

What Does It Sound Like?
I Kings 19.1-15
Pentecost +6C
Sunday, June 26, 2016
St. Charles Avenue Baptist Church
Rev. Elizabeth Mangham Lott

Elijah is a prophet of Israel who cries out to a people who have forgotten their God. He is bold and powerful, he is connected to God's lightning bolt energy, he raises a young man from the dead, and he also slaughters the prophets of the neighbors' god. And when he draws enough attention to himself for this slaughter, Queen Jezebel promises Elijah will meet the same fate.

Jezebel is the one who introduced the god Baal to her husband, King Ahab. She is the one who exterminated the prophets of Israel, save for the 100 Obadiah hid away. Jezebel made sure her husband got his vegetable garden next door by arranging for the false arrest and rapid execution of the next door neighbor. And now Jezebel, upon hearing of the slaughter of the prophets of Baal, has sworn to kill Elijah "by this time tomorrow."

Elijah, no longer bold, no longer powerful, no longer sure of his calling, runs and hides in the wilderness beneath a broom tree. "Elijah is a burned out prophet," comments Richard Nelson, and the question we readers are to ask is "will he continue to hold his prophetic office or will he give it up and die as he wishes? This tension will be resolved when it becomes clear that God refuses to let him go."¹

Beneath the broom tree, God sees him and sends an angel. The angel cares for him in that hiding place, feeds him in that resting place, nudges him to take what he needs to have strength for the journey. Elijah eats and drinks, then makes his way to a cave where he sleeps again. Elijah is depressed. He is exhausted. He wants to relinquish his call as a prophet and sleep in that cave forever. He wants God to find someone else to do the hard work of calling the people to remember what they've forgotten.

But God sees him there in that cave. And God calls out, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" Elijah tells his story, and God calls him to come out, "for the Lord is about to pass by." First a great wind splits mountains and breaks rocks. Elijah does not come out. Then an earthquake shakes the ground. Elijah remains hidden. A fire breaks out all

¹ Richard Nelson, *Interpretation: First and Second Kings*, p. 126

around. Elijah stays tucked cozily in the cave. But then there is the sound of sheer silence. It hovers like breath and fills all of the space between the broken rocks and the scorched shrubs. It is a rolling, moving, active silence, the kind of silence that can create something out of nothing, and Elijah knows that God is near.

This time Elijah comes out, and God asks again, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" And Elijah tells his story again—I was faithful, God, but they were so unfaithful. I told them about you, God, and now they all want to kill me. I'm done. I'm over it. It costs too much to work for you. I'm lonely. I'm tired. I don't want to do this anymore.

And that hovering, space-filling, active silence fills all the broken places in Elijah and then tells him, "Go."

We think we like this story because it reminds us of the contemplative spirituality so many of us practice and crave. God is in the sound of silence. Be still and tune into the presence of God. Those teachings about contemplation and presence are real and good. However, that isn't what is happening in this particular text. To read I Kings 19 "as a statement about the nature of revelation," writes Richard Nelson, is a serious misreading of the narrative. The story is really about Elijah's attempt to relinquish his prophetic office and God's insistence that he continue." Better read and interpreted, "the intention is rather to describe the recall and recommissioning of a prophet."²

God has called Elijah to inhabit a certain kind of space in the world. God has shaped Elijah to be one who advocates, cries out, reminds, calls people back. Elijah is a person sent into the wilderness of the world to tell the story of God again and again and again. God needs Elijah to be Elijah out there for the sake of all people. God provides for Elijah for a time of rest and hiddenness, but then God calls him back out again. God blesses Elijah again. God tells Elijah of his call to "Go" again, God commissions Elijah and puts his feet back on the path of return.

Terence Fretheim adds, "the text is concerned to reveal something about the basic character of God. God is active in human affairs; God listens, speaks, and acts, and not only in 'obvious' ways; God honors commitments made to chosen leaders and people. More specifically, God does not leave Elijah to wallow in his despondency. This God refuses to allow the prophet to stew in his feelings of dejection; God comes to him through a messenger, gets him going, but then sharply confronts him with questions. This God, having encountered Elijah's initial response of self-pity, refuses to be content with that interpretation of the situation and finds a way to confront him more directly

² Richard Nelson, *Interpretation: First and Second Kings*, p. 123

with the divine presence. And then, allowing him to state his self-pity in the very presence of God, recommissions him to his vocation, assures him that God is still at work through him, and promises him successors. God promises that God will not leave without ongoing witnesses."³

Much is happening in our world that brings me close to the despondency Elijah feels. It is as though the earth is shifting beneath our feet. There is too often a disconnect between what is happening in the world outside and the comfort of the cave of the church. We remain hidden in here.

