

In the Silence
1 Kings 19:11-13
November 14, 2021 – Center Harbor Congregational Church, UCC
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Dave and I married rather late in our lives. I was 49 and he was 53 when we tied the knot. Before we married, we did the kind of negotiating that people with some life experience know to be necessary. Early on we brought up the big picture items, the things that were most central to our hearts. Dave, who was building an airplane at the time, said, “I will always be airplane poor.” And I responded, “I am on a spiritual journey, and I don’t know where that will lead me.” As we came nearer to joining our lives permanently, we got more practical. We would spend money on long-term-care insurance, for example. We would prioritize travel. But it turns out that those first things we shared with each other, Dave’s commitment to flight and mine to the Spirit, were the ones that have actually shaped our lives together.

I think you all know that we moved from Virginia to Massachusetts so that I could attend seminary at Boston University. Seminary was really, really hard work – academically and also emotionally. It wore me out, but I kept pressing ahead because I was certain that God had called me to ministry. But you already know that when I graduated, during the economic crisis of 2008, I did not receive an ordainable call. I was able to serve a tiny church as a licensed pastor for a couple of years, but we had two kids in college, and eventually I had to be a grown-up and make some money to help pay their tuition, so I retreated back into higher education. It was a heart-breaking decision, and I felt deeply wounded for years. Going to church was terribly difficult for me in that time, sort of like trying to be just friends with a former fiancé who had left me at the altar. Sort of like finding a safe, familiar cave where I could lick my wounds. It turns out, God wasn’t finished with me yet, and it was the quiet voice of Ann Koniszewski that set me back on the path that brought me here. Carol was retiring, and Ann came to me after the worship service to ask me to preach on the first Sunday Carol would be gone. I said, “You have quite a number of ordained clergy in this congregation. Surely you want one of them to do this.” She replied, “No, we want you. They can preach later.” I have never told Ann how deeply that conversation affected me. There was something about her voice. Her calm, quiet confidence that I was the one the deacons wanted to hear hit me so deeply. Those few sentences overcame my fear and my anger and began to heal my hurt. They changed my life in a way that something louder or more dramatic never could. So, thank you, Ann!

I am always brought back to my own call story when I read today’s scripture. But I need to give a little background before we dive into it. We have spent four weeks with King David, and now it is time to move on in the arc of the Hebrew Scriptures. David lived about 1,000 years before Jesus was born. During his reign, the Northern and Southern tribes of Israel were united into a single kingdom, and peace and prosperity reigned. After David died, his son Solomon inherited the throne. Solomon built the great Temple in Jerusalem and excelled at diplomacy with neighboring nations, so peace and prosperity continued. But after Solomon’s death, there was a fight for the throne among two of his many, many sons, and the Northern and Southern sections of Israel split apart again. In both the north and the south, the people of Israel were plagued with a series of really bad kings – kings who allowed or encouraged the worship of other gods, and kings who mistreated the poorest and most vulnerable people in the land. And so, there arose a series of prophets whose mission was to speak truth to power, to call the nation back to right worship, and to speak out for justice in an unjust world. The first great prophet in this line was Elijah, who lived about 150 years after King David and about 850 years before Jesus. There are many vivid and dramatic stories about Elijah, and some day perhaps I will tell them all to you. But today I want to focus on one of my favorites – Elijah’s encounter with God on Mt. Sinai, near the end of his life.

Elijah is running away. He has had enough. He has given it his best shot, and it didn’t suffice. Elijah has been demonstrating God’s power with amazing feats involving fire and rain and resurrecting the dead. He has publicly defeated the priests of the Canaanite deity Ba’al, yet the people still failed to return to Yahweh. And all this put Elijah in the cross-hairs of Queen Jezebel, who was a worshiper of Ba’al herself. She has promised to kill him. So, Elijah flees out into the desert and falls asleep under a tree, praying to die. An angel wakes him, offers him food and drink, which he

accepts. Elijah falls back asleep, but the angel wakes him again and says, “Eat, or the journey will be too much for you.” What journey? But Elijah does as he is told and trudges on for forty days till he arrives at Mt. Horeb, which is another name for Sinai, where Moses and the people received the Ten Commandments all those centuries ago. Elijah thinks he is running from defeat and threat, but he has actually made his way to a sacred place to meet God. He finds a cave and goes to sleep there.

In the cave, Elijah hears a voice. “What are you doing here, Elijah?” Elijah explains himself: “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.” God responds, “Go out and stand on the mountain, for the Lord is about to pass by.” Then, the Bible says, there is a great wind, so strong that it splits mountains and breaks rocks in pieces, but the Lord is not in the wind. And after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord is not in the earthquake. And after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord is not in the fire. And after the fire a sound of sheer silence. When Elijah heard the silence, THAT is when he wraps his face in his cloak and goes out to stand at the entrance of the cave. Then there comes a voice to him, a whisper only, the quietest, deepest voice his soul can hear, saying, “What are you doing here, Elijah? I still have work for you to do.”

It is easy to get caught up in the big, dramatic moments of our lives, isn't it? God is in those moments, too. Elijah had called down fire from heaven to win a bet with the priests of Ba'al, and God sent the fire. It got everybody's attention! Calling down that fire was probably Elijah's most stunning public achievement as a prophet. But the people of Israel still worship other gods, and the nation still mistreats the poorest and most vulnerable among them, both anathema to the Living God. Kings and queens are deeply corrupt. Elijah can call down fire from heaven, but he hasn't been able to turn the nation around. He has failed. Yet in the silence comes a voice, “What are you doing here, Elijah? I still have work for you to do.”

Not only has Elijah failed, the effort has simply exhausted him. He has no more to give. The people don't want him and they don't want God. The queen has promised to send an assassin. What is the point of continuing? Elijah is depressed and suicidal. He just wants to lie down and die. Eventually he retreats to a dark cave, and he probably would be glad to stay there forever. God responds to Elijah's exhaustion. God sends food and water. God sends blessed sleep. But then the quiet voice comes. “What are you doing here, Elijah? I still have work for you to do.”

Our lives are filled with so much noise. Television. Meaningless chatter. Endless claims on our time and our attention. I bet you have a place where you can invite silence into your life. Do you sit by the lake? Take a walk in the woods? Light a candle? Close a door? How long has it been since you gifted yourself with the silence that your soul needs?

God has work for all of us to do, no matter how far along in life we are. No matter whether we have been successful in the past or not. No matter if we feel exhausted. Even if we are ready to give up. God's voice for our lives will not be in the wind. It won't be in the earthquakes all around us. It won't be in the fire. The still, small voice will find us when we put aside those claims on our attention. It will come when we ourselves are still.

“What are you doing here?” God asks. “I still have work for you to do.”

Amen