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# The Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost

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**1 Kings 19:9-18**



Elijah has to be one of the most important and interesting figures of the Hebrew Bible. Among many other fascinating characteristics, Elijah is noteworthy as one of the very few people in the entire Bible who does not die in a typical sense. Rather than physically passing away at the end of his life, Elijah is famously depicted being dramatically whisked up to heaven, while he's still fully alive, in a flaming chariot with horses of fire. This otherworldly scene led over time to various traditions about Elijah returning one day to prepare the way for the Messiah. The first followers of Jesus understood John the Baptist to be this second coming of Elijah, while some Jews today still keep an open chair when celebrating the annual Passover meal in anticipation of Elijah's eventual return.

Yet, as our reading today from 1 Kings clearly shows, even such an eminent figure as Elijah struggled with hearing the voice of God. We might imagine that such an amazing spiritual person, one of the heroes of the Bible, and above all one of ancient Israel's greatest prophets, would have a direct, ungarbled line of communication with the Almighty. That he, unlike us, would have crystal clear access to God's voice, that he would be a pure channel through which God's spirit could speak to the world. Yet 1 Kings records a remarkable event in Elijah's life which shows that, like us, he too at times had great difficulty hearing the voice of God. This story is valuable, I believe, because it shows us three important things: it teaches us 1) something about the voice of God, 2) something about human weakness, and 3) ultimately something even more fundamental about divine grace in the midst of our shortcomings and failures.

As we pick up the action in 1 Kings 19, we find Elijah hiding out in a mountain cave. Elijah has been on the run from Israel's leaders and from pagan prophets—both of whom want Elijah dead. The strain of his constant flight and of being a wanted man have really taken a toll on Elijah emotionally and psychologically. With Elijah's mental health about to break down, God comes to him, asks him why he's in the cave, and essentially asks him how things are going. But God surely knows all the distress Elijah's enduring, and God's naive question is not well-received. "I'll tell you how things are going," Elijah replies. "I've been 'very zealous' for you. I've been a great prophet, doing everything you told me

to do. And what do I get in return?: The people reject my words, they reject you, God, they kill your prophets, I'm totally alone now, and they're trying to finish me off as well. That, O God, is how things are going."

So God says, "okay, Elijah, I understand you're pretty fried: go stand out on the mountain, I'm coming to meet you." To summarize the rest of the story briefly, we then see a series of dramatic events—wind, and earthquake, and fire—but God is not in any of these. Instead, after all of these earth-shattering events, God finally arrives, and God's arrival is described mysteriously and paradoxically as "the sound of sheer silence." Now, whatever the "sound of sheer silence" happens to be, it is evidently a very powerful experience, the culmination of the dramatic wind, fire, and earthquake: while these were awe-inspiring natural events, the "sound of sheer silence"—the arrival of God Almighty—is on a whole other level, an encounter with the Divine that cannot be described in words. After this awesome encounter, God again asks Elijah, "So Elijah, what's going on now? Why are you here?"

And Elijah's reply is very sad, because it's the exact same response as before: "I've been a very good prophet for you, and the people reject me, and they reject you, and they've killed the other prophets, and I'm all alone, and they're trying to kill me too." In other words, Elijah communicates that he is so stressed and afraid and burned out that not even a direct encounter with the Living God is powerful enough to reset his perspective. Now importantly, how does God then respond to this rejection by Elijah? God does not get angry or blast Elijah for how obsessed he is with himself and his personal predicament. Instead, God gives Elijah some relief: God tells him to go back down the mountain, find his apprentice (Elisha), and anoint Elisha as his replacement. God sees that the strain is too much for Elijah, and so God graciously grants him rest.

As I mentioned earlier, this fascinating interaction between God and Elijah shows us three important things: 1) about the voice of God, 2) about human weakness, and 3) about divine grace.

First of all, the voice of God appears in a very surprising way, emerging amidst "sheer silence." Elijah experiences a series

of awesome, grand events—a dramatic fire, a tremendous earthquake—which one might naturally associate with God Almighty. But 1 Kings very deliberately displays these mighty events in order to underscore the surprising fact that God is not found by Elijah in them. Our human sensibilities might very well expect to find God in certain amazing experiences or breathtaking places—at the Grand Canyon, for instance. And I don't think the point of 1 Kings is that God cannot be found in such awesome encounters, but that God has a knack for surprising us: that sometimes God is found where we think it most unlikely: yeah, God's at the Grand Canyon, but God might well be even more palpably felt and seen and heard at the local homeless shelter or halfway house. I wonder what false assumptions we might hold about where God can and cannot be found. What (perhaps subtle, unrecognized) biases might we need to let go of, in order to hear, see, or feel God more fully? Start where you assume God is not, and then work out from there. In my case, for example, when I was in college, I basically assumed that God was not really to be found in non-Christian regions like, say, Tibet, which motivated me to go there as a missionary, and then to find—to my great surprise—that God actually was powerfully there in the lives of Tibetan Buddhists who were far more Christ-like than me. I wonder where, or in whose community, God's presence might surprise you.

