand, he murmured, "I murdered a relative this morning." The guests responded with phrases like, "Marvelous! Keep up the good work. We are so proud of you. God bless you, sir." It was not till the end of the line, while greeting one foreign ambassador that his words were actually heard. The story goes that the ambassador, who wasn't sure what to say but didn't want to contradict Roosevelt, leaned over and whispered, "I'm sure they had it coming, Mr. President."

There is an old phrase that says is well, "A wise old owl sat on an oak, the more he saw the less he spoke, the less he spoke the more he heard. Why aren't we like that wise old bird?"

Our own Andy Wolvin, a longtime member of this church, is a national expert on listening. In his book on listening, Andy points out that good listening skills are some of the most critical ones to determining success in business and in life. Andy and his coauthor Carolyn Coakley, write that listening means more than just focusing on what our ears hear. Listening can mean finding meaning through many medium. For example, visual stimuli matter to listening, like a wink or slumping posture or head nod. They aren't things you hear but they suggest that much meaning in the messages we hear come from nonverbal cues. You can pick up a lot from using senses other than your ears. For Elijah that meant watching the elements around him. For us it means paying attention to what the voice inside us says in prayer.

One of the basic tenets of our faith is that God wants to have a relationship with us. But you cannot have a relationship with someone without communication. It's why we pray. The great thing about prayer is it affirms your love for God. And as we express love for God, we feel God's love. As we pray, we learn that the greatest need we have may not be for the thing we are praying for as much as simply for feeling the presence of God. For God is not always in the noise or shouting or in our talking, but in the feeling we have in prayer.

The concept of hearing is one of the most critical ones in the Bible. In 1 John we are told, "If we ask anything according to God's will, God hears us." We meet this morning mid-way between the two holiest days on the Jewish calendar. The mission statement of the Israelites in the Old Testament, is called the Shema. The Hebrew of Shema means "hear" and that great statement of monotheism that bears its name is "Hear o Israel the Lord your God the Lord is one." God's call on the people is not to shout or speak or talk but first to hear. To open one's ears to God.

I believe humans want to listen. We need to be still and listen with our ears and eyes, hearts and minds.

Our text tells us that the sacred was not in the earthquake, or the wind or the fire. Those of us who like music from the 1970's might say there is something holy to be found in the sounds of "earth wind and fire," but not Elijah. Elijah heard God in the sound of sheer silence. The phrase we hear in popular Christian circles is the "still small voice of God." Paul Simon sings about the sound of silence. The words sound and silence appear together elsewhere in the Bible as in Job. Wolvin suggests listening incorporates more than just our ears. To listen to a sound of God, you have to use your eyes and heart and mind.

Our New Revised Standard Version of the Bible calls the sound Elijah hears, "the sound of sheer silence." A better name for it comes from the NIV. That sheer silence means "a gentle whisper." Elijah is able to hear something for God is still speaking even when God seems silent. If Elijah were talking himself or yelling or in a busy loud place, he might have missed it. To hear a gentle whisper, you have to be calm, contemplative or quiet yourself. And that is why we have moments of silence in our confession, respond to God in prayer and bookend our worship services with moments of prayer.

Even in what can seem like God's silence, God is still speaking to us. We must learn to listen so we don't miss God. We have to be quiet enough to hear the gentle whisper.

I don't know about you but I don't find God in the shouting of our culture. In the protests I see on TV or in the noise I watch on television. If you think about what you know of God, that makes sense. If you believe there is a God who has a plan or some part in creating the world, then it stands to reason that God could impact that world. Yet God chooses not to overwhelm the noises of this world. God says through the Psalmist, "Be still, and know that I am God.

God acts as love acts. Love does not come when one person shouts at another. No, think of passage on love we read at weddings from 1 Corinthians 13. It tells us that love is not a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. But love is patient. God is kind. Love does not push. Love pulls. Love whispers.

At Christmas, we celebrate that God doesn't beat down the door of our world to shout God's arrival. God shows up in the birth of a small baby to obscure parents, in an unlikely stable, on a quiet, holy night.

I can remember as a child going to see my grandfather. He would sit in a big rocking chair and I would often sit on a couch and we'd talk. But sometimes I would go over and sit next to him close so he and I could hear and see and touch – listen in a special way. Because when you love someone, you want to be close in order to hear them. When you are with your children at bedtime, you don't shout I love you to them, you whisper it.

The Lord was not in the wind or in the earthquake, or in the fire. But after busyness of the city, after the noise, after the rumble, after the shouting, after the speaking and after the storm, Elijah found God in the sheer silence. The Lord encouraged him to reflect on where he was and why. "What are you doing here Elijah?" Elijah was there to listen for the gentle whisper of God. And so should we. Thanks be to God. Amen.