

# Listening in the Wilderness

A Sermon for Cary Presbyterian Church

September 11, 2022

*1 Kings 19*

*1 Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done, and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword. 2 Then Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah, saying, "So may the gods do to me, and more also, if I do not make your life like the life of one of them by this time tomorrow." 3 Then he was afraid; he got up and fled for his life, and came to Beer-sheba, which belongs to Judah; he left his servant there.*

*1 Kings 19:4 But he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a solitary broom tree. He asked that he might die: "It is enough; now, O LORD, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors." 5 Then he lay down under the broom tree and fell asleep. Suddenly an angel touched him and said to him, "Get up and eat." 6 He looked, and there at his head was a cake baked on hot stones, and a jar of water. He ate and drank, and lay down again. 7 The angel of the LORD came a second time, touched him, and said, "Get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you." 8 He got up, and ate and drank; then he went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights to Horeb the mount of God. 9 At that place he came to a cave, and spent the night there.*

*Then the word of the LORD came to him, saying, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" 10 He answered, "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."*

*1 Kings 19:11 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*

*Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done, and how he 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; 12 and after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence. 13 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?” 14 He answered, “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.” 15 Then the LORD said to him, “Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus; when you arrive, you shall anoint Hazael as king over Aram.*

**Have you ever felt like you were doing all the right things — but not getting rewarded for doing them?**

**A. That’s probably where the adage “No good deed goes unpunished.” comes from — the sense that doing good deeds is no guarantee of good outcomes.**

**1. I may not be as cynical as the adage — but I do have enough evidence from my own life to conclude that at least *some* good deeds seem to lead to punishment.**

**B. If you turn on religious radio or TV programming it will not take you long to find voices there which describe a very tight relationship between a life of faith and this world’s riches:**

**1. Good people get good things**

**2. Those without sufficient faith get bad outcomes.**

**I find these voices from our current religious world maddening . . . because anyone who has read their bible more than a few minutes can see that having a profound faith and living it zealously is no guarantee of a trouble-free**

life.

- C. **One only has to look at the life of Jesus to see this.**
  - 1. **Far from protecting him from trouble — his faithfulness to bear witness to God’s in-breaking kingdom put him at odds both with religious and civil authorities.**

**II. So then, if our faith is not an insurance policy against suffering, what is it and why have it?**

- A. **Calvin’s description of faith is helpful here:**

[Faith is] “ . . . a firm and certain knowledge of God’s benevolence toward us, founded upon the truth of the freely-given promise in Christ, both revealed to our minds and sealed upon our hearts through the Holy Spirit.”

- 1. **A firm and certain conviction that God is “for us.”**
- B. **Faith teaches *not* that we will not suffer — but rather that through *all* the vicissitudes of life God is *with us* and *for us*.**
  - 1. **St. Paul suggesting in Romans chapter 8 that God is at work in all things to bring good . . .**
- C. **This life of faith — this commitment to remain in a loving relationship with the God who made us allows us *not to avoid troubles* but rather to be *at peace* in even difficult circumstances because we know that we have God’s companionship and God “benevolence” even in the hours of trial.**

- 1. It is not so much a peace derived from the absence of conflict, or pain, so much as it is a peace made possible by the presence of love.**

**Today's lesson from Kings is one of the great narratives of the Hebrew bible — and it works these profound questions about faithfulness and trouble.**

**Great prophet Elijah**

**Angels (x3!)**

**Villains —  
phlegmatic Ahab and**

**Jezebel (reminds me of Cersei Lanister from Game of Thrones)**

**Actions!**

**Threats,**

**flight into the wilderness,**

**encounters with angels and with God**

**Fire, Wind, and Earthquake**

**Silence in wilderness solitude.**

**But before I get too much into today's lesson, perhaps we should review the events of the previous chapter of Kings (Chapter 18).**

**A mighty prophet  
Great confidence**

**Great theatrics too!**

**In one act he ends the drought, convinces the people of the error of following Baal and shows king Ahab to be as useless as he really is.**

