

June 19, 2022
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1 Kings 19:1-15a
Signal to Noise Ratio

In the church liturgical year, this is the second Sunday after Pentecost or the first Sunday in a season known as Ordinary Time. Ordinary Time is longest liturgical season of the church year, stretching from today to the Sunday before Advent begins. During this season, the cycle of scriptures known as the lectionary includes New Testament readings focusing on Jesus' ministry and letters from Paul and others to the early church. The Old Testament readings focus on the history of Israel and Judah during the 9th and 8th centuries BCE, primarily from the perspective of the prophets. This was a turbulent time in the history of the Hebrew people, with frequent changes in rulers, impending threats of conquests and ultimately exile for the people of Judah in 597.

In this unsettled and tempestuous period, prophets had a unique role. When we hear the term prophet, we sometimes think about fortune tellers or someone who could predict the future. However, the role of a Biblical prophet was to be the voice of God to the people. And the people they often spoke the word of the Lord to were people in power, kings and queens, rulers of foreign lands, and priests who were not following God's ways. This week and next week we will hear about two of these prominent prophets: Elijah and Elisha. Their stories are told in the books of 1 and 2 Kings.

Before reading the text from Kings this morning, I want to set the stage and introduce the cast of characters. Our story takes place in roughly the mid 800's BCE. David and Solomon are long dead and the kingdom split into Judah to the South and Israel to the north about 75 years prior. Our story is set in Israel during the reign of its seventh king since the split. We are first introduced to Elijah in 1 Kings 17 when Elijah proclaims to King Ahab it will not rain, nor will there be morning dew again until Elijah declares it. Following this declaration, Elijah treks to Phoenicia, where he performs a series of miracles. He has now returned to Samaria, the capital Israel, to meet up with King Ahab again.

Ahab is introduced to us in Chapter 16 with these words "Ahab, son of Omri did evil in sight of the Lord more than all before him" and then we learn that a big reason for this evil is that he married Jezebel, who was not only a foreigner, but she also worshipped and served the Canaanite storm god Baal. Ahab puts his stock with Jezebel, not the LORD, building altars and shrines to Baal and other gods. You don't need foreboding music to know that we are headed for trouble. So hear now these words from 1 Kings 19:

Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword. Then Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah, saying, "So may the gods do to me and more also, if I do not make your life like the life of one of them by this time tomorrow." Then he was afraid; he got up and fled for his life and came to Beer-sheba, which belongs to Judah; he left his servant there.

But he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness and came and sat down under a solitary broom tree. He asked that he might die, "It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors." Then he lay down under the broom tree and fell asleep. Suddenly an angel touched him and said to him, "Get up

and eat.” He looked, and there at his head was a cake baked on hot stones and a jar of water. He ate and drank and lay down again. The angel of the Lord came a second time, touched him, and said, “Get up and eat, or the journey will be too much for you.” He got up and ate and drank; then he went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights to Horeb the mount of God. 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.” Then the Lord said to him, “Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus. This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

This is not how I had planned to share the story of Elijah’s call from God with you this morning. However, I am grateful for the gifts of technology that allowed me to prerecord this message. As you can hear in my voice, I am still on the mend. I am also grateful for the AV team under Matt Pearson who are helping make this happen and for our liturgists Ewen Todd and Irene Shutt, who have taken an expanded role this morning.

Two weeks ago on Pentecost, I concluded my sermon with the words, it was then, and is now, all about community. Thank you all for being community to Brian and me as we recover and being community to each other as we worship together. And a special thanks for being community to Rebekah last week as we called her to be our next Associate Pastor.

Two weeks ago on Pentecost (which seems like a long time ago!) I also shared these words from the second chapter of Acts, words that tell of how the gift of the Holy Spirit arrived as Peter, other disciples and a crowd had gathered:

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them.

The Holy Spirit came like the rush of a violent wind and tongues of fire. These are the images of the Holy Spirit, especially on Pentecost. We wear red to celebrate this imagery. And we expect that the Holy Spirit is going to make this grand entrance, with a flash of lightning and

bolts of thunder; bells and whistles and sirens flashing, awakening us from our complacency and transforming us. And sometimes that happens. Sometimes the voice of the Holy Spirit is so loud and obvious that we can't help but notice.

And sometimes it is not. Sometimes God's breathes the Holy Spirit into the stillness. This was Elijah's experience when he was going through a rough patch. When King Ahab and Queen Jezebel were none too happy with him, Elijah went on the run for 40 days. When he finally arrived at Mt. Horeb and found a cave where he could hide while he tried to figure out his next steps. Elijah waits expectantly, knowing God will guide him on his journey. A great wind comes and yet there is no message from God. And an earthquake comes and a fire comes and still no message from God. And then the sound of sheer silence. And friends that is when God speaks to Elijah. In the silence.

