

## Hearing the Silence

### **1 Kings 19:9-14**

At that place 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?” 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.”

“What are you doing here, Elijah?”

We have to back up a little to hear Elijah’s story. Elijah was the only prophet left in Israel. His biggest concern was convincing the people to remain faithful to God, and not to worship Baal. He gathered 450 of Baal’s prophets on a mountain, and they had a showdown. Each ‘team’ had a bull to sacrifice, and the god to respond with fire was real. So each god’s followers prepared their bull. No matter how hard the prophets of Baal tried, there was no spontaneous fire. But when Elijah called on the name of the Lord, not only was there fire, but it was able to consume even waterlogged wood.

The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob was the clear winner, and Elijah ordered the people of Israel to kill the prophets of Baal. The big problem here is that the king of Israel, Ahab, was the one who had encouraged everyone to start worshiping Baal in the first place. He didn’t marry an Israelite, but a woman who came from a culture that worshiped Baal. And as you might expect, when Elijah killed all those prophets, Ahab told his wife. Maybe you’ve heard her name – Jezebel. As the queen, Jezebel had quite a bit of power. And she was furious about what Elijah had done. So she sent him a death threat message. Rather than facing her or some assassin, Elijah ran off to the wilderness.

Which is where we meet him this morning. Elijah wanders through the wilderness for a few days, then decides he's ready to give up. He prays to God and says he's ready to die. This is a pretty drastic reversal – Elijah just ran away in order to save his life. Now he's ready to lay down and die. Okay, a death threat is significant, but he is whining a bit this morning. I can almost picture him giving up in the desert: "God, it's just too hard. I might as well die." God's not ready to do Elijah in just yet, so he sends an angel with food and water and a message: "Get up and eat." Don't give up just yet. Twice the angel comes with food, and it's enough for Elijah to make his way to Mt. Horeb, the place where Moses saw God. And Elijah sits in a cave to wait.

He doesn't have to wait long, and God asks him, "What are you doing here?" Elijah answers by saying that he's the only good Israelite left. He's the only one who cares about God at all. All the rest are bowing down to Baal and trying to kill him. It's not an outright lie, but it is an exaggeration of the situation.

And then we get to the part of this story that is more familiar. There's an earthquake, and a fire, and a violent wind – but God is not in any of those things. Instead, God is in the sound of sheer silence that follows. [pause in silence] So why bother to send the earthquake, the fire, the wind? God is present with Elijah, but he has to discern where. He has to figure it out. And it turns out, he's not very good at that.

Because God has been with him since before our story began! God was the one who called him to be a prophet in the first place. His very profession was to listen for God and express what he heard to the people. God was with him in the great fire showdown with the prophets of Baal. God was with him in the wilderness when Elijah was ready to give up and die. And yet, when he received a death threat, Elijah wanted to retreat from his life to find God.

Anyone here a fan of *The Wizard of Oz*? Dorothy goes tromping all over Kansas before the twister, then all over Oz, only to declare, “I know that if I ever go looking for my heart’s desire, I’ll never go any further than my own backyard. For if it isn’t there, I never really lost it.” Elijah was never out of God’s presence, but he went looking for it anyway. And I think we can identify with him on that level too. Sometimes we can’t feel God’s presence on the terms that we define. We don’t get the outcome or the experience we asked for, so we assume that means God isn’t there. But then in hindsight, we can see how God was simply present in a way we weren’t looking for.

So the earthquake, the fire, the wind? God’s exaggerating for Elijah the way Elijah is exaggerating for God. No, says God, I’m not in all these big things. I can use big things to get your attention, but that’s not where you should look for me. I’m the still, small voice, the sound of sheer silence, even when the rest of the world is screaming at you. But I am still here, and I am with you. Learn to listen to the silence. Listen for the still, small voice.

When Elijah heard it, he knew it was God’s presence. He went to the entrance of the cave. He covered his eyes, because he knew that no one had ever seen God’s face and lived. And while he stood there, he heard God say again, “What are you doing here, Elijah?” And despite the experience he’s just had, Elijah gives the same answer. Being in God’s direct presence in the same place where Moses stood has not changed his perspective at all. Elijah still seems to think that he is the center of the universe, and that his problems are the only ones worth noting.

Elijah recognized that God was in the silence, but he didn’t hear God’s still, small voice in the quietness. He was in God’s presence, but he remained unchanged by it. It’s sad to be surrounded by God’s presence and not notice it. But it’s heartbreaking to know that God’s presence is with you, and yet not be impacted by that truth. It is the beginning of the end for

Elijah. He leaves the mountain with a clear set of instructions from God, including the name of a young man he is to anoint to take over from him the position of prophet. For how can you be a prophet when you can't hear God's voice even when you're standing right next to it?

The real tragedy of this story is that Elijah wasn't changed. And sadly, I think many people today can identify with Elijah on this point too. I mean, it's one thing to believe that God exists, and another thing to believe in God. To put your faith and trust in God. If we really trust God, it changes us. Our faith compels us to live in different ways. James reminds us that "faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead." In a similar vein, belief without change is a misunderstanding of who God is and what he is calling and inviting and expecting us to be.

And then 1 Peter challenges us that we should "Always be ready to give an explanation to anyone who asks you for a reason for your hope." Why do you believe? Why is this important? How has God impacted you and changed your life? How are you different because of God? Now some of you might point out that you, like me, were raised in the church from day one, and so you aren't really 'different' because of God. But there are no excuses for us Cradle Christians, because we are often the ones most in danger of not realizing the full impact and power of God's presence.

So how do we avoid Elijah's tragedy? First, we have to listen to and for and in the silence. Life is rarely made up of our responses to big moments, but rather the many minor responses to seemingly insignificant things. That's what makes a reputation and a life. But that's hard, and much easier said than done. So we also need support from our faith community. People who also believe and trust in God, people who can remind us of what God has done.

It's really important to note and remember that the problem isn't being in God's presence, but being changed by it. Because God is already with us! The question is now that you

know that, how will you live differently than someone who doesn't know that? There are lots of ways to answer that question.

Some of you might find it helpful to live by the three rules of the Methodist movement:

1) Do no harm. 2) Do all the good you can. 3) Stay connected to God in all the ways you can.

Some of you might find guidance in the words of Micah 6:8: "What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God." Thousands of Christians have reminded themselves to be changed by their encounter with God by asking WWJD (what would Jesus do)? At the most simple level, you might simply ask yourself every night before you fall asleep, "what did I do and not do today because I believe in God? How will my faith guide me tomorrow?"

Hear these words from Psalm 62: "For God alone my soul waits in silence, for my hope is from him. He alone is my rock and my salvation, my fortress; I shall not be shaken." Amen.