

July 31, 2022

## The Five Senses Sermon Series – Hearing - 1 Kings 19:11-13

Rev. Lauren Baske Davis

**Scripture** - Elijah Meets God at Horeb

*<sup>11</sup> He said, "Go out and stand on the mountain before the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by." Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind, and after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake, <sup>12</sup> and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire, and after the fire a sound of sheer silence. <sup>13</sup> When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. Then there came a voice to him that said, "What are you doing here, Elijah?"*

**Sermon**

Thank you, Leota, for reading. We're back for our third week of the series on The Five Senses—a series exploring the ways in which we experience God through smell, touch, hearing, taste, and sight. Last week, we talked all about the sense of touch, what a big sense it is, how deeply it's tied to the emotion center in our brains, and how we might and receive God's love through the sense of touch where it is healthy and good.

Today, we are on to hearing. It's really amazing all we can take in through sound, or even vibrations of sound. Whether it's big and joyful melody and harmony of a vintage band, the belting of a Brandi Carlile concert like the one in the Cities last night, or the overdue smoothness of Joni Mitchell's voice coming out of retirement last week, sounds are powerful. Maybe you prefer chirruping birdsongs on a walk in the Carleton Arb, or the hush of sitting on a deck while the neighborhood is sleeping. Sounds can enliven, frighten, soothe and more.

Now, Elijah's experience of God in this passage is one of *many* great sensory passages in the Bible. As a result, I wrestled with what scripture to preach on today. There are some incredible stories about sound, hearing, and listening in our scriptures. There are plenty of Psalms<sup>1</sup> asking—even demanding—for God to *hear*, praying: "incline your ear to me." There are also just some lovely passages about sound and music: when Miriam plays her tambourine to celebrate the people's escape from Egypt through the Red Sea,<sup>2</sup> when David plays the lyre to soothe King Saul's pain,<sup>3</sup> again Psalms of joy, which were themselves likely sung as music by ancient people.

And there are scriptures about God *hearing* people's prayers, or cries for help. In Genesis,<sup>4</sup> Hagar, who is enslaved by Abraham and who is the mother of their child, Ishmael, cries in the dessert after being sent away and then running out of water. God *hears* Ishmael and Hagar's cries, shows them water, and promises to look after them and make a great nation from them. Interestingly, the name Ishmael means "God will *hear*." In the Gospel of John, before raising Lazarus back to life, Jesus prays loudly to God, "I thank you for having *heard* me. <sup>42</sup>I knew that you *always hear* me ...."<sup>5</sup> The scriptures make it clear that God listens.

---

<sup>1</sup> Psalm 31 and 130 for example.

<sup>2</sup> Exodus 15:20-21

<sup>3</sup> 1 Samuel 16:23

<sup>4</sup> Genesis 21:8-21

<sup>5</sup> John 11:41

July 31, 2022

## The Five Senses Sermon Series – Hearing - 1 Kings 19:11-13

Rev. Lauren Baske Davis

But there are *fewer* passages in the Bible where people clearly experience *God* through sound. Which is why I chose the scripture today. If you've been around here lately and this scripture is ringing in your ears in a strangely familiar way, it's because Pastor Cindy preached on it last month. She referred to it as the scripture famous for speaking to the healing power of a snack and a nap. Thankfully, Pastor Cindy gave you the full history and background of the scripture—the good, bad, and ugly of the whole story.

So yes, we're back with Elijah, and here's the quick summary of what he's been up to. A few verses back, Elijah challenged the worshippers of the god Ba'al to a competition to see whose god is better. Elijah won—by far—but he then did more than gloat and rub it in their faces; he followed up his win by murdering hundreds of the priests of Ba'al after the competition. After his murderous rampage and superiority spree, Elijah is exhausted and down and runs away. This is where the snack and nap happen. God asks him, "what are you doing here Elijah?" Elijah tells God that he's been ardently working for God because God's people aren't abiding by the covenant, and he feels like he's the only faithful person left. So God tells him to stand on a mountain where God will pass by. Now we're up to date with the scripture for today.

On the mountain, Elijah experiences the rush of a powerful, damaging rain and windstorm, the complete instability of an earthquake, the heat and intensity of a fire. But God isn't in any of it. God appears afterward instead, is in the silence, or by what some translations call, "a still small voice."

I am repeatedly drawn back to God's presence in the silence. In the still small voice, which is in direct contrast to vast and enormous sounds of the rain and wind, the earthquake, and the fire. A God who whispers in the quiet of a moment.

When you think of the image of God you grew up with—or your image of God right now—what do you imagine God's voice sounding like? Big and powerful? Gendered? A certain age? ...Or intentionally soft, steady, and small? In our scripture today God comes in the quiet, in a complete lack of dramatic revelation. We have seen God in the burning bush and the pillar of cloud and fire leading the people out of Egypt. But here in this ancient story, God shows that it is in the quiet, then too, not just miraculous and spectacular events, that God can be experienced. It is in the quiet that God might be heard.

