

***In the Thin Quiet***

A Sermon for Northminster Church

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1 Kings 19:1-4, 8-15 Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done, how he had killed all Baal’s prophets with the sword. **2**Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah with this message: “May the gods do whatever they want to me if by this time tomorrow I haven’t made your life like the life of one of them.”

**3**Elijah was terrified. He got up and ran for his life. He arrived at Beer-sheba in Judah and left his assistant there. **4**He himself went farther on into the desert a day’s journey. He finally sat down under a solitary broom bush. He longed for his own death: “It’s more than enough, God! Take my life because I’m no better than my ancestors.”

**8**(Later,) Elijah got up, ate and drank, and went refreshed by that food for forty days and nights until he arrived at Horeb, God’s mountain. **9**There he went into a cave and spent the night.

The word of God came to him and said, “Why are you here, Elijah?”

**10**Elijah replied, “I’ve been very passionate for the Lord God of heavenly forces because the Israelites have abandoned your covenant. They have torn down your altars, and they have murdered your prophets with the sword. I’m the only one left, and now they want to take my life too!”

11God said, “Go out and stand at the mountain before me. I am passing by.” A very strong wind tore through the mountains and broke apart the stones before God. But God wasn’t in the wind. After the wind, there was an earthquake. But God wasn’t in the earthquake. 12After the earthquake, there was a fire. But God wasn’t in the fire. After the fire, there was a sound. Thin. Quiet. 13When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his coat. He went out and stood at the cave’s entrance. A voice came to him and said, “Why are you here, Elijah?”

14He said, “I’ve been very passionate for the Lord God of heavenly forces because the Israelites have abandoned your covenant. They have torn down your altars, and they have murdered your prophets with the sword. I’m the only one left, and now they want to take my life too.”

**15**Then God said to him, “Go back through the desert to Damascus.”

Talk about a mountaintop experience. Before Elijah made his escape through the desert or had his brush with the still, small voice of God, he had been on another mountaintop, Mt. Carmel. It was a sight to behold. Four hundred fifty prophets of Ba’al (or “Bale,” as we call him in the South) against the one prophet of Yahweh, Elijah, the faithful one speaking truth to power even when it was unpopular, even when it could get him killed. So confident was he in the power and the presence of God – and in the corruption and the flimsiness of the idol Ba’al, that he challenged those 450 prophets to a kind of divine duel. After dancing around their altar all day, the prophets of Ba’al were crushed when no fire came from heaven to answer their cries. Elijah, on the other hand, made a spectacle of drenching his altar in water before calling down fire from heaven, and when it did come, immediate and all-consuming, the people were convinced: “Yahweh is the real god!” they cried. They tore down all the altars to false gods. And then, in the customary way, Elijah had the four hundred fifty prophets of Ba’al rounded up and executed.

This, we can imagine, is why he felt the need to flee. Just because he had proved that his god was the real one did not mean that Queen Jezebel had to like it. It certainly would not result in her falling to her knees in repentance and faith. Divine contests aside, Jezebel was still the same murderous despot, one who was less concerned with orthodox belief in Ba’al than she was in the way that the people’s faith in Ba’al had solidified her political power. Now Elijah had taken that power away from her, and he was right to run. It’s as he was running that our story for today picks up, Jezebel breathing out her murderous threats against Elijah, swearing to do to him what he had just done to 450 of her best prophets.

Anybody who ever went to church camp knows that after a spiritual “mountaintop” experience it’s pretty common to find yourself down in the depths once you come down off the mountain and remember that real life isn’t like that all the time, that it’s not so easy to wrap your mind around the presence of God, or to open your heart to accept that presence, in the midst of your daily life. Elijah’s mountaintop experience was a little more vivid than anything I ever experienced at camp (my mountaintops mostly involved lifting my hands to praise & worship songs in a dark room, rather than calling down the fire of God from heaven), so it’s no wonder that he finds himself in a place of deep despair as he leaves the mountain, in spite of the awe and the wonder of the mighty, tangible presence of God he had just witnessed. I’m sure it doesn’t help that the “daily life” he is returning to involves living as a fugitive from a murderous queen who loathes everything he stands for.