When I think of Elijah in that cave—hiding, sitting alone, contemplating death—I wonder what the parallels are to the church in the U.S. in 2016. How often is our mindset rooted in a fear of death? We don't rock the boat, we play nice, at all costs we get along, we stay neutral, and we do all of that because we fear any other way will end in us closing our doors and sticking a for sale sign in the yard.

Elijah is hiding in the cave hoping God will pass by, get bored, forget, and go look for someone else. Surely someone else will take on the cause of God. Surely someone else will stand in the line of fire. Surely someone else will remind people of who God is and how God loves and what God's great dreams for the world are. Surely someone else.

This story is our story. We are wrestling with the next phase of our call as a church. We feel God pulling us forward in fits and starts, but then we want the comfort of the cave again. And on some level I think we hope that someone else will speak for God and remind people of who God is and how God loves and what God's great dreams for the world are. At times, we don't want to ruffle feathers or cause discomfort if topics feel controversial. We don't want to pick a side or draw a line in the sand or speak out when injustice is all around.

I am guilty of this, too. I feel the pull to be a prophetic voice and then run in search of the nearest broom tree. I step out into that space of boldness and then want to wrap myself in obscurity. Sometimes I want to be a gentle, calming presence with a rather anonymous life. But I do not think that is who God has called me to be or how God has shaped me to serve the world in Jesus' name.

In our families and neighborhoods, when we love each other and value holding comfortable space together, sometimes that means we want to stick to the light topics so as to not cause offense or unduly raise passions. But here in this space as a people

³ http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2876

on the path of God, that is not prophetic calling. We cannot hide in the cave. It's time for us as a church to come out.

Come out into the moving, dynamic silence of God.

Come out to reclaim the call on this church as an outspoken, thinking, vibrant, challenging, stretching, prophetic people.

Come out to embrace the distinct call on this historic church as rabble rousers for the kingdom.

Come out to step onto the path as truth tellers of scripture.

Come out to be commissioned yet again as pot stirrers of justice.

There can be no question among our neighbors of who we are.

There can be no question in our city of what side of history we are on.

There can be no question among our Muslim brothers and sisters of our support and protection of their faith and of their religious freedom. We must advocate, partner, educate, and hold space for our Muslim neighbors.

There can be no question among our African American brothers and sisters of our listening ears and our open hearts as we stand as allies in the next phase of the civil rights movement. We must cry out for reforms and lobby for change where the work of equality is left undone.

There can be no question among our LGBTQ brothers and sisters and friends that all are welcome here, that all are made in the image of God, that all are loved by God and by us, that we are holding a safe space here where every single person who joins us will find sanctuary and community and shalom. The work of partnership and protection must extend into every corner of our lives that there will never be another Orlando again, that there will never be another daughter disowned by her family because of her identity, that there will never be another child told God cannot love him. We must preach and pray and live out the message that love is love is love is love is love. And by the way we love one another so fully and so well, there will be no question that we are following on the way of Christ Jesus.

And there can be no question among any of these groups or any other group pushed to the margins, maligned, persecuted, or attacked that we stand with you as allies, we will advocate for you in the systems that count you out, that we will live out our faith in the Way of Jesus, for the love of God, and for our common good in dynamic, active ways beyond the walls of this building.

There are times when we need to rest beneath the broom tree. In those times, God will care for us and give us the sustenance we need for the journey. In the resting times, we focus on healing, growth, sleep, strength, and restoration. We have been in a beautiful season of broom tree healing for a couple of years now. But the time is right. The sound of sheer silence surrounds us. We know God is near. We feel the warmth of God's breath and the expansiveness of that silence as God fills the cracked corners and scorched earth around us. God is near. God is calling us back to our prophetic identity as advocates, activists, and people of faith who live out the stuff of their prayers with the passions of their daily lives.

Will you join me? Will you reclaim this prophetic identity? Will you accept the call God has placed on you? Will you embrace the commission to go into the wilderness of the world with the message of who God is and how God loves and what God's great dreams for the world are? Will you cry out and remind and stir the pot in Jesus' name? What are you doing here? Go!