

Second Sunday after Pentecost
1 Kings 19:1-15a
June 23rd, 2019
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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, otherwise 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."

God creates openings that invite us to surpass the limits of awareness that we set for ourselves. God's wisdom originates somewhere *beyond* our own perspectives and yet provokes growth in our faith from *within* us. Even so, God does not impose God's presence upon us. We find God *with* us when we seek God. And God consistently shows up in unexpected ways.

People, on the other hand, are a little more predictable. Even people like Elijah, who became one of the most important prophets in all of Jewish scripture. Maybe especially prophets like Elijah because in his story, there is a significant pattern that pertains to us all. This part of Elijah's story from First Kings centers on empty space, as these events so often do.

Elijah is a fugitive. He's been busy. Ahab, the King of the northern kingdom of Israel, had just established an alliance with the Phoenicians by marrying Jezebel, the daughter of Ethbaal, king of Tyre and Sidon. As a strategic gesture, Ahab has also been promoting the worship of Baal, the nature-god of the Phoenicians, alongside YHWH.

But then Elijah, fresh from responding to YHWH's call, showed up and set the scene for an impressive display of YHWH's superiority over Baal that resulted in the slaughter of 450 Canaanite prophets.

At the beginning of our reading, the notorious Jezebel swears revenge on Elijah who runs for his life to the southern kingdom of Judah. Frightened and depressed, he finds a lone juniper tree in the wilderness, where he sits and asks YHWH to let him die.

YHWH, instead, sends an angel to feed Elijah. Twice.

With his energy regained, Elijah travels even further into the wilderness to Mount Horeb, the same mountain where YHWH first appeared to Moses. There Elijah goes into a cave and hides. Now, empty spaces in scripture are potent symbols of places of safety and refuge from wild beasts, bad weather or dangerous enemies. They are also crucibles or nurseries for spiritual insight.

Benedictine Abbot Laurence Freeman says, "It was often in caves over long periods of retreat that prophets and monks allowed their minds to be re-fashioned and then welcomed the new sense of purpose and destiny that came to them. It is as the mind is remade in this way that we discern the divine pattern emerging through the mists of illusion and the tides of distraction."

Just so, God is with Elijah in an empty space on Mt. Horeb. Empty not only in the physical emptiness of a cave, but also in an interior state of spiritual, emotional and psychological emptiness.

"What are you doing here, Elijah?" God asks. There is no critique, no reprimand, no displeasure. Only a question. "What are you doing here?"

In responding, Elijah lays out the boundaries of his current worldview. Despite having moved an impressive physical distance, *internally* Elijah has moved only from self-pity to self-righteousness. Having told an angel that he was ready to die because he is no better than his ancestors, Elijah then describes himself to YHWH as the only prophet left in Israel.

He is a little self-involved.

And this is where God meets us all; right where we actually are and exactly as we are.

After Elijah answers, YHWH tells him to leave his cave, to step outside the security of his cave and his self-limiting perspective to stand before God, who is about to pass by. Elijah, having recently witnessed the fire that YHWH brought down on the prophets of Baal, is likely expecting to see YHWH in the great wind that tore mountains apart and broke rocks. Elijah did not see YHWH there. Not this time.

He was still ready to see YHWH in a rumbling earthquake. He did not; YHWH was not in the earthquake. And when the fire started to come, Elijah must have thought, “Surely, now! Surely, YHWH will be in this fire like the fire that killed Jezebel’s prophets!”

The fire comes and the fire goes. And Elijah did not see YHWH there.

Now he must be feeling uncertain, doubtful. God has lowered the barriers of Elijah’s expectations; cracked the certainty of his worldview. An anomaly, an irregularity, catches Elijah in this unguarded quandary. Only then can he experience what comes next.

The Hebrew phrase for what comes is “qol dmamah daqqah,” which literally translated is “a sound of thin utter silence.” It is not a whisper or a murmur that Elijah finally notices. We can no more hear the voice of utter silence than we can see the sound of bells or taste the Unpronounceable Holy Name. *It is a paradox*; a gift from God intended to interrupt Elijah’s habitual way of thinking and expose him to greater truths about the world and about himself. The experience is fragile and fleeting, and yet the inner message that unfolds is particularly powerful and specifically radical.

This is frequently how God enlightens and teaches us. From outside the incubators of our familiar perspectives, God confronts us with questions instead of giving us answers. God gives us gifts – little nuggets of perplexity or major conundrums to work on that require us to explore new ways of making meaning. That work takes time, persistence and more than a little effort.

Elijah gives YHWH the same answer he gave the first time YHWH asked what Elijah was doing, but the seed has been planted. In time he will be able to move toward the future God has for him beyond the presumed safety of a cave on Mount Horeb. Elijah, like the rest of us must, will have to spend time recalibrating and updating the limitations of his former perspective as he incorporates a new, larger way of looking for God.

Sometimes, the oddity that God uses to stimulate us to recalibrate our awareness is as dramatic as Jesus relieving a man from a demon named “Legion.” Sometimes, God inspires people with deep convictions, like St. Paul, to come to the awareness that the unity of Christ moderates all human labels.

And sometimes God breathes an insight into our hearts as though it were a “thin, silent sound”; something that we notice and yet can’t quite articulate except to say that it seems to be tugging us away from the safety and predictability of the past. Something drawing us toward risk and trust, asking for our consent to something uncommon and yet alive with love.

Sometimes, God speaks silently into the deepest, darkest rooms of our souls to ask: “What are you doing here?”

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