It's also quite significant that God's voice is heard in this passage amidst "sheer silence." Again, that's not to say that God doesn't speak in other registers—even audibly in some rare cases—but generally speaking, if we want to hear/sense/feel God, we've got to quiet down. Noisy hearts, noisy minds generally cannot hear a God whose voice is discerned, in some mysterious way, amidst silence. Now on rare occasions, God might raise God's voice up to a thin whisper, but usually it's even quieter than that. And we just cannot hear that whisper if we don't learn to cultivate our own interior silence. Monks and nuns from the past 2000 years of Christian history continually hammer home this point: if you want to hear God, begin to schedule times of silence: maybe a few minutes of the day at first, but gradually increase it to longer and longer periods, perhaps using a spiritual tool like centering prayer or meditation.

But at the same time, we shouldn't be beating ourselves up about this. The danger of prescriptions from the pulpit about cultivating more silence or spending more time in prayer is that the priest standing up here giving you these instructions can start to sound like an out-of-touch, self-righteous dentist: "You only need to floss the teeth you want to keep." Implication: I guess you don't really want to have teeth when you're older; otherwise you'd floss like I tell you to. Similarly, the priest can sound like he's saying: "You only need to pray and be silent if you care about your spiritual life." Implication: if you don't cultivate silence and a committed prayer life, you really aren't all that into this God stuff, after all, are you? You're pulling like a strong C minus in the spiritual life department. Never mind the fact that you have a life: you might have a job, kids, friends, relatives, other responsibilities. So, let me underscore that that dentist-style shaming message is neither my point nor the point of 1 Kings. And we know this because of the second major takeaway from the reading: the failure of Elijah to hear God's silent voice. God personally meets Elijah on this mountain; God even tells Elijah exactly where to stand, so as to hear God's voice. And still, as we just saw, God's words roll off Elijah's heart like water off a duck's back. Elijah complained about all his woes and suffering; God Almighty personally met with him; and what happened? Nothing—Elijah lodges the very same complaints after hearing God's voice as he did before hearing God's voice.

So, what is 1 Kings saying? God speaks; God speaks in surprising ways and places; God often speaks very, very quietly, and hearing God's silent voice is gonna take some effort on our part. But failure to hear God's voice, failure to be impacted by any words we do hear, is not cause to beat ourselves up about our spiritual limits, weakness, or shortcomings. If Elijah, one of the greatest prophets of the Bible, failed to take in God's words, failed to be moved by God's personal message to him, then are we not also inevitably going to mishear, or fail to appreciate, God's words at times in our lives?

Yes, failure is part of our humanity. It may be frustrating to miss out on God's voice, but the third takeaway of this passage (and the final one I want to highlight this morning) is that Elijah's failure and our own shortcomings are met time and time again

by God’s grace. We don’t want to turn a deaf ear to God’s voice; it’s not in our personal interest to ignore God: life is far more thrilling, joyful, and satisfying when we learn how to be silent, how to listen, and how to trust and follow what God says. But inevitably when we fail to quiet down and listen, God—unlike our dentist perhaps—does not respond with a disappointed, condescending gaze. How does God respond to Elijah? “Elijah, okay, I understand: you are worn out. I’m not going to punish you or be angry with you for being stressed and exhausted; actually I’m going to give you rest. Go,” God says, “give the heavy yoke of your ministry to your successor, Elisha. You’ve done enough. It’s time for someone else now to bear the load of a prophet.”

And then shortly afterwards, outside our reading for this morning, God raises Elijah up to heaven amidst brilliant chariots of fire. Likewise, in our own lives, God knows what noise, what stress we’re dealing with: and so rather than condemning us for our failures, God responds again and again with a gentle word of reassurance and invitation: “Just come as you are. Come quiet down as best you can. Come hear my voice. Be surprised, be challenged, be refreshed, be renewed.”

In a minute or two we are going to move on to the other parts of our worship together this morning: we’re going to recite the Creed, pray as a community, and celebrate the sacrament of Holy Eucharist. But, every Sunday, before we do any of those, we quiet down, we pause in our service to take some precious moments of pure silence. As we do so this morning, I encourage us not to get pulled away by the strong current of roaming thoughts: in the silence, may we center our hearts on one theme—or even just a single word or phrase—from the story of Elijah. What is that word that stands out to you? What comes to mind first when you reflect on Elijah’s encounter with God? Maybe “silence” or “grace” or “mountain” or ....? As we settle into silence together, you can use that phrase as a touchstone to come back to as your mind naturally begins to wander. Thoughts arise—come back to your word; you wonder what’s for lunch—come back to your word; your partner’s tummy rumbles—come back to your word; you realize summer’s ending—come back to your word.

And throughout the week to come, that word can also be a valuable tool which grounds us in each moment, which brings us back to our center when the day grows intense. A word or phrase that we can quietly recite to recenter, to re-calm, and to reconnect with our silent-speaking God. So, what is that word or phrase that stands out to you from Elijah's story? Let it be for you a touchstone as we enter silence together. Amen.