This is Elijah’s state of mind as he runs off into the wilderness. And in that state of mind, we can understand how he might have come to believe that he is the only prophet of Yahweh left – even though we know (and Elijah *should* know) that there are at least a hundred others…because Obadiah had just told him, right before the Mt. Carmel incident. (Obadiah? Incidentally, also a prophet.) Obadiah himself had helped to hide them all away, to protect the prophets of Yahweh from Jezebel. So, although Elijah may be the only one here, in this cave in the desert, and I don’t want to belittle the suffering he must have been going through, this is not a fear that is grounded in reality. He clearly believes it, deeply, because he says almost the exact same thing twice, first when God speaks to him in the cave, and again when he goes out to meet the presence of God in the stillness. This seems to be a deep-seated fear, one that the text is drawing our attention to through repetition, but one that is also just so clearly false. Isn’t that the way our minds work? Most of us have found ourselves fixating on a worst-case scenario, often until we come to believe it’s inevitable. We expect it to be true, and so we start behaving as if we believe that it already is.

What if I am, really, all alone? What if I really am the only one left?

Did you know that the United Kingdom created a new position in government last year called the Minister for Loneliness? Around the world, there is growing consensus that loneliness is not just an emotional or relational epidemic but one that is having physical consequences. A 2017 essay by a former US Surgeon General cited one study that found that the physical effects of loneliness on a person could be just as harmful as the effects of smoking 15 cigarettes a day. The UK is seeking to address the problem on a national scale by increasing funding for community spaces, expanding the work of charities and community groups, and – in a particularly creative move – incorporating postal workers into the effort. Part of their responsibilities will now be to check up on lonely people as part of their usual delivery rounds. It’s a fascinating problem and, I would imagine, one that might hit close to home for some of us here, as well.

Our family has been here for just over six months now. We don’t claim to know everyone just yet, or to have the full picture of Monroe (or West Monroe – but see, I know enough to include both of them!), but I think I have gathered enough about who we are, here in this building, and who we are, here in our larger community, to say with some confidence that perhaps Elijah’s cry is not altogether unfamiliar to us. Many of us, I might imagine, have felt that we, too, were all alone, that we were the only ones left, the only ones who thought, or voted, or believed like we did. Something, somewhere along the way, set us apart from “our people,” and we found ourselves on the outside. Perhaps we were the only ones in our families who thought differently about politics or religion. Perhaps we were the only ones in our workplace who didn’t assume the cultural Christianity that predominates in this region. In any number of ways, in any number of settings, I imagine most of us in a place like Northminster have some experience of feeling that even when we are surrounded with people, still, we are alone.

That’s what’s so beautiful about Northminster, though, isn’t it? About this particular iteration of the body of Christ? The fact that this many folks could feel that same sense of aloneness and choose to come together in this place tells me that we’re not as alone as we think we are. We have one another. We have this place. We have a responsibility to cultivate the sense of community between us – not only for moral reasons but for the sake of our very lives. (I mean, fifteen cigarettes a day!) And it’s so easy to give in to the martyr complex – it’s exactly what Elijah did, and it led him further into his loneliness, into utter isolation in a literal wilderness. But, like Elijah in the wilderness, if we can snap out of our despair long enough to recollect what we already know to be true – there are others, they’re out there, and we’re not alone – then there is the possibility of community.

Maybe we should give Elijah a little more credit. Let’s imagine he was listening when Obadiah told him about the hundred prophets hidden away in their various caves; let’s imagine that he even remembered (or noticed) that Obadiah was, himself, a prophet. I wonder if Elijah just felt like he knew Jezebel well enough to know that there was no hope for any of them, as if they might as well all be dead already? This cry he makes – alone in the wilderness, a cry that God alone hears – it is the cry not just of loneliness, but of hopelessness. “I am the only one left! And I don’t have long, myself. Enough, already!” It’s one thing to feel alone. It’s another to feel alone and to know there are good reasons not to ever expect to feel differently.

This hit me hard as I spent time with this story this week. Going back to the analogy of our church in our community, many of us may feel – with good reason – that there is simply no chance that those around us will ever change their politics, or their theology, or whatever it is that separates *us* into a *them*. And that hopelessness has a tendency to sink the loneliness in even deeper, the sense not only that we are alone, but that we always will be. It’s the sense that no matter what we do, even if it makes a dent, it won’t be enough to turn the tide.

