

## The Sound of Silence

A Sermon by Rev. Cal Chinn  
June 23, 2019



### **1 Kings 19:1-15a**

*Abab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done, and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword. 2Then 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." 3Then 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. 4But 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." 5Then he lay down under the broom tree and fell asleep. Suddenly an angel touched him and said to him, "Get up and eat." 6He 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. 7The 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." 8He 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.*

*9At 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?" 10He 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." 11He 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; 12and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence. 13When 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?" 14He 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." 15Then 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.*

MY FAVORITE PROFESSOR, THE PROFESSOR WHO HAD THE GREATEST IMPACT ON me when I was a student at SFTS, was 66 when he taught my Introduction to the Old Testament course. Dr. James Muilenburg was forced into retirement from his long-held teaching post at Union Seminary in New York City because Union Seminary had a compulsory retirement age of 65. I would not be serving as your Transitional Pastor if the Presbytery of San Francisco, the Synod of the Pacific, the General Assembly of the PCUSA had a compulsory

retirement age of 65. Where in the Bible does it say that God commands us to retire at 65? Are we retired from our baptismal vows at 65? When we reach 65, does God *un*-call us? When we have completed our term as a Deacon or as an Elder, when we have finished chairing the Finance Committee or our term as a Trustee on the Foundation, is God done with us? Does God's call come to us only once? When we have reached the mountain top of our service or ministry, completed a successful career, when we have accomplished a major task, raised a wonderful family, completed a marathon, when we reach 65, are we finished? Is God done with us?

IN A DRAMATIC FACE-OFF WITH THE PRIESTS OF BAAL ON MOUNT CARMEL, Elijah comes out victorious. Elijah not only cut down the flower of the clergy of Baal, but did so in a manner that attacked the pride and arrogance of the royal house of Ahab and Jezebel. Elijah was the majestic, powerful, and triumphant servant of YAHWEH against the servants of Baal. That was in 1 Kings, chapter 18. Today's reading is a continuation of the story, with these opening lines: "*Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done, and how he 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 my prophets by this time tomorrow!***" That threat by Jezebel terrified Elijah; he got up and fled for his life. Elijah, the conqueror in the previous chapter, now is a frightened fugitive, full of self-doubt, overcome by despair. And Elijah's journey was not a short one. He traveled from Jezreel, located in the valley that lies between Mt. Carmel and the Sea of Galilee, to the southern city of Beersheba, a distance of about 100 miles. While that distance does not seem all that great to today's reader, it was an enormous undertaking in a world of foot-travel. Elijah flees in fatigue, hunger, thirst, afraid for his life, so he didn't want to stop. He sleeps poorly, if at all, with constant fear of being wakened by pursuing enemies, and arising before dawn to try to get more distance away from the queen. And once in Beersheba, he continues for another day into the wilderness—not Yosemite, more like Death Valley. The prophet is physically and emotionally spent after the days of fleeing. Finally stopping and sitting down under a tree, he is spent, ready to give up: "*It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors.*" Well I think you know what that's about, don't you? A lot of us are like Elijah. Our spirits can be broken by Jezebel. As Jezebel said to Elijah, **You are Elijah, but I am Jezebel.** You are fighting for housing for the homeless? I am the Chamber of Commerce and City Hall. You cast your vote in elections? I can afford to attend \$25,000 a plate fund raisers for candidates. You are a refugee seeking asylum? I am the Immigration and Customs Enforcement. These are difficult days to proclaim the Word of God, the Good News when our daily newsfeed shout out bad news. Last weekend marked the 4 year anniversary of the shootings at Mother Emmanuel AME in Charleston. Is there a word from the Lord for those who yet grieve the daily violence and injustice perpetrated against the black community in this country?

ELIJAH WANTS TO DIE, TO RETIRE FROM MINISTRY. He rationalizes to the Lord: "*O Lord, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors.*" Elijah is ashamed that he can't accomplish what Moses did in his day. The shoes of Dr. James Emerson and Dr. Laird Stuart, of Alden Gilchrist are a challenge to fill. Like a typical Chinese mother, an angel of the Lord came to Elijah, woke him up from his sleep and said to him: "*Get up and eat.*" Food, that marvelous symbol of grace and hospitality. Food is nourishment. Food is restoration. Food is renewal. "*Get up and eat.*" The angel of the Lord ministers to Elijah's self-doubt and despair with food. Twice the angel does this. The second time the angel of the Lord touched Elijah and repeated the words, "*Get up and eat.*" And then added, "*Otherwise the journey will be too much!*" What *journey*?! Well for the next 40 days and 40 nights, Elijah was commanded by the Lord to journey to Mount Horeb, the same sacred, holy mountain where Moses met the Lord. It is no accident or coincidence that Elijah is sent on a journey that parallels the journey that Moses took through the wilderness. Arriving at Mount Horeb, Elijah immediately went into a cave.

