

SERMON
Hope for Hard Times
LESSONS ON FAITH FROM ELIJAH AND ELISHA
“The Still Small Voice”
1 Kings 19:1-12

A woman invited some people to dinner. At the table, she turned to their six-year-old daughter and said, "Would you like to say the blessing?"

"I wouldn't know what to say," the girl whispered in a whiny voice.

"Just say what you hear Mommy say," her mother replied.

The little girl bowed her head and said, "O Lord, why on earth did I invite all these people to dinner?"

In our Bible passage for this morning Elijah's quandary isn't as much about what he should say as it is about how he should listen. Queen Jezebel has just put a price on Elijah's head promising him that he would be dead "by this time tomorrow." Fearing for his life, DeVega in his book *Hope for Hard Times* says "*Elijah did what any sensible, rational, clear-thinking person like you and me would have done. He ran screaming for his life out into the wilderness.*" Exhausted from his plight, we are told, Elijah collapses under a broom tree and cries for God to take his life. DeVega says of Elijah's cry: "*I think this is the phrase that makes him the most human, the most approachable, and the most relevant to us.*"

Who among us hasn't been there; wandering in the wilderness so completely worn down by the pressures of life and the demands of daily living, that all we can do is cry out to God: TAKE MY LIFE AWAY? It's that or either: DO SOMETHING AMAZING JESUS AND GET ME THE HECK OUT OF DODGE?

For those of us stuck in the wilderness; DeVega, in his book, describes a scene from the Disney/Pixar movie *The Incredibles*: "*The main hero, Bob Parr, is a former super hero who fled into hiding after it became illegal for super heroes to use their powers in public. A disheartened, bored, and exhausted Bob Parr, a.k.a. Mr. Incredible, comes home from a tedious day in the office only to find a neighborhood boy in his driveway. The boy looks up at Bob and stares at him, having seen evidence of his super-hero potential earlier. Bob finally asks the boy, 'What are you waiting for?' To which the boy says, 'I don't know ... something amazing, I guess!' Bob sighs. 'Me too, kid,' he says.*

That's the line isn't it?" concludes DeVega; "*For anyone and everyone who is wandering in the wilderness, that's what we are waiting for. We're looking for something surprising and exciting to intervene in our lives that will give us a new spark of energy and zeal to punctuate our realities.*"

Elijah, like ourselves, was no different; he was so busy looking for God's surprising and exciting response to his predicament that he failed to hear God's still small voice.

Henri Nouwen, in his book *Bread for the Journey*, says that underneath all the very noisy voices that we are listening to; "*Is a still, small voice that says, 'You are my Beloved; my favor rests on you.' That's the voice we need most of all to hear. To hear that voice, however, requires special effort; it requires solitude, silence, and a strong determination to listen.*"

One would think that after being called to meet God on top of Mount Horeb (that is, Mount Sinai) one would go with great anticipation; but we're told that Elijah goes with great reluctance.

Why would he travel to this mountain where God first spoke to Moses with reluctance? I mean ... come on ... this is the mountain of the burning bush and the ten commandments. I would be expecting big things if I have been called to go to this holiest of holy places to meet with God. But instead of waiting on top of the mountain for God to show up, we're told that Elijah withdrew into a cave. "*A cave,*" says DeVega, "*is not a place to find God ... it is a place of resignation, not revelation. They are places you go if you want to experience containment, concealment, and death.*" Elijah was no more ready to hear God than when he was dying from exhaustion under the broom tree. But who among us are ... when the Jezebel's of this world have us running scared? Who among us haven't found ourselves in a cave? Or as DeVega says: "*lost, concealed, confined, dark, lonely, isolated, longing for light, yearning for freedom?*"

The coronavirus pandemic has, in essence, forced us all into caves. Never before in our history as a nation has a disease like this had all the ingredients to make the perfect storm. According to Larry Ginsburg of Hackensack Meridian Health there's a direct correlation between the constant news stories concerning the spread of the virus, it's rising death toll, its economic impact on our nation such as loss of jobs and income and our nation's mental exhaustion. Whereas, once some of us may have had an occasional worry; we as a nation, have become consumed with worry about the future of ourselves as well our loved ones. We are, says Ginsburg; "clinical depressed."

We like Elijah are longing for light ... yearning for freedom. We're ready to hear God speak. But are we any more ready to hear him; as Elijah was in what Nouwen calls: *"that still small voice?"*

"Well, sort of;" answers DeVega.

He continues: *"The first thing that came by was a great wind. We would expect to find God in the wind. After all, this is the kind of wind that first hovered over the face of the waters, when the Spirit of God was present at Creation. It was like the wind that was breathed into human beings the moment human life began. It was like the wind and cloud present in the Tabernacle when it settled among the wandering Israelites, or the wind that was heard when the Spirit touched down at Pentecost. If there was going to be a way for God to be made known to Elijah, surely it was through the wind."*

But God was not in the wind. Because God is not always found in the way you've found God before.

Then came the earthquake. Yes, indeed, surely God would be in the earthquake. The same God who created the planets and fashioned the trees, rocks, and animals could shake the earth at its foundations. We remember that an earthquake accompanied the tearing of the Temple curtain at the time of Jesus' death, and an earthquake shook apart a jail cell where Paul and Silas were imprisoned. Surely, if ever there was a way for God to be made known to Elijah, it was here, in an earthquake.

But God was not in the earthquake. Because God is not always found in the way you've found God before.

Then came the fire. Certainly, God had to be in the fire. Like the fire that led the Israelites through the wilderness by night, a pillar of fire that blazed the way. Or the fire that touched down like tongues at Pentecost. Well, even Elijah himself had just witnessed the fire of God through the servant showdown on Mount Carmel. If ever there was a way we would expect God to be revealed to Elijah, it had to be through the fire.

But God was not in the fire. Because God is not always found in the way we have found God before.

What does all of this teach us? That sometimes, when we look for God in the ways we have found God in the past, we are unable to find God."

We're ready to hear God speak but only if God speaks in the ways we come to expect God to speak. We, like Elijah are looking to the wind, earthquake and fire. We're looking for God to intervene through an election, or at the very least, an injection.

But what this passage of scripture from 1 Kings teaches me is that we need to leave room in our hearts and our minds for God to surprise us; to, as DeVega says, *"break us out of our preconceived notions and the boxes where we have place God."* Sometimes what's needed is simply for us to quiet ourselves ... our thoughts and our minds and listen and watch for that still small voice; what the NRSV translates as 'a sound of sheer silence.'

I can't help but think of the woman sat down in a confessional booth, but said nothing. After a long silence, the priest says, "What can I do for you, my daughter?"

She still doesn't say a word.

The priest prompts her, "You may begin by saying, 'Bless me, Father, for I have sinned.'"

Still nothing. After a few more moments, the priest says, "I'm sorry, but I can't hear your confession if you're not going to say anything."

To which the woman responded, "Whatever happened to the right to remain silent?"

"The key to overcoming spiritual dryness and total exhaustion," says DeVega, *"is to quiet your life down and listen."*

Madeleine L'Engle may have said it best when she wrote:

*“In prayer the stilled voice learns
To hold its peace, to listen with the heart
To silence that is joy, is adoration.
The self is shattered, all words torn apart
In this strange patterned time of contemplation
That, in time, breaks time, breaks words, breaks me
And then, in silence, leaves me healed and mended.”*

Sometimes, according to Elijah, our hope comes when we learn to turn off all the other voices in our head and simply sit in silence and soak in the presence of God. Allow Him to fill you, comfort you, encourage you, and give you the strength to go on.