

LISTENING FOR GOD
I Kings 19:1-18
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Sunrise Church, Salina, KS
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Listening for God - how do we do that? It's been a week of deep and painful reflection in our country. It's been a time to listen to victims and families tell about pain and loss. It's been a time to listen for new ideas to help us become a less violent society. It's been a time we should listen to one another. But have we listened for God in and through the events of this week? What would God say to us? We must ask ourselves how do we listen for - not talk with - how do we listen for God? How do we hear God? Is there noise? Does God have a deep resonant voice? Are there grand choruses of angels? Are their clear answers?

Our scripture reading this morning concerning Elijah deals with that question - How do we listen for God? Where do we hear God speaking to us? The story of Elijah offers us some possibilities. We've been telling parts of Elijah's story in worship over the past few weeks.

When I think of this story about Elijah - the lyrics that old Simon and Garfunkel *Sound of Silence* come to mind:

*Hello darkness, my old friend,
I've come to talk with you again.
Because the vision softly creeping
Left its seeds while I was sleeping.
And the vision that was planted in my brain still remains
Within the sound of silence.*

The sound of silence - can often be the voice of God. God's voice is usually not loud or booming as we might imagine. God does not normally speak in clear English sentences. Instead, God's voice often comes to us in the stillness of life - by giving us pictures or visions

which could be or by offering us a way to look on the world in a way we had never had before. Perhaps we saw victims of the shooting this week - and at others times, we might never have noticed or felt their pain. Perhaps this week we heard their stories - Or it may be that we have seen needy people - at the grocery or at the food bank countless times- but then suddenly we notice their need - and even though no words pass between us - the voice of God begins a conversation with us that takes place in our hearts in what seems an unbearable silence.

But that is not how we want to hear the voice of God. In silence there is far too much uncertainty, far too much room for error, far too much incredulity to try to explain it to others. We would prefer that God speak to us in clear, precise tones which tell us what to do and what not to do. We long for a voice to cry out to us to show us the way, and what we often hear instead, is the sound of silence.

Such is the story of Elijah. This morning's scripture reading picks up after the contest on Mt. Carmel. Recall that Elijah wished to prove the existence of God while, at the same time, prove that Baal did not exist. To do this Elijah took two bulls and placed each bull on piles of timber to be sacrificed. Baal's priests pleaded repeatedly throughout the day with Baal to come and light the fire to consume the bulls. Elijah lost no chance to deride their pleas and prayers - he mocked and parodied their efforts.

When it was Elijah's turn, God indeed showed forth in a rush of fire which consumed the bulls. When the crowd saw the fire - they remembered their God - they turned and repented. They did exactly what Elijah had prayed they would do.

Today's reading begins with Elijah on the run from Ahab's Queen Jezebel. The queen is furious with the prophet and has placed a price on his head. She wants him dead. Elijah fears for his life, so he runs. As he runs - he is offered food and drink and direction - the care of God? But Elijah is not listening. He finds a cave on Mt. Horeb and climbs in depressed and lonely. He sulks. Elijah is mad at God for not stopping Jezebel.

Oh, how much like us Elijah is! Great things have happened to him. Urgent work awaits him. Wrongs have been righted, and he sits in a cave pouting, "I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away." How often are those our words? We go out of our way to serve the Lord. We have been somewhat successful in our work and we are ready for God to praise and protect us for our efforts. Right? - Not so fast!

That is precisely what God says to Elijah. Elijah creeps to the door of the cave to watch a great wind tear up the earth. He sees the earth quake and move. Fire consumes the forest. God is not in any of these theatrics. God is not showing off.

Instead, God is speaking to Elijah in the same way God often speaks to us - through the sound of sheer silence. In the unbearable sound of silence Elijah runs into the cave, wraps his face in his coat and fears what he hears. The depths of the silence tell forth the word of the Lord more powerfully than winds or earthquakes or fires.

In that silence, Elijah hears God say to him for a second time, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" Elijah whines a second time, "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."

Elijah speaks in the same manner he began, but there is a difference this time because he has heard the sound of silence - the sound of that still, small voice. That silence speaks louder than his fear - his protests. God answers his fear - his protests with a command. "The Lord says to him, Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus; when you arrive, you shall anoint Hazael as King over Aram, and you shall anoint Jehu, son of Nimshi as King over Israel; and you shall anoint Elisha, son of Shaphat Abelmeholah as prophet in your place." What a command! It is full of political danger and intrigue. It requires him to name his successor. To respond to

God's command requires every ounce of courage and fortitude he can muster.

Elijah sets out to follow the command. The sound which spoke in the deep silence is far more powerful than any protests and self-pity he can muster. Elijah goes and does the will of the Lord.

This story never fails to move me. It tells us how God works through us - through people. Elijah has doubts, despair and self-pity - nonetheless, God uses him. Elijah shuts his ears and tries not to listen - God breaks through his defenses. God is a God of ordinary people like us. God uses *us*. God comes to us to keep us going when we would quit.

God uses us and God directs us most often through the dark silences of our minds and the visions left for us to ponder and dream. God's words pound on through the silence and move us to act in ways that are not ordinary at all. That silence - that inner voice - that still small voice - is one way we listen for God.

Let us listen to the silence today. Let us look about and listen and try to discern if God is speaking through all the clutter we keep in our minds. Let us be quiet. God speaks. There is much pain in our world - There is much work to do-- and we are the ones to go forth to follow God. Listen! Alleluia! Amen.