**We *expect* that Elijah will be celebrated  
That his prophesy will change hearts**

**That his zealous conviction will be infectious**

**D. But then we turn the page and both we and Elijah are surprised and disappointed to find that Jezebel has put a contract out for his life.**

*“So may the gods do to me, and more also, if I do not make your life like the life of one of them by this time tomorrow.”*

**1. And the great prophet who seemingly had no fear in his contest with 450 prophets of Baal — is full of fear.**

*3 Then he was afraid; he got up and fled for his life, and came to Beer-sheba, which belongs to Judah; he left his servant there.*

*1 Kings 19:4 But he himself went a day’s journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a*

*solitary broom tree. He asked that he might die: “It is enough; now, O LORD, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors.” 5 Then he lay down under the broom tree and fell asleep.*

**E. What? Where is the great man of faith from chapter 18?**

- 1. He has been overcome with the injustice of this world — his discovery that his zealous display of faith does not elevate him**
- 2. Rather it brings a death-threat and that causes him distress.**
- 3. So much distress that he says, in essence, “Lord if you love me . . . kill me.”**

**V. However, even though Elijah is ready to quit God is not finished with Elijah!**

**A. Angels come and awaken him**

- 1. Feed him direct him to go on a pilgrimage to Mt. Horeb**
- 2. Horeb is deep in the Sinai and is where God gave the people instructions through Moses.**

**B. Just as Moses had once stood upon the mountain before the Lord, so now Elijah is told to stand on the mountain for the Lord is about to pass by.**

- VI. Then we have the spectacular scene of**
- A. Winds so strong they “split mountains and broke rocks to pieces”**
  - B. Earthquake so strong it made him question the ground upon which he stood**
  - C. Fire consuming everything it touched  
— But God was not in the wind, or earthquake, or fire —**
  - D. After these there followed sheer silence.  
Only then does Elijah feel compelled to wrap his face in his mantel and go out to speak with God.**

**What he hears is a new calling — a new word which invites him to “Go! . . . but *Go through the wilderness* ...”**

- E. The wilderness was the place where all bets were off — where all certainties were seen for the illusion they are.**
  - 1. The wilderness is the place where people (even great prophets) are forced to encounter and deal with the limits of their capacity to control things.**

**Belden Lane — “where we and our understanding of God alike are undone,”  
BUT ALSO WHERE WE  
“can we understand bewilderment as occasioning another way of knowing.”**

**VII. So, we are left to wonder about our own sojourn**

**How might we learn from Elijah how to  
live fully**

**and with profound meaning,**

**and with faithful intentionality?**

**Surely one thing we might learn is to incorporate silence and  
deep listening into our lives.**

**1. A prayer of silence and of listening is a prayer  
which:**

† **Quits telling God what to do**

† **Trusts that there is nothing to fear in the  
mutual listening**

† **Acknowledges that God is present:  
surrounds us like air,  
impinges on our thoughts,  
is full of gentle invitations, and  
awaits our attention.**

**C. We learn to meet God in silence because:  
if our heart are full of other things we struggle to  
hear the voice of God.**

**When we listen to the voice of God in the  
stillness of our heart, *then our heart can be  
filled with God.***

**D. And there is more — silence is not only a path to a full and meaningful relationship with God — it is the path to deeper relationships with one another too!**

“Maybe there is nothing more important than that we keep track, you and I, of these stories of who we are

and where we have come from and the people we have met along the way because it is precisely in these stories in all their particularity . . . that God makes God’s self known to each of us most powerfully and personally.”

— Frederick Buechner, From — Telling Secrets

**VIII. In our wordy and discordant world we are invited to join Elijah in an encounter with the God who is present - but is often present in ways which can only be disclosed in the silence of the heart.**

“God’s call is mysterious; it comes in the darkness of faith. It is so fine, so subtle, that it is only with the deepest silence within us that we can hear it.

And yet nothing is so decisive and overpowering for a man on this earth, nothing surer or stronger.

This call is uninterrupted: God is always calling us! But there are distinctive moments in this call of his, moments which leave a permanent mark on us --moments which we never forget.” preface xv Letters from the Desert by Carlo Carretto

**So friends let us be on the alert for God's calling today and every day.**