But as I also mentioned, there are differences between hearing and listening. Hearing doesn't describe the whole of what we mean when we talk about being heard. Listening is something else. As Pastor Michelle Lewis of Bread of Life Deaf Church in the Twin Cities has said, there is a difference between hearing and listening, or as she framed it, "physical deafness verses spiritual deafness."<sup>6</sup> In the spirit of resisting ableism as we talk about the senses, we must name that when we speak of listening, we aren't speaking about the physical ability to hear. I want to be clear on that. Listening is more of a posture of being. Or as Father Richard

---

<sup>6</sup> Conversation with Rev. Michelle Lewis, September 2018.

July 31, 2022

## The Five Senses Sermon Series – Hearing - 1 Kings 19:11-13

Rev. Lauren Baske Davis

Rohr wrote, listening is more “an act of will,”<sup>7</sup> a compassionate, intentional awareness. Listening is, as Rohr says, when we are invited to hear to God with the “ear of our heart.”<sup>8</sup>

Sikh activist Valerie Kaur, who contributes to for Rohr’s Center for Action and Contemplation (among many other pursuits), says that “deep listening is [actually] an act of surrender” because “we risk being changed by what we hear. When I really want to hear another person’s story,” she says, “I try to leave my preconceptions at the door and draw close to their telling. I am always partially listening to the thoughts in my own head when others are speaking, so I consciously quiet my thoughts and begin to listen with my senses. . . . The most critical part of listening is asking *what is at stake* for the other person. I try to understand what matters to them, not what I think matters.... When the story is done, we must return to our skin, our own worldview, and notice how we have been changed by our visit.”<sup>9</sup>

Listening is about tuning our attention to something; to hone in and be fully be present with another. What might we hear when we really listen? Deep listening requires us to set aside our own responses or expectations in a conversation in order to be curious and really sit with what someone else is saying. It can feel uncomfortable, especially when we are listening to someone with whom we ardently disagree. Just breathing, staying in our body, and not reacting can be a challenge.

So Elijah experiences all the elements, then God is ready to talk, hoping perhaps for Elijah to listen. Again God asks the same question, which is where our scripture today ends, “what are you doing here Elijah? And Elijah responds with the same answer: he says he’s been ardently working for God because God’s people aren’t abiding by the covenant, and he feels like he’s the only faithful person left.

So in that still small voice—that still-speaking voice, as we say here in the UCC!—God speaks. Literally translated, God’s voice is “the sound of fine silence,” or more poetically translated, God’s voice is, “the sound of calm after the storm.”<sup>10</sup> And in that voice that sounds like the calm after the storm, God tells Elijah there’s more work, different work to do.

God who listens, who hears—who inclines their ear and hears prayers—speaks, shows Elijah that it’s not necessarily through miraculous feats that God’s work is done but instead sometimes through the quiet voice of God, the one that sounds like calm after the storm. God speaks, showing Elijah that God’s work is also done by quiet intentional listening. That God’s work involves leaning toward one another, rather than conquering one another with destructive and distancing violence. Perhaps God is saying, “yes, sometimes I appear in wind and rain and fire, but other times in calm, quiet, loving voice.”

As listeners to this story, perhaps we have the opportunity, to be changed. To take the image of God we grew up with or have even now and welcome God’s voice in the surprising

---

<sup>7</sup> Richard Rohr Daily Meditation: “A Listening Heart,” Week 30: Holy Listening, email from the Center for Action and Contemplation, Thursday, July 28, 2022.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Richard Rohr Daily Meditation: “Courageous Listening,” Week 30: Holy Listening, email from the Center for Action and Contemplation, Tuesday, July 26, 2022.

<sup>10</sup> *The New Interpreter’s Bible Commentary, Vol III*, Nashville: Abingdon, 1999, p. 142-5.

July 31, 2022

The Five Senses Sermon Series – Hearing - 1 Kings 19:11-13

Rev. Lauren Baske Davis

ways it may be experienced. Surely we have been invited to marvel at the sound of God's voice which is the sound of calm after storm, the rest that may come from really listening in silence. Trusting, that God's presence may be made known to us in powerful ways, yes! But also through small, quiet, ways. May we welcome the sounds of God's presence which take many forms.

As we close, let us remember e.e. cummings words, which are "may my heart always be open to little/birds who are the secrets of living/whatever they sing is better than to know." And as we pray here together, and go into the week, let's practice naming our prayers, but not so that we can tell God what to do with them. Rather, let us listen to God, and listen for God around us. Perhaps it is we who will be changed simply by the practice. Or perhaps we will hear that still small voice that sounds like the calm after a storm. The voice that came to Elijah so many thousands of years ago and is speaking still. May it be so.