

“The Sound of Silence”

Psalm 42, I Kings 19: 1-15

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The House of Hope Presbyterian Church

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Twelfth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Ahab is a warrior king. Jezebel was known to be a fancy dresser. Elegant, stylish. But make no mistake, she was a warrior queen. They were married to consolidate political power. They had their cheerleaders to cheer them on and publicly validate their decisions. Jezebel brought in nearly a thousand of the prophets of Baal. She and Ahab liked these religions. They had the values that would support the King no matter what.

Whenever the King and Queen spoke or did anything controversial, the prophets of Baal smiled and nodded like bobble heads in the back window of a car. Hundreds of the pro-Ahab party smiling and nodding.

Ahab and Jezebel do not want anyone countering their royal decrees, so they have issues with the prophets of Yahweh who talk about topics they want to avoid: compassion, hospitality, justice. Ahab and Jezebel make arrangements to have those pesky prophets of Yahweh silenced. Permanently. Hundreds of them. It was a bloodbath. And the bobble headed priests of Baal nod vigorously in agreement. “Yes sir, King Ahab, it had to be done.”

The problem is: Ahab and Jezebel did not wipe out all the Yahweh’s prophets. In particular, they never could get ahold of Elijah. The Royal couple considered him the chief troublemaker.

After remaining out of sight for quite a while, one day announces a contest. Elijah has the audacity to show up in the Temple of Baal and throw down a challenge: Set up two altars: one for Baal, one for Yahweh. Then set out an offering, and see which God accepts the offering.

Baal: the god of rain, Lightning. Supernatural power. The icon of Baal: a lightning bolt. This should be a piece of cake for him to send fire down from heaven and claim the sacrifice. Elijah says to the priests of Baal, you go first. He gives them home court advantage.

They pray. Nothing happens. They sing. Nothing happens. They dance. They dance harder. They’re doing the twist. The Watusi. The bump and grind. They are trying to get Baal’s attention. Nothing is happening.

Elijah starts doing his John Stewart imitation, making fun of them: “Maybe if you yell louder. Maybe your Baal is with your other gods in a committee meeting. Maybe your god is taking a nap. Maybe he’s in the bathroom. Try yelling louder!”

The priests of Baal are in a frenzy: they have offered the blood of animals, now they start to cut themselves, offering up their own blood to try to get Baal's attention. Nothing happens. They stop. Finally they give up.

Now it's Elijah's turn. First he digs a trench around the altar. Then he pours buckets and buckets of water: until there is this moat filled with water, covering the offering. It should be impossible to burn. Then, the moment Elijah prays to God, fire comes down from heaven, and consumes his offering. Elijah won. The crowd is awestruck.

Elijah has the brutal, murderous priests of Baal, who you remember, had slaughtered the prophets of Yahweh, immediately receive the death sentence. Their cruelty is eliminated.

This did not sit well with the royal family. It was especially vexing to Queen Jezebel, who considered herself the patron saint of the Baal priests. Jezebel, seeing herself as a classy sort of Queen, though it would be considerate to send Elijah a little note.

*Dear Elijah,
I've heard you killed my prophets.
I'd like to return the favor.
The King and I cordially invite you
At this same time tomorrow,
To attend
To your own execution.
Dress casual.
Sincerely,
Jezebel.*

Prior to this, Elijah had been fighting the good fight. He had been courageous and bold. But now, in the face of his own death sentence, Elijah did what an intelligent prophet does in those circumstances. Run! Run! Flee! It is his Forrest Gump moment, and Elijah earns the world champion record in fleeing. Run, Elijah, Run!

As a warm up, he ran to the top of Mount Carmel. Then he ran 17 miles and outpaces the Kings chariot. But now that it is time to flee, it is a thing of amazement: First he 90 miles before he drops off his secretary. Then he runs another day into the wilderness. Then he runs another 400 miles through the mountains, 40 days and 40 nights, to Mt. Horeb.

The first point of 1 Kings: In the Bible, nobody runs like Elijah. Elijah is a marathon man. Elijah runs, and runs, and runs. He runs out of gas. Runs out of energy. He runs out will power.

Prior to this, Elijah is the greatest of heroes: he has had stupendous success. He brings about numerous miracles, faces down an army of foes, makes people roar with laughter at this evil king.

And yet, he ends up tired, afraid, intimidated, self-doubting, angry, exhausted, ready to give up. He feels sorry for himself. He feels as if he is all alone.

Which is to say to us, you may be a social prophet, and do great things that require tremendous stamina and courage. But people who put out great exertion may end up spiritually and physically exhausted. Elijah says, "Lord, it's too much. I've had enough."

Are there any Elijah's out there today? Beat up, battle scarred and burnt out? Taken on too many Kings and Queens who out number you, who out strategize you? You end up exhausted for all your good work? Feel as if there is not enough support, too many half-hearted people discourage you?

Or who may not have taken on evil Kings and queens, but just feel exhausted as if you've served on too many church committees?

I remember this old "Far Side" cartoon: It had a picture of a Caretaker at the Zoo in the Middle of the snake house, his body is completely contorted as he stands in the middle of a compound full of snakes. The caption underneath the cartoon says, "Larry the herpetologist, after 20 years of tending snakes, gets a terminal case of the heebie-jeebies."

Is that a picture of Elijah and you, after dealing with snakes for all these years, all contorted and tied up, and terminally anxious?

But look again at Elijah's journey, and see what has been given to him along the way. Four epiphanies. He has the first epiphany is under the broom tree. He's exhausted. He's ready to give up, to lay down and die. But this angel brings him a jug of water and a fresh loaf of bread. It's cooked on hot coals. You and I know, the Hebrew word for hot coals is rare: those hot coals only exist on the altar of the throne of God.

