

Lucia Lloyd's sermon
June 20, 2010
1 Kings 19:1-15a

“Hey, they messed up one of my favorite verses!” When I first began to read today's Old Testament passage, and realized it was the one in which Elijah was going to the cave on the mountain, I was looking forward to getting to my favorite part of that story, the part that says, “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; and after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire; and after the fire a still small voice.” I love that part about the still, small voice. But when I read it, it said, “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; and after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence.” What do those Bible translators think they're doing taking away my still, small voice? Hey, that's the voice of God they're messing with!

The translation “still, small voice” shows up in the King James Version and the Revised Standard Version. The New International Version and the Living Bible say, “the sound of a gentle whisper.” But the New Revised Standard Version translates it as “the sound of sheer silence” and I have to admit that when I went back to look at the original Hebrew, “sound of sheer silence” may very well be a more accurate translation of the original Hebrew.

“A still, small voice” is an important part of our relationship with God. In the midst of problems and troubles, “a still, small voice” suggests peace, calm, a quiet sense of guidance, hearing what is the right thing to do in difficult circumstances. That sense of God speaking softly to us is a wonderful thing, but it may or may not be what is going on in this particular passage.

A St. Stephen's parishioner e-mailed me this week to say, “I wanted to share a paragraph from one of the readings in "Forward Day by Day." I don't always find the readings helpful, but occasionally I do. I'm often trying to figure out what I feel and why and this

paragraph comes pretty darn close. It's from the reading for Wednesday May 12: "As author Herman Wouk says, 'A man wants to praise God for the marvels of life, and to ask to be spared its terrors if possible, and to give thanks for what he has in hand, in health, family, and work. He wants to, that is, if a sense will not leave him that God is there.' It's very simple, but I don't think I have ever heard belief stated this way."

And the parishioner is right, that is a good description of faith: "a sense will not leave us that God is there." I wonder if that is what God is giving to Elijah, when God gives him "the sound of sheer silence." Elijah has already been involved in some pretty spectacular miracles: his prayers ignite fire on water-drenched animal sacrifices, he has wild ravens show up every day just to bring him food, he even brings a widow's son back to life. Even in today's reading he has angels bringing him food in the desert, and telling him, "Get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you." We see God as the Italian grandmother: "Eat, eat! Mangia! Get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you."

And after all the spectacular miracles, Elijah turns out to be cowering in a cave, afraid he's going to die, and at the same time so miserable that he's asking God to let him die. And the word of the Lord comes to him. The word of the Lord does not offer him guidance. The word of the Lord does not offer him peace. The word of the Lord does not even give him a command. As it does in a surprisingly large number of incidents throughout the Old and New Testaments, the word of the Lord asks a question. The word of the Lord asks the question: "What are you doing here, Elijah?" The interesting thing about this conversation is that Elijah does not answer that question in any way whatsoever. In fact, what Elijah says in his three-sentence reply is exactly the opposite of an answer to all three parts of the question. God asks "What are you doing here, Elijah?" And instead of saying what he is doing here now, he tells what he used to do elsewhere in the past: "I have been very zealous for the Lord, the God of Hosts." God asks, "What are you doing here, Elijah? And instead of telling what he is doing, he tells what other people are doing: "The Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword." God asks him, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" and instead of saying what he is doing, he says that he is only existing, and is only just barely even existing, "I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away."

Now all the information Elijah gives here is factually accurate, but none of it actually answers the question God asked him. The real answer to God's question, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" is "I'm doing absolutely nothing except feeling sorry for myself in this cave. And other people are being mean to me." I don't want to be too hard on Elijah here; I expect that if I were in his shoes I'd be feeling pretty sorry for myself too. But God's question makes us aware that self-pity isn't really a very helpful course of action; in reality it's kind of...pitiful.

So God tells Elijah, "Go out and stand on the mountain before the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by." And then God puts on his spectacular miracles, just like old times, but the end result is very different: "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; and after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence." And in the awe-inspiring enormity of the sound of sheer silence it comes across: the sense that God is there.

Maybe at this point what Elijah needs most is not words of guidance or comfort or gentleness. Maybe at this point what Elijah needs is simply the sense that God is there. All his problems remain the same, what changes is that he has a different perspective now. His problems don't seem so overwhelming, so paralyzing, now that he has encountered the living God who is there in the sound of sheer silence. It's not about the miracles, it's not about a message, it's not about what people have done to be mean in the past or what he is afraid they will do to be mean in the future, it's not even about Elijah. When everything else is peeled away, it's about God being there, in the sound of sheer silence.