AND NOW THE LORD REVEALS WHAT WAS ON THE LORD'S MIND ALL ALONG. And it was not retirement that was on the Lord's mind. The Lord issues a *new* call to Elijah. After everything Elijah has done—confronting the royal house of Ahab and Jezebel, defeating their religious establishment, shaming their power and position, having his life threatened and chased as a fugitive, despairing and wanting to give up and die, and journeying 40 days and nights through wilderness and now hiding out in a cave, the Lord challenges Elijah not once but twice: **What are you doing here, Elijah?** And on both occasions, according to the text, Elijah responds in self-defense and self-pity: "*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!"* Elijah was looking for sympathy, not criticism. Elijah wanted understanding, not judgment. Elijah wanted to enjoy retirement, to be given an honorable discharge, not to be called back into service. Elijah had finished his term on the Session, had done his share of teaching and leading, had attended his share of meetings, had contributed his share of financial support, had served as chair of this, as director of that, as coordinator of this and that.

BUT THAT'S NOT THE WAY THE LORD THINKS OR OPERATES. There is no such thing as retirement from our baptism. We can't stay in our cave, satisfied with our past achievements and accomplishments and honors; satisfied with the diplomas and the certificates of achievement and the plaques of appreciation and the ribbons of honors lining our cave walls and the trophies and mementos sitting on our cave mantel. The Lord calls us OUT of the cave, ***What are you doing here?*** And notice, take note of the fact that the Word of the Lord came only AFTER Elijah stepped out of the cave. As long as we remain in the cave—as long as we see retirement as staying comfortably in the safety of our caves, as long as any of us live our young, active lives in the cave—we will not hear the Word of the Lord. Once out of the cave, the Word of the Lord came to Elijah. And we hear some of the most famous recorded words of scripture: ***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...a whisper...a sound of sheer silence.*** Once we step out of the cave we will hear God's word and it comes to us not in violence like wind, earthquake and fire...in a miracle...but gently like a whisper. We expect God in a powerful and dramatic event, but instead God comes in the humiliation that shows the depth of God's love. We expect God to shout forth from the heavens with an angry voice at the unjust ways of humankind, but God judges with the gift of forgiveness. We expect God to grab us at worship, but God stalks the homeless tenants on the streets of San Francisco. We expect God while on our knees in prayer, but God appears when we stand ready and confident before a challenge. We expect God at a beautiful sunset, but God comes in the dawn of each new day's opportunities.

WAITING IN SILENCE IS NOT EASY OR COMFORTABLE. It's like locking up your smart phone for 2 weeks; or having no internet access for 2 months. The silence strips away busyness, distractions, and entertainment. You are confronted with yourself: your thoughts, voices, temptations, fantasies, all that you are and all that you are not. True silence is not escape but engagement, not emptiness but fullness, not absence but presence. It is a way of showing up and being present to God, others, myself, life and the world. God is never so present as when everything argues for God's absence. That was the experience of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Imprisoned by the Nazis, deprived of the presence of those he loved, restrained from performing his function as minister, he wrote from his lonely cell: *"I'm sure everything that happens to me has a purpose, even if it cuts across my own wishes. As I see it, I am here in prison for a purpose, and I only hope I am living up to it."* In his hour of darkness when outward events spoke of God's absence, by faith he discerned God's presence.

IN THE SILENCE, GOD SENDS ELIJAH BACK THE VERY WAY HE CAME. Face that which you most fear. Do the work God calls you to do. You see, nothing has changed. Jezebel still seeks to kill Elijah. His life remains on the line and God refuses to grant him divine immunity to the hardships inherent in being a prophet to the world bent on silencing the word of the Lord. Nothing, on the surface, in outward circumstances, has changed. But Elijah goes back to face that from which he fled, equipped only with the gift of God's presence and word, enough assurance to get him out of the cave, off the mountain, and through the wilderness, prepared once again to do the work of the Lord. Go back, says God. We will be called to stand courageously in these days with our black brothers and sisters, our refugee brothers and sisters seeking asylum, our Muslim brothers and sisters. We will need the sustenance of our weekly gathering and the knowledge of how to find God in the silence when we go back into the roaring madness of this world. Today's Elijah comes in all ages. Eight teenagers in the confirmation class at First United Methodist Church in Omaha stood before the congregation on Confirmation Sunday in April and read a statement saying they do not want to become members of the congregation at this time. The teens said they took their stand on principle because they believed the denomination's vote to uphold and strengthen its ban on LGBTQ ordination and marriage to be "immoral" and "unjust." In their words, *"We want to be clear that, while we love*

*our congregation, we believe the United Methodist policies on LGBTQ+ clergy and same-sex marriage are immoral.”* The eight teens received a standing ovation from their church family!

HIDING IN OUR CAVES, DON'T BE SURPRISED IF THE LORD INTERRUPTS YOU WITH the question, ***What are you doing here?*** The Reign of God will come on earth when enough of us are willing to come out of our caves to hear God's voice and to do God's will.

