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“The Sound of Silence”

a sermon preached by Rev. Abigail Henderson

at First United Church of Christ in Northfield, MN, on June 30, 2013.

1 Kings 19:1-15

As you many of you know, my soon-to-be-former neighborhood of Powderhorn Park was hit very hard by the storm that tore through South Minneapolis last weekend. Will and I were lucky: we were with family in St. Paul during the worst of it, and our house and cars sustained no damage. The same cannot be said for other houses and cars on our block. We did lose power for four days, and I must say, you learn a lot about yourself and the strength of your relationships in such conditions. I'm happy to report that Will and I are doing great, but we both agree that in the event of the apocalypse, we probably lack the skills and fortitude to be among the intrepid survivors rebuilding civilization.

My friend Elizabeth came over to help me pack the other day, and she and I swapped storm stories. Hers was much scarier than mine. Last Friday night, she was driving home east from Uptown. It was raining hard, but nothing a seasoned driver couldn't handle. Then, just as she was going through the busy intersection at Chicago and Lake, the rain became horizontal. Winds pounded her car, and all around her, huge old trees were uprooted and fell across the street, dragging live power lines down with them. In the chaos, cars swerved and collided. Elizabeth could feel her own car dragging along debris attached to the undercarriage. (She would later discover three blocks' worth of electric wire wrapped around her front tires.)

She managed to pull over and cut the engine. And there she waited for the storm to blow over.

That was the point when Elizabeth became, in her own words, “suddenly very interested in Jesus.”

The daughter of Lutheran pastor, she went to a familiar place: praying, begging, bargaining, and trying to make peace with the One whose job (she'd always been told) was to deliver her from harm.

If we take out the Jesus part, I wonder if that's how Elijah felt in the cave, as terrible winds and earthquakes and fires raged outside.

Let's think about him for a minute. What we have here is not the confident Elijah of last week's reading, utterly convinced of his God's righteousness and responsivity.

This week, Elijah is tired. Hungry. Desperate. Suicidal. Trying to escape his prophetic duty. And perhaps, I daresay, a little irritated with the God who asks, not once but twice, "What are you doing here, Elijah?"

Is that supposed to be a rhetorical question? As those of us who have been following the story know, Elijah has been, as he puts it, "very zealous for the Lord, the God of hosts." In other words, he has been a very cooperative prophet indeed, doing everything God asks of him, and look where Elijah's hard work has gotten him.

Not once, but twice, the prophet responds with a litany of complaints: despite his life-risking efforts, the people of Israel still forsake God; his fellow prophets of Yahweh are all dead; and soon he will be dead, too, if Queen Jezebel has anything to say about it.

If today's passage sounds repetitive to your ears, that's because it is--purposefully so. The text is a chiasm--an ancient literary device in which important themes or images are repeated according to various patterns. Whole sections of the Hebrew Bible are structured this way in order to emphasize certain ideas, perhaps even to guide our interpretation. What we have here is a mini-chiasm, and we are invited to look at the parallels and wonder: what is different between the first version of this conversation between God and Elijah, and the second version?

One classic reading understands it this way: in the first conversation, Elijah is terrified, fleeing for his life into the wilderness, and ready to give up his calling as a prophet. By the second conversation--*although it goes virtually the same way*--Elijah is renewed, ready to get back into the game, and continue doing God's work among God's people.

What, exactly, helps him to get from point A to point B? It's not what you might expect.

Let's review the circumstances leading up to the first exchange between God and Elijah.

- Elijah is threatened by Jezebel.
- He flees to the wilderness.
- He asks God to take his life.
- He falls asleep under the broom tree.
- And angel comes and provides life-sustaining food and water, and reminds him to care for himself.
- So nourished, he travels to Mount Horeb--also known as Mount Sinai.
- And then God asks, "What are you doing here Elijah?"

Now, you'd think, at this point, that Elijah ought to be feeling pretty comforted and cared for by God. He's been given the basic necessities of food and drink. He's been touched by an angel. He's been led to the very same place where God presented Moses with the Ten Commandments. If you're wondering whether God is going to watch over you, what more could you ask for? I'd be delighted, myself, if God responded with such directness to any of my prayer requests.

But all these things--they aren't enough. Not when you're as down-and-out as Elijah is.

How do I know this? The text's chiasmic structure suggests as much. Something else has to happen to get Elijah back up on his feet. What is it? Let's examine the events that lead up to the second exchange between God and Elijah:

- Elijah is told to stand outside the cave because the Lord is about to pass by
- A terrible wind blows through, breaking apart the rocks of the mountain--but God is not in the wind
- And after the wind comes an earthquake, but God is not in the earthquake
- And after the earthquake comes a fire, but God is not in the fire
- And after the fire comes the "sound of sheer silence," or as the King James Bible puts it, "A still small voice."

And that still small voice again asks, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" And Elijah responds in the same way as before. But something has changed. God issues new marching orders to go to Damascus and anoint a king--and off Elijah goes.

What is different this time?

Apparently hot cakes and water and angels didn't completely cut it. What was needed, really needed, was God.

And not the fiery, all-powerful version of God that we would expect having read other parts of the Hebrew Bible, where wind, earthquake, and fire are *exactly* the kind of places where you find God.

This time, in this story, the *sound of silence* is more powerful than angels, or God-given sustenance, or the earth literally shaking with God's might.

Sometimes, no words are the right words.

Sometimes, emptiness takes on a distinct shape.

Sometimes, absence is a presence unto itself.

There is a school of theology that believes we know God best through recognizing what God isn't. For myself, I think there's another step involved: we must move, we must turn, in a different direction, away from the thing that is not God. In fact, the word "conversion" comes from the Latin *converto*, to turn around.

Maybe Elijah had a conversion moment on that mountain. Maybe we all have conversion moments whenever we are able to turn away from our paralyzing fears, from cruelty and hatred, from materialism and selfishness, and turn toward--what?--*something else*. Something hopeful. Something full of possibility. Something that we dare to name as God.

And so we are able to continue with the work God has called us to do in the world.

Amen.