

The Sound of Silence

TEXT: 1 Kings 19:1-16

Preached by Rev. Anne Robertson at Crawford Memorial UMC on March 5, 2023

Last we saw the prophet Elijah, he was on Mt. Carmel challenging the prophets of Baal to a divine contest: Who can make their God rain down fire and consume the sacrifice? Elijah's God, Yahweh, won the battle. That was in 1 Kings chapter 18. But just winning the contest was not enough for Elijah. He decided also to slaughter all the prophets of Baal.

Important to the story is the fact that the religion of Baal happened to be the religion favored by the King and Queen at the time—the Queen in particular, and Queen Jezebel was none too pleased at having all of her prophets skewered. Elijah had already been a nuisance at the court before this, and with the slaughter of the prophets of Baal, Elijah found himself running for his life a scant seven verses later.

Elijah runs into the wilderness; in fact, he crosses the border from Israel into Judah. With the Israelites divided into a northern and southern kingdom at the time—the north called Israel and the south called Judah, Elijah literally fled the country. Judah had its own king, so when Elijah crossed into Judah, he was effectively out of the reach of Jezebel's wrath. While that no doubt brought some relief to Elijah, he was not a happy man.

Elijah is now as depressed as he was jubilant in the wake of his victory in the chapter before. Why? To him it appears that he may have won the battle but lost the war. He had been trying to get the northern Kingdom of Israel to stop worshiping idols and return to the worship of Yahweh, but it was an uphill battle, especially with Baal worship having the official sanction of the royal court. Even when he proved Yahweh's superiority without question on Mt. Carmel and disposed of all the prophets of Baal, the culture was not changed. People still worshiped Baal, led by their Queen.

So, Elijah does what any good pastor would do under such circumstances. He sits under a solitary broom tree and says, "I want to die. Take my life, Lord!" he cries. "I'm no use to anybody." And, like almost every depressed person, he hides from the world in sleep.

The thing about the calling of God, however, is that it doesn't go away. You can't run from it, as Jonah discovered, and you can't sleep it away, either. Elijah's sleep is interrupted by an angel, who brings him food and drink. Elijah gets up, eats as the angel commands, and then goes back to sleep again. The angel comes back a second time and it happens again... "Come on, Elijah, snap out of it. Eat...drink...get your strength up, you've got a journey to make."

So Elijah gets up, eats and drinks again, and travels forty days to Horeb, the mountain of God. Forty days. There's that number again. Remember, forty in the Bible almost never means forty. It's a symbol of a harsh and often life-threatening time.

This passage talks about Mt. Horeb, but most people know it better by another name. Mt. Horeb is also known as Mt. Sinai and, like Moses before him, Elijah goes up the mountain—making a pilgrimage perhaps—to seek the wisdom of God. Elijah's complaint under the broom tree was that the people had rejected God's commandments, and so he goes back to the very place those commandments were given centuries earlier to make his case. Again, an angel finds him, this time in a cave on the mountain.

"What's up, Elijah? What are you doing here?" Elijah's depression is serious. Even after the long journey and climb up the mountain, it has not gone away. "I've done my job. I've done everything for you, and have totally spent myself in the effort. I've done everything I can to wipe out the worship of Baal from your people, but it hasn't worked. All those commandments you gave Moses right here on this mountain? They're not following them. I'm the only one left who worships you, and now they're trying to kill me."

The angel is unmoved. Go out of your cave, Elijah. Come out of the dark and stand on the mountain. God is going to pay you a visit."

In the next verses, we are meant to remember the days of Moses on that same mountain. When Moses brought Israel to Sinai, the mountain quaked and burned and smoked and blew just as it does for Elijah. But while God appears out of the fire to Moses, speaks out of the whirlwind to Job, and shows up with earthquakes in many places in the Bible; Elijah experiences earth, wind, and fire but finds God in none of those things.

Instead, suddenly it is quiet...too quiet...the kind of quiet where even the noises that are supposed to be there are not there and you know something is up. Elijah steps out into the silence where he hears what the King James version beautifully translates as the "still, small voice" of God.

But however gentle the voice, the question from God is the same as from the angel, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" and Elijah's answer is the same. Even being in the very presence of God has not lifted his dejected spirit. Now I don't know what you would expect from God in such a situation, but I think I would have expected a bit more understanding than Elijah gets.