And after this enormous transformative theophany, Elijah is able to come out of the cave and stand at the entrance of the cave. Well, it's a start. And God gives Elijah another chance now, after his amazing encounter, by asking him the same question again: "What are you doing here, Elijah?" And Elijah does what every single miserable person in the world does, the thing that is probably the definition of a miserable life: he repeats how mean people have been to him in the past, even though he insists he's the good one, and repeats his fears about the future: "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." He again does not answer God's question, "What are you doing here, Elijah?"

This continuing avoidance of God's question might seem surprising, except that every time I have given in to the temptation to keep repeating, out loud or in my mind, what mean things other people have done to me while I'm being the good one, or the temptation to keep repeating, out loud or in my mind, my fears about the future, it turns out that I am avoiding exactly the same question from God, "What are you doing here?" Because the answer is, "I am feeling sorry for myself—but it's all someone else's fault!"

Since Elijah is still avoiding God's question, God gives him the answer: "Go." Elijah does not have to stay in his self-pity. God gives him the way out of the self-defeating cycles. Continuing to repeat what mean things people have done to him in the past will only lead to more immobility. Continuing to repeat what he is afraid might happen in the future will only lead to more immobility. Getting caught in either of those cycles blinds us to the fact that we have the capacity to act, to move, to do. Or more accurately, getting caught in either of those cycles deafens us to the fact that we have the capacity to act, to move, to do, until we hear the voice of God saying, "What are you doing here?" Until we hear the voice of God saying, "Go."

Despite the fact that I have always loved the middle of this story, if you had asked me what happens next in the story, I would not have been able to tell you. I'm not the only one. In fact, the end of the story seems so forgettable that our lectionary passage doesn't even include most of it. But the ending turns out to be essential to understanding the middle. The Lord said to Elijah, "Go, return on your way to Damascus; when you arrive, you shall anoint Hazael as king over Aram. Also you shall anoint Jehu son of Nimshi as king over Israel; and you shall anoint Elisha son of Shaphat of Abel-meholah as prophet in your place. Whoever escapes from the sword of Hazael, Jehu shall kill; and whoever escapes from the sword of Jehu, Elisha shall kill. Yet I will leave seven thousand in Israel, all the knees that have not bowed to Baal, and every mouth that has not kissed him."

Remember how the culmination of Elijah's complaining is, "I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away." But when Elijah does what God tells him, "Go" he discovers that he is not alone. He's got Hazael, who is about to become a king,

and he's got Jehu, who is about to become a king, and he's got Elisha, who is about to become a prophet, and it turns out he's got seven thousand faithful Israelites who have not worshipped idols! He's not so helpless after all! He thought he was the only prophet left, but God's got a new prophet, Elisha, all ready to roll. He was afraid because Jezebel has threatened to have him killed, but as soon as he stops being afraid and starts to move, it turns out that he has armies on his side!

It doesn't take much to get me started on what other people should or shouldn't do. A different translation of a verse in the Old Testament book of First Kings is enough to do it. People shouldn't translate it in any way other than the way I know and love. People shouldn't mess with my expectations. But today's scriptures point us toward a God who does mess with our expectations. We expect God to give us a solution to the problem of the moment; instead God gives us himself, a sense that God is there. We expect that we know what God should do and what other people should do; instead God asks us "what are you doing here?" We expect God will feel sorry for us because we are feeling sorry for ourselves; instead God tells us "Go." We expect God to give us a wet cloth for our foreheads; instead God gives us a kick in the behind. And after God has broken through Elijah's expectations, paradoxically he provides everything Elijah wants: a solution to his problems, other people who are doing the right thing, and the sense of hope and courage he needs to emerge from the old anger and despair into a future full of potential. Because in the past, the present, and the future, God is there.

1 Kings 19:1-15a

Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done, and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword. 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." 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.

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." Then he lay down under the broom tree and fell asleep. Suddenly an angel touched him and said to him, "Get up and eat." 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. 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." 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. 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?" 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."

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; and after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence. 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?" 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." Then the LORD said to him, "Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus."