

The Sound of Silence
1 Kings 19:1-15a
June 30, 2019
First Presbyterian, Luling

Today's passage falls right in the middle of the stories about the prophet Elijah in the book of First Kings. We're jumping into the middle of the story, and it's important to see how Elijah got to this moment in his career as a prophet, and how he got to this place in the wilderness.

The chapter before this told about a standoff between Elijah, the prophet of the Lord, and all the prophets of Baal, who is the main god that Queen Jezebel and her followers worshipped. The queen is already put out with Elijah, because he's speaking out against her regime. This standoff is a dramatic, with water and fire and a little bit of showmanship on Elijah's part. He gets pretty close to being obnoxious about his victory, or God's victory. But he wins the showdown and proves that his God, the Lord of Israel, is more powerful than Baal the god of Jezebel.

So Elijah is feeling pretty certain of himself, certain of his God and his God's power, and confirmed in his prophet's role. But Jezebel becomes even angrier with him; in fact, she's ready to kill Elijah the first chance she gets.

And that brings us to today's reading. One of the things we learned in Hebrew class is that Hebrew is a language that is all about action. It's almost all verbs, enough nouns to make sense, very few adjectives and adverbs. So there's very little talking about feelings, or motivations, or what someone was thinking when they did action x.

And so typically for Hebrew, in today's story, there are very few words about how Elijah felt or what his motivations or intentions were. Just imagine if this story were written up in an inspirational magazine today, or as a social media post, and you can see the difference. Nevertheless, even with just verbs, we can conclude from this chapter Elijah is a whiner. I admit I have little patience for whiners and maybe I'm being a little hard on Elijah, but let me tell you why I come to that conclusion.

Elijah has run away, as far as he can get from Jezebel, who is out to kill him. He sits under a broom tree and pouts, saying, "Well, I guess my life is over now. I haven't done any better than my faithless ancestors. Woe is me."

An angel comes and feeds him, which doesn't improve his whininess...though in my experience a little food is always helpful to a whiny or grumpy disposition...and the angel comes and feeds him again and tells him he's going on a journey. I guess he needed something concrete to do, because this temporarily cures his whininess, and he sets off for forty days and forty nights through the desert to Mount Horeb. You might know Mount Horeb by its other name, Mount Sinai, where Moses went up the mountain, met God, and came back down the mountain with the Ten Commandments. Same place.

In the Biblical storyline, one goes to Mount Sinai for one purpose only, and that is to meet God, and hear what God has to say. Mountains have long been seen as holy places, and this particular mountain as holy to the Israelite people. Moses had met God face to face there, and received the law. At this point in their history, if you were going to go to a place where God was sure to be, it was this mountain.

God, however, is not impressed with Elijah. Not with the whines. Not with the forty days and forty nights' journey, not with Elijah's presence on Mount Horeb. Elijah is not where God thinks Elijah is supposed to be, nor is he doing what God thinks Elijah is supposed to be doing, which is making sure that Ahab and Jezebel aren't doing any more damage and that the Israelites are following God and not Baal. So God asks Elijah, "What are you doing here Elijah?" And Elijah says, "I've been out doing work for you, but I'm the only one left who is faithful to you, and now they're trying to kill me." I'm just almost sure this was a whine. He wasn't telling God anything God didn't already know, nor was he really telling the truth. The truth was, "I'm here hiding in this cave because I'm running away. I'm afraid, and your work has gotten too hard for me, and I can't take it anymore."

But instead, Elijah whines. And God says, "go outside the cave, for I'm about to come by for a visit." And this is my favorite part of the story. There is a mighty wind, and then an earthquake, and then fire. But no God yet. Those are all traditional ways that God might be

manifested in an appearance—remember the pillar of fire that led the Israelites through the desert, for instance? God is not in the spectacular, the showy, what you might call the “special effects.” Elijah had already found God in those kind of ways. Elijah needed another way to listen, a different way to find God.

And God appears, in the sound of sheer silence. You may have in your memory that the King James and the old Revised Standard use the phrase, “a still, small voice.” What does this tell us? So many things. If we haven’t figured it out by now, this is another reminder that God likes to do the unexpected. When we are least expecting God to show up, there God appears, in the way we least expect. It also tells us we need to listen more carefully to hear God’s voice—to listen to everything, to listen closely to see if it is God speaking, to see if it is God appearing.

Silence is a funny thing. It’s hard to find, as the reading calls it, the sound of sheer silence. In our world, there are always sounds like traffic on the highway, the hum of the air conditioner, airplanes overhead, the countless things that we are so accustomed to that we don’t even hear them anymore. If we are so blessed as to get away from the modern world, it is rare even to find silence in nature. Insects humming, the breeze blowing through the trees, birds chirping, the sound of our own breathing. Much of what we might initially think of as silence is really not silent at all.

Whether listening for silence, or for the still small voice, Elijah, to his credit, doesn’t miss God’s presence. He catches on, and knows that God is there in the midst of the quietness after the wind and earthquake and fire, and so he goes outside to meet again with God.

And God asks him the same question, “What are you doing here, Elijah?” And Elijah, believe it or not, has the same whiny answer. “I’ve been out doing work for you, but I’m the only one left who is, and now they’re trying to kill me.” After this amazing display of God’s presence, after being aware enough and listening carefully enough to discern God’s presence in the midst of silence, Elijah can’t come up with anything better than the same, exact whine.

I guess God has kind of given up on him getting the point at this late date. So God gives him the new instructions, which is where our

reading left off. Just go, Elijah. Go back and do what it is I called you to do.

So to recap. Elijah wins a bet, gets scared and runs away, tries to hide from his calling, God tells him he can't get off that easily, and Elijah goes back to fulfill his calling. That's the trajectory of the story. Along the way, Elijah learns somehow how to listen for God in everything. In the places where he knows God will be, he does find God. But not in the way he expects. Not in the way Moses did, not in the way his people have for several generations. But in the stillness, in the silence.

In the week before Pentecost, one of my friends shared something on Facebook, which occasionally can be a force for good in our world. It was a quote from an unidentified source, and it said, "Never assume that loud is strong and quiet is weak." "Never assume that loud is strong and quiet is weak."

Elijah's experience in the wilderness is a confirmation that quiet, that silence, that the still small voice, can be the most powerful.

It was ironic to me, and maybe a little bit funny in a preacher-nerd kind of way, that my friend was posting that just before Pentecost. Pentecost is a day when we celebrate and remember the loudness and unruliness of the Spirit. It's not a day when we intentionally appreciate quiet or silence. And I'll admit that most of the time, I fall more on the side of wanting to listen for God in the quiet stillness than I look and listen for God in the surprising chaos of Pentecost.

But maybe bringing those two experiences together reminds us that God will likely show up in the wind and fire and earthquake. And God will also likely show up in the sound of silence. And we would do well to be looking and listening in all kinds of ways.

In the busy-ness of our lives, there God is. In the quietness of some moments, there God is. In the magnificence of nature, there God is. In the interactions between family and friends, there God is. May we learn to hear and see God in each of these.