There's no "There, there, Elijah...it will get better." There's no, "I understand how you feel, you've had it rough. Why don't you head down to the Nile for a bit of vacation." No, God doesn't even acknowledge Elijah's feelings. "Go anoint a couple new kings, Elijah. And while you're at it, get a successor for yourself." Then comes the kicker down in verse 18. "Oh, and by the way. You're not the only one left. There are still 7,000 others in Israel who do not worship Baal."

As we see with the Bible's main characters from Adam on down, life in God's service is not necessarily "safe" in the way that we usually consider it. Both Moses and Elijah had to confront kings, and both Moses and Elijah had armies sent after them as a result. But when Elijah wears out with the work, God feeds him, just as Moses got manna from heaven. There are lots of similarities between Moses and Elijah and, by putting this story on the same mountain, I believe we are meant to connect the two figures. But to what end?

I think a big part of the point for both Moses and Elijah is that, even for those with as important a calling as each of them had, they should not expect the work to be finished in their lifetimes. We'll see that more poignantly with Moses next week, but the same is true for Elijah. On the one hand, Elijah is depressed because he's exhausted and had to flee his own country because the King and Queen want to kill him. That'll depress anybody.

In addition to the exhaustion, Elijah feels alone in his struggle. That feeling of isolation is very common in depression, which is why talking about how we feel to others is a critical component in healing. If everybody hides the hardships they're dealing with in an attempt to appear invulnerable and perfect, we end up with a bunch of people in the same community going through exactly the same thing with each one feeling like they're the only one.

In churches, that is more and more common the further up the economic and social ladder you go. We can come to believe that hardship is visited only on the weak, which is not the witness of the Bible at all. Jesus himself directly contradicts that attitude. And yet, if we have the means to disguise and hide our troubles, we typically do, and it comes at a huge cost to our mental health. But we won't admit our mental health struggles either, so it becomes an unvirtuous cycle.

Support groups of various types are so helpful not just because you can pick up helpful coping strategies or find out what kind of help is available. They are helpful, first and foremost, by confirming that we are not alone. Lots of other people are struggling just like we are; or have in the past. The burden is lighter the minute it is shared and someone steps forward to say, "Me, too." God addresses this feeling with Elijah, by telling him that there are still 7,000 people in Israel who are faithful. He is not the only one.

But the thing that seems to weigh most on Elijah is that he thinks his inability to stop the worship of Baal in Israel means that the worship of Yahweh will come to an end once he is gone. Everything first accomplished there on the Mountain of God—the Torah given to Moses, the establishment of Israel as God's people who would be a witness to the world of God's glory, and the promise God made to Abraham to be a blessing to all the nations of the earth—it will all come to a screeching halt once he is gone and that date seems to be approaching as quickly as Jezebel's chariots.

Elijah isn't even asking God for anything here. It's almost like he has personally carried the covenant God made with Moses back to its source to lay it back at God's feet before he dies. It was passed down for centuries until it came to him and he failed. So, he crawls back to the place it all began to let the end come as it may.

But God doesn't indulge that for a single minute. God sends him right back into the fray. Go anoint a couple more kings, God tells him. Obviously, we need better ones. Oh, and get yourself a successor. I've picked one out for you. In fact, his name is so close to yours that it will confuse people for millennia. Go find Elisha son of Shaphat and train him to take over your work. We're not done here. My work is bigger than any one prophet. It was bigger than Abraham, bigger than Moses, and it's bigger than you.

Well, okay then! That's what Elijah does. Finding Elisha is the very next thing that happens in the story and there are quite a few chapters, and even more years, of war and calling down fire and a grizzly end to King Ahab and Queen Jezebel before the fiery chariot comes to pick up Elijah and take him into the heavens in 2 Kings chapter 2. Elisha then literally picks up Elijah's mantle and continues the work.

What Elijah had to face on the Mountain of God is a key teaching of the Lenten desert. We may have critically important roles in our jobs in our families in our church or in the broadest reaches of society. We might be presidents or kings; prophets or popes. We might lead billion-dollar businesses or negotiate peace and war between nations. All those things will come to an end eventually. Even nations will rise and fall. Dust we are, and to dust we shall return.

But when the work is truly God's work, there will always be someone to pick up the mantle when our part is through. When we're exhausted, God provides strength for the journey. When we think we're alone, God says, "Look—there are thousands of others in the same boat." When we think God's work is doomed because our part in it is coming to an end, God says, "I have a successor lined up and have booked you a fiery Uber to come home." Well, okay then! Better get up, eat, and see it through.

Amen.