Like us, Elijah is living in a world full of noise and chaos. The natural world was not cooperating - there was a terrible drought leading to famine; the rulers on the nation were focused on themselves not the good of those they led; and rather than following the Lord who rescued them from slavery and led them to the promised land – the people are worshipping a myriad of gods. How can Elijah hear God in the midst of all of this chaos? He expects to hear God's voice in the wind and the earthquake and the fire, but instead it is in the silence.

This passage reminds me that we too live in a world with so much noise. I believe the Holy Spirit is God still speaking in the world today, meeting us in the messy world in which we live. The work of the Holy Spirit is not easy work. It is the Holy Spirit who breathes into me as I seek God in prayer and scripture. It is the work of the Spirit who reconciles me to my brother and sister, so words of disagreement are transformed into sharing the bread and cup. My challenge is to recognize the still small voice of the Spirit amidst the noise and busyness of life.

Before my call to ordained ministry, when I was spending my days in the lab as a neuroscientist, one of the biggest research challenges was detecting a small change in a protein level or electrical activity in the brain after a manipulation we did. It was a constant battle of signal to noise ratio.

And honestly this a pretty fair representation of my life on a lot of days. Careening from one activity to the next, the busyness of life providing so much background chatter that the Holy Spirit barely has room to get a word in edgewise. Even this week when COVID has forced me to slow down, I still find myself needing to slow down more and make room for the Holy Spirit.

Fire, wind, earthquake, and sheer silence – all symbols of the work of the Holy Spirit. As is the dove:

And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw God's Spirit descending like a dove and alighting on him.

This passage from Matthew's gospel shares that the dove was commonly understood to be a symbol or a marker of the Holy Spirit. And if I were in the sanctuary, I'd point to the left side of the sanctuary and the banner of the dove we put up for Pentecost. On my office door is wood carving with a dove. More than fire, earthquakes, wind or even silence, the dove – or more

accurately birds – have become a reminder to me of the gift of the Holy Spirit – and specifically the way the Spirit shows up in unexpected places and ways.

Shortly after I arrived at my last call at First Presbyterian Church in Hilton Head, SC I was asked to inter ashes in the columbarium behind the church. The ashes were of a deceased former member whose family lived out of state and was not able to be there. It was my first time engaging in this sacred act. I was alone in the columbarium, not really sure if I should pray out loud or silently. Not really sure what I should say. Feeling a little foolish and a bit uncertain. And then an egret flew into the columbarium. Now egrets are quite common sights in Hilton Head. As waterfowl, they feed in the marshes, lagoons and the dunes by the ocean. To see one in the church courtyard, a good ways away from water was a surprise. And yet there was an egret with me in the courtyard. I even took a picture of it, to make sure I wasn't hallucinating. I wasn't.

That egret silently stood guard while I interred the ashes, reassuring me that the right words would come. Reassuring me that God is with me in my moments of insecurity, my moments of uncertainty. Throughout my five years in the Lowcountry of SC, the egret became for me a powerful symbol of the work of the Holy Spirit. I would often share the story of the egret with people as a reminder to be alert to unexpected ways the Holy Spirit might show up. And when I left the church in Hilton Head, the Board of Deacons gave me this beautiful artwork featuring an egret to always remember the work of the Spirit.

Now I have yet to see an egret in Michigan, although I hear that they can appear in mid-summer. And I will be on the lookout. However, the sand hill crane seems to be my Michigan reminder of the work of the Spirit and I'll share those stories on another day.

Because we need the work of the Holy Spirit now. We need to the Holy Spirit to swoop in and sweep away the cobwebs of complacency that keep our privilege intact at the expense of others; we need to the Holy Spirit to transform our hearts to pump love and grace to a world that so desperately needs an encouraging word. We need to the Holy Spirit to stir our imaginations to see exciting possibilities in what otherwise seems ordinary or even useless.

Because we don't make it easy for God, do we? We put on all sorts of armor and baggage and masks to pretend that we are doing just fine, that all is right in the world, that we are strong and independent and don't need God or others. Elijah tried that approach. Moses tried that approach too, until God cut through the noise with a signal Moses couldn't ignore – a burning bush that was not consumed in the flames. Then Moses paid attention. Presbyterian pastor and author Frederick Buechner puts the challenge before us this way.. "WHAT IT MEANS IS that if we come to a church right, we come to it more fully and nakedly ourselves, come with more of our humanness showing, than we are apt to come to most places. We come like Moses with muck on our shoes—foot-sore and travel-stained with the dust of our lives upon us, our failures, our deceits, our hypocrisies..." Yes, we may come in that way. Yet, if we open ourselves to meet God in unexpected ways, to see Jesus in the face of each other, to allow the Spirit to cut through the noise and chaos of life, we don't leave the same way we came in. May it be so. Amen.