I have spent a lot of time exploring the life and colorful stories of Susan B. Anthony in the last few months. I’ve been reading through a collection of her essays, speeches, and diary entries. I have to take it slowly because it’s easy to grow angry and embittered reading accounts of Susan B. Anthony making arguments for women’s equality in the 1800s that we still have to make today, and cultivating bitterness is not why I set out to read her work. I’ve been reflecting a lot, though, on what a beautiful example she is of a soul devoted to a cause with her whole being, for her whole life, even to the end – when the goal had not yet been achieved. She died in 1906, after working toward obtaining the vote for women since the 1840s, when she was my age, and it wouldn’t become law for another fourteen years after her death. I think she must have been driven not only by a stubborn determination in spite of all the odds, but by a deep and fervent hope. In the last letter she wrote to Elizabeth Cady Stanton, her lifelong friend and partner in the struggle for equality, Anthony wrote about how surreal it was that they would have to pass the baton to the next generation, leaving the work still unfinished after so many years. And then she wrote, “And we, dear old friend, shall move on to the next sphere of existence – higher and larger, we cannot fail to believe, and one where women will not be placed in an inferior position, but will be welcomed on a plane of perfect intellectual and spiritual equality.” Susan B. Anthony has become, for me, a model of what it looks like to believe in the future God dreams of, while maintaining hope right now, in the midst of the not-yet in which we find ourselves.

We don’t actually get an account in this chapter of Elijah realizing or remembering that all those other prophets are still out there. It almost seems like God chooses not to dignify Elijah’s complaint with a response. As he’s crying out “I’m the only one left” when he so clearly, certainly is not, it’s interesting that God doesn’t say, “No, my child, remember my servant Obadiah hid fifty prophets in one cave and fifty in another – go find them and you’ll be in good company.” Instead, God says, “Come out here and let’s talk.”

Do you think Elijah was expecting more fire? After a display like Mt. Carmel, he would have to have been. And the fire came – but God wasn’t in it. So, too, with the earthquake and the thunderous windstorm. The loud and bold and decisive acts of nature that had come to be associated with the divine; in these, God was not to be found. Not today. Rather, after all the fuss was over, a calm stillness came over the mountain. A hush was in the air. The Common English Bible I read out of today says, “There was a sound. Thin. Quiet.” The old King James translation is where we find the language of the “still, small voice,” that spoke, and others call it “the sound of sheer silence.”

This was where God was to be found – in the thin quiet. Whatever the translation, it was not loud, or thundering or flashy, or even on fire. God was in the stillness. God was quiet and close. And as Elijah wrapped his face in his cloak, he stepped out into the serene silence of God’s presence. And in that presence, he wasn’t alone.

The voice of God asked for a second time, “Elijah, why are you here?” And for a second time, he lodged his complaint: *God, I am alone. I’m the only one left.*

And then, for the second time, God answers Elijah’s complaint with instructions. “Go to Damascus.” It sounds dismissive. I don’t believe that it is. In Damascus, Elijah would anoint a king; then he was to anoint another, and then – and this is where I believe God’s wisdom is most evident: Elijah was to anoint a successor, a prophet like himself, to carry on his work. God’s instructions were essentially: *Prepare for the reality that you will not live forever, and then do what you can to ensure that when you’re gone, the work will go on.*

Elijah’s hopelessness was rooted in a sense that no matter what he was able to accomplish, if he were the only one left, what was it all for? And here, in response to this despair over his own smallness, his own mortality, God offers the very practical advice to plan ahead, to make arrangements, to make the most of the time you have left. And although it would be delightful if in that time that you had left, God chose to show up in daily pillars of fire or flashes of lightning, most often it seems that God is evident in the quiet, the mundane, the ordinary. And isn’t that exactly how the work gets done? Incrementally, in our showing up day by day? The work of God goes on as slowly, slowly, we move the needle over time. The work of God goes on as the mantle is passed to a new generation. The work goes on as those who have loved God and served the work of justice and love take strides to share that love and that work with those who will continue it after they are gone.

So Northminster, I wonder what expectations we are holding onto that might be standing in the way of our experiencing life? Are we holding on to the crushing belief that we are alone? Do we expect that our work is going to amount to nothing because we cannot see any progress and our enemies always seem to be gaining ground? Are we expecting that if God is going to show up at all it’ll have to be in dramatic fashion? I wonder, if we could let go of those expectations, if we might find that we have encouraging community, if we might find that God’s power looks different from the world’s power and is actually effective after all, if we might find that the healing, rejuvenating, justice-working, meaning-making God has been here all along in the still, the small, the silent, the ordinary – in the thin quiet. I wonder what might change if we did.