

What are you doing here, Elijah?

1 Kings 19:9-18

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Before we listen for today's scripture reading, I'd like to give us some context around what's going on in this scene, just in case you don't remember *exactly* what happens in the Old Testament book of 1 Kings. Today, we find ourselves within the story of Elijah the prophet. Elijah isn't quite like prophets like Isaiah or Ezekiel; he doesn't have a whole book of the Bible dedicated to his call and prophecy. His story comes in 1 & 2 Kings, the books of the Bible that span the end of King David's life all the way through to the destruction of the Jerusalem temple and the beginning of the Babylonian exile. This was a period marked by political and religious turmoil - these books tell stories about leaders and communities who sometimes did what God would have them do, and sometimes failed to follow that call. Such is the story of God's people throughout history. It's a story we might recognize, that we might even live ourselves, even today.

Elijah comes on to the scene during the reign of King Ahab, and Elijah's story is totally intertwined with the story of Ahab and his administration's failure to follow God faithfully. You might remember the time when Elijah predicted a drought and the king's people got so mad that Elijah had to flee into the wilderness, where he met a widow who fed him and gave him shelter, and upon finding the widow's son ill to the point of death, Elijah revived him and he was healed. You might also recall the wild scene of competition where Elijah proved God's triumph over Baal - "You need to choose who you're really worshiping," Elijah said - "And watch this: the true God will show up with fire for this sacrifice!" And God showed up. The story of Elijah in 1 Kings is one worth revisiting this week as a devotional practice- these are simply the highlights, but the story is so rich. Our story today comes after that impressive scene where God shows up in fire and Elijah proves the other prophets wrong. Elijah has had to flee, fearing

for his life after this controversial event. And we find him here, on a journey to Mount Horeb, at the mouth of a cave.

Listen now for our second scripture reading, 1 Kings chapter 19, verses 9 through 18.

At that place Elijah 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?" Elijah 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." God 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?" Elijah 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 Elijah, "Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus; when you arrive, you shall anoint Hazael as king over Aram. Also you shall anoint Jehu son of Nimshi as king over Israel; and you shall anoint Elisha son of Shaphat of Abel-meholah as prophet in your place. Whoever escapes from the sword of Hazael, Jehu shall kill; and whoever escapes from the sword of Jehu, Elisha shall kill. Yet I will leave seven thousand in Israel, all the knees that have not bowed to Baal, and every mouth that has not kissed him."

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

When I was in college, I was a music major. I spent a lot of time taking classes in the music building; whenever I visit my campus, those classrooms still feel like home to me. One of the required classes for graduation was a music literature class focused solely on large, sacred, choral-orchestral works. That means we studied long musical pieces where a choir and an orchestra and soloists work together, often centered around a biblical story or narrative... the most famous example is probably Handel's *Messiah*, which is where the Hallelujah Chorus comes from. One of the pieces we studied in that course was a piece by 19th century composer Felix Mendelssohn called *Elijah*, based on the biblical prophet Elijah, who we're hearing about today. It's an enormous work - the run time is between 2 and 2.5 hours - and we listened to the whole thing as part of that class. The work goes through the entirety of Elijah's life, and it spares no detail. It leaves nothing to the imagination. The week we worked through *Elijah* in class, I remember thinking, "Wow...I don't remember much about Elijah from Sunday School, but it seems that he was not a super happy dude."

Because, sure, Elijah's life was full of dramatic moments, those exciting high points I highlighted before we heard today's reading. But there were also some really dark spots in his life, and Mendelssohn's musical rendering of this story does not ignore those moments. There's an entire solo where Elijah is crying out to God in despair; the soloist sings, "It is enough; O Lord, now take away my life... let me die, for my days are but vanity!" Later, there's another solo where Elijah bemoans his community's reluctance to follow God faithfully, and he cries out to God again: "O Lord, I have labored in vain. I have spent my strength for naught!" There are some really beautiful and famous pieces of Mendelssohn's *Elijah*, but I left that unit of class feeling like I didn't necessarily need to revisit the work any time soon. Those moments of Elijah's deep struggle were just so difficult to listen to.