Did you ever, when you are spiritually exhausted, have somebody bring you some fresh cake, hot with the love of God?

Elijah eats and drinks, and then falls asleep again.

Then comes the second epiphany: Specifically, this is not just an angel, this is an angel of the Lord. The angel tells him: You have to eat, or the journey will be tough for you. We live in a world that tells us to diet. To constantly push ourselves to be our best selves, to do more and more and more, and eat less and less and less. And sometimes, that is what we need to do.

But isn't it nice to have an angel of the Lord say: "Eat! Eat!" That's a word that comes from the God who loves us.

I was going through an extraordinarily difficult time. But unexpectedly, once a month, an angel of the Lord would show up at my door, and said, "Here. I baked you a homemade pot pie for dinner." I swear, it was baked on the coals from the throne of God. Have you been visited by an angel like that?

Have you tasted that dish that was baked on the coals from the throne of heaven? Some angel who presents you with something that gives you strength for the journey? An angel who says, "Eat! Eat!"

The third epiphany: When he was in the cave. Hiding. In the dark. Alone. It is more than a man cave – it is practically a tomb. And then, in his fear, exhaustion and aloneness, a voice came to him in the darkness. A voice that says, "What are you doing here, Elijah?"

Elijah while he was running, the whole time had been composing and practicing this speech in his head. He has a very well-reasoned, very articulate speech prepared: about how hard he had worked, how much he had done, how many risks he's taken, how much he's given up, how many checklists he had completed, how many committees he had served on, how many do-gooder projects he had completed, how many hours he had worked.

He lists it all out, and ends by saying, "And besides, I'm the only one doing any work around here. I've had enough. So I quit."

In the face of such over-the-top whining, the voice that comes reveals a God of true constraint. God quietly says, "Go outside."

Elijah, Go outside the cave, stand on top of the mountain, and take a look around. Go look at the big picture. Elijah goes out to look at the big picture.

He sees and hears and feels the earthquake, wind, fire: that is the stuff the Baal gods deal in. All the flashy power moves to shock and awe and intimidate us. It is supposed to define reality. To show who is Boss. Elijah sees the false gods throwing their power around.

They drop their word bombs, they give their windy speeches, flash their fancy wristwatches, dazzle with their glass towers. But for all the sound and fury, it all signifies nothing. It does not mean a thing. It does not define what is real. It does not reign. It is not of God. God is not in all their earthquakes, all their tornados, all their fire power.

Then the Bible says, "There came a sound..." The King James Version says: "a still small voice." Which I have always found great comfort in. If that is helpful to you, take it in. Listen to what the still small voice says.

If you want to get deeper into what the Bible says, the Hebrew says: "Then there came the sound of absolute silence." That's the beauty of the Hebrew for you: The sound of silence. It is an oxymoron. A contradiction in terms.

The sound of silence. It is a phrase that points to the mystery. The mystery of God's presence, which can't be captured. That is where the reality is. That is what defines us. That's the source of our strength for the journey for the marathons that we run. For the evil we must face. We need to take in and soak up that sound of silence.

God's presence which does not yell at him or berate him or judge. For all his whining and hiding, God does not berate him. Rather, God simply asks the question that we all have to ask ourselves in life: "What are you doing here?" What are you doing here in life?

The presence of the one who reveals in the sound of silence reveals what is real, and what you are called and created to do. In the face of all the Ahabs and Jezebels, and all the powers of evil in the world, what are you doing here in life?

Don't give up. You are needed.

The source of your strength is in the mystery of the living God. That is what defines us. That is what strengthens us. Don't give up, and do not think that you are all alone in this struggle.

There was a story a number of years ago on National Public Radio. I wish I could remember who told the story. It was about a young man home from college, out late with a friend, who ends up crashing on his friend's couch in the living room of his friend's parent's house. Parents had already gone to bed, and did not know he was there.

The young man was just about asleep, when he heard his friend's father padding down the stairs. The father went into the kitchen, turned on the light. Poured himself a glass of something to drink, took out a loaf of bread, a cut off a large piece.

Then did this ritual: every time before he would take a bite of bread, he would stretch out his arms and lift up the bread above his head, and say in a different language:

Bread!

Brot!

Chleb!

Pane!

Grana!

Hljeb!

Yorba!

When he finished eating, the father turned out the light, paddled back up the stairs.

The young man lay in the dark, in the silence, thinking about what he had seen. Each time the man lifted up the bread in this ritual of absolute celebration, the young man could see on the top of the man's arm, the tattoo from the concentration camp.

Elijah, you are not alone. Neither are we. Sit in silence, and wonder. Wonder at the Wonder of Wonders. Take it in, Elijah. You need strength for the journey. Receive the bread. Be fed through the Living Word that speaks beyond all words.

Remember those moments. Let them strengthen and guide you. You are not strong enough alone to take on those Kings and Queens and forces of evil. But the good news is – you are not alone.

The source of your true strength does not come from within you, but from outside of you. From beyond you. Listen to that sound of silence that strengthens you.

Be strengthened for the journey in the fight against evil. God has called you. Listen in the silence. Then go back to the work that gives our life meaning.

Be strengthened: life's meaning we only fully understand when we've heard the sound of silence. You need to hear that voice to strengthen you for what God needs you to do. You have more battles to fight. You can't get out of it, and still have a life with meaning. That may require you taking charge of some grand project. Or standing up to some tyrant or bully. Or it may mean getting back on some church committee to multiply our shared strength.

But today, right now, relax. Take in the food God has given you. On the journey, don't forget, and don't neglect, that sometimes you need to sit back and rest. And remember the source of your strength that comes to you and speaks. In the still small voice. In the sound of absolute silence.