I think, though, that as we enter into today's text, the more difficult parts of Elijah's story are actually the parts that really have something to say to us today. This is the Elijah who is completely and totally human. This is not a scene that shows Elijah the victorious hero, proving God's triumph over false gods. This is not a scene that shows Elijah the miracle-worker,

reviving the body of a young boy. This is not a scene that shows Elijah the brave and courageous faith leader, confronting the powerful king with God's message for the people.

This is Elijah the human being. Elijah the disappointed prophet with *all* the feelings: dejection, disappointment, pride, sadness, perhaps some doubt. Here, there isn't even a whiff of victory, not even a taste of the miraculous. Just basic, human disappointment. Turns out, even real-life prophets of the Lord experience the emotional breadth and depth that all of the rest of us do - even the hardest parts. And God shows up, even then, with something to say about the life of faith, about how much we need one another and how sometimes God shows up in ways we don't expect.

In this part of Elijah's story, God has sent Elijah to Mount Horeb. As in, the Mount Horeb where Moses received the Ten Commandments. It was a forty-day-long journey, and Elijah is tired, and we might imagine that Elijah is expecting something to happen here at the foot of this very famous mountain. This is where God shared the covenant with the people for the first time, and remember how that scene went? Thunder and lightning, loud sounds, the whole experience far too intense for the people to even encounter God directly; they had to stand back and let Moses do the talking and interacting. I wonder if Elijah is expecting something similar, something kind of like his own memories of divine power, when God showed up for him with fire and smoke billows and unmistakable force. Elijah has been on the run for quite some time now, after all, and it's about time for God to show up in a big way. Even better that he's ended up at this mountain that carries with it such a rich history of God showing up for God's faithful followers. Surely God is about to launch Elijah the faithful prophet out of this sad season of wilderness wandering, catapulting him into a new divine mission in the world.

Of course, you heard the story. This isn't what happens. Almost the opposite thing happens. God doesn't show up with an exciting divine mission; God shows up with a question: "What are you doing here, Elijah?" The question is almost insulting. What do you mean, "What am I doing here?" I'm here because you sent me on a mission to prove how great you are to these idolatrous people and then they ran me out of town! I'm here in this cave at the foot of this mountain a zillion miles away from my people because my people simply will not listen to me! I'm the only faithful one left! Not only are they unfaithful; they're trying to kill me! (*Pause*)

Elijah, shall we say, blows his top. And again, God responds in exactly the opposite way Elijah might imagine: God says, “Go stand over there. I’m about to show up. Just watch.” Elijah goes and stands *over there*. And all of a sudden, an enormous gust of wind; a raucous earthquake; a blazing fire. But God is not there in those shows of force. No, it’s not until the sound of sheer silence, or as other translators say, the *softly whispering voice*, that God shows up. Imagine how Elijah is experiencing this. God is turning his expectations upside down, shaking up what Elijah thinks he knows about God’s presence in his life.

And God gives Elijah another chance to answer that question: Again, God asks, “What are you doing here, Elijah?” And again, Elijah shows us just how very human he is. He’s not impressed with the still small voice of God; he’d like to remind God again just how faithful he has been and just how different that is from those idolatrous Israelites and just how disappointing it is to be the very last faithful person left in the whole wide world. Oh, Elijah. We have *so* been there. We have probably been there sometime during this pandemic, or maybe sometime in the past week, or if you have little ones at home, maybe sometime in the last hour. We have been there with Elijah, shaking our fists at the sky and feeling like we’re the only ones feeling sad and trying desperately to do the right thing and wanting God to show up how we expect God to show up. Wanting things to feel normal for once. It’s ok. This story reminds us that it’s ok. Even famous biblical prophets had these moments. You have permission to shake your first a little and do some yelling into your pillow.

Because listen to what happens next. God doesn’t console Elijah; God doesn’t say “Oh I’m so sorry things have been so hard, that sounds really rough, come here for a big bear hug.” God simply informs Elijah that his next work of prophetic ministry is to bring his prophetic ministry to an end. “Go on and head back to your people. Anoint a new king in Aram, and then anoint a new king in Israel. And then – here’s the kicker, Elijah – go ahead and anoint a new prophet in your place.” In this simple instruction, God has fully removed the burden from Elijah’s tired shoulders. God has lifted the yoke Elijah has carried for a very long time. God encourages Elijah to rely on his community to keep the hard work of faithful response to God going on into the next generation. One biblical scholar I read called this moment Elijah’s “De-Commissioning.” It’s the moment where God tells Elijah it’s time to hand over the baton,

time to leave the prophet-ing to a new prophet. And in the final sentence of this passage comes perhaps the most astounding of God's utterances thus far: God will not abandon the community. In fact, there will be *thousands* of believers left when this next generation passes on. It's this subtle reminder that Elijah is not alone, has never been alone, and the community of believers that Elijah so loves will never be alone, even when he is long gone. I have to imagine that it took Elijah a little while to receive the blessing of what God has just instructed and promised; doesn't it take you a while to cool down after all your fist-shaking and pillow-screaming? But when it's time, Elijah will get up from the mouth of that cave at the foot of that holy mountain and realize that his journey back to Israel is one of the holiest journeys he will take. It's a journey of trusting in God's promises and remembering that the community of faith carries us far beyond our own capacity for faithfulness.

I think that we are on this same journey today, in this community of faith, following in the footsteps of Elijah. We are learning that we are human – that we have the capacity to experience the full breadth of the human experience and that God can handle our responses to all those diverse experiences, even when we fail to act faithfully. We might have been used to God showing up in big and expected ways, but this pandemic has shown us that God shows up in totally unexpected, subtle, gentle ways. We expected to be in the presence of God in powerful ways in this very building each week – the sounds of the Rejoice band and organ and choir; the smell and taste of fresh Communion bread; the laughter of children and conversation at coffee hour...these are the places we trust God to be present, just like Elijah trusted that God was present in wind and flame and cosmic shows of drama. But we are on this journey with Elijah now, learning to listen instead for the softly whispering voice. Where is that voice whispering in your own life? Do you hear it?

We're on the journey with Elijah toward an understanding that when this soft voice shows up, it might whisper to us a reminder that our community carries us through the life of faith. We are not alone; we were never meant to be alone. Even when it feels like we're the only ones feeling as low as we've ever felt, we are not alone. Every time we baptize a child at this font, we promise before God and one another that we will uphold that child and encourage that child in the faith. One of the ways we do this is by responding to the call that Elijah

received in today's reading, to rely on the gifts of the whole community when times are difficult.

Here at First Pres, we are on this journey in a really specific way, learning to be church together in the midst of a global pandemic and in the middle of an important interim period between senior pastors. The PNC is listening to the softly whispering voice of God as they discern who God might be calling as a leader for this next season of congregational life here. This church staff is listening to that still small voice as we dream together about ministry and life in the midst of significant change. We are all listening to the softly whispering voice of God as we remember who this congregation has been in this community and dream together about what we might be called to be in the future.

Because the work of the Church, the work of God's body in the world, is hard work. One of my favorite parts of our Presbyterian *Book of Confessions* is the section in *A Brief Statement of Faith* on the Holy Spirit. It says this: "In a broken and fearful world the Spirit gives us courage to pray without ceasing, to witness among all peoples to Christ as Lord and Savior, to unmask idolatries in church and culture, to hear the voices of peoples long silenced, and to work with others for justice, freedom, and peace." This is an enormous call, and the Spirit is leading us there now as much as ever. We are called into the ministry of unmasking the idolatries of racism and systemic oppression. We are called into the ministry of partnering with communities whose voices we have failed to attend to. We are called into the ministry of praying and witnessing, of letting our lives speak for themselves about our commitment to a life of faithful discipleship.

This is hard work, but Elijah's story reminds us that we are not meant to carry the mantle of faith on our own shoulders; we are meant to share the burden and gift with one another. The life of faith is not a life we live by ourselves, even if we are dwelling in the struggle of what it means to be human, just like Elijah did so many times in his remarkable life of ministry. We live faithfully when we live together in community with one another, passing on the baton when we need to, and receiving it when we're the ones called to receive it. The work of the Church, of God's body in the world, is hard and holy work, but I pray that we continue to listen together to God's softly whispering voice in this season. God is here. Amen.

