

Sermon: Sunday, August 9, 2020. 1 Kings 19: 3-15
Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, Canmore AB – Rev Greg Wooley

A few Sundays ago, on July 5th, I put the question out there, about the impact that the Bible had made on your life – what principles of life that you would consider to be explicitly “Biblical,” or scriptures that had walked with you through the highs and lows of life. Similar wonderings travelled with me this week as I prepared to preach on 1st Kings 19, except this time the question is about hymns – or phrases from hymns – that have shaped your beliefs. Sometimes based on scripture, sometimes not, the combination of a perfectly-formed phrase and memorable music can really etch something on your heart, mind and spirit: “I’ll never – no, never – no, never forsake” (How Firm a Foundation), “with bold new decisions, your people arise” (Spirit of Gentleness), and, today, this: “speak through the earthquake, wind and fire, O still small voice of calm.” Drawing upon 1st Kings 19, this poetic expression of God’s presence expressed as the “still small voice of calm” has been profoundly influential in my life, and perhaps in yours as well.

How many times, and in what circumstances, have you experienced God’s guiding presence as that “still, small voice of calm?” When I think back to 1999, to when I was off work for a year with clinical depression, those encounters with God’s calming love were pretty much daily. And at other times - when family or pastoral crises have emerged, when the foundations have been shifted by something like 9/11, when chaos or sorrow or confusion or division threatened to win the day - the “still, small voice” has grounded me and let me know that this, too, shall pass. In the early days of COVID, when the swirl of things we were just starting to know about this virus put us on such unsure footings, and even now, I have at times found it difficult to access that “still small voice...” but when I have been able to let myself step away from the turbulence, and rest in God, that holy stillness is there, in all its love and wisdom and strength.

So often, I have found this to be true. The more that the power-holders of this world flex their muscles and speak with aggression and attempt to silence contrary voices, the more evident the grounded voice of calm becomes. It’s one of the key reasons that non-violent resistance is such a powerful force for change: voices systemically silenced, people officially ignored, standing their ground and calmly but firmly saying, “we shall not be moved.” It was evident a year ago when the informed, passionate voices of Greta Thunberg and the “Fridays for Future” student environmental movement would not be silenced by nations or by industry or by the petulant name-calling of their opponents. It is evident in the knowledgeable, wise, calm and caring demeanour of our Chief Medical Officer, Dr Deena Hinshaw, who has been an absolute rock for many of us through these past five months. God’s calm presence is evident after a disaster, as we found here in Canmore back in 2013, and as I hope is being experienced in Beirut right now, with the volunteers and organizations who show up ready to do some heavy lifting, and all manner of assistance offered by charities and governments and businesses, often with little or no fanfare. And in a very different way, I give thanks for the number of times when someone has stood up at a public meeting, or a Church Conference, and amidst the bluster and the posturing and the ego of a debate that is getting out of hand, has been able to name with calmness and clarity what is going on in the room and how we might go forward. In many times and many places, we experience the power of the calm at the eye of the storm, and in my theology this isn’t

just LIKE God's still, small voice; this IS God's own voice, speaking through the open-hearted.

When Elijah experienced this presence of God in the "still, small voice" or in what some Bible translations term "a gentle breeze," the stakes were high. Elijah's life was already extremely intense, a lived metaphor of the battle for the hearts of the people of Israel... and once we reach today's reading, he is on the lam, hiding from King Ahaz and Queen Jezebel who want him dead. Seeking not only guidance for his next course of action, but some sort of evidence that God has not abandoned him, here's what happened next: God called him to stop hiding and get out in the open, and "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." (1 K19: 11-12). After the big loud displays, it was within that silence, that God's presence was encountered.

What's interesting here, is that the Bible doesn't say that God is NEVER in the wind, or the earthquake, or the fire; no claim is made here that the bigger and the louder and the more obvious, never present us with "teachable moments." On the contrary, Louis Ginzberg wrote of the rabbinic tradition "that each of the events on Mount Horeb had symbolic value. The wind is today's world, passing as quickly as a gust of air. The earthquake is the day of one's death, at which people tremble. The fire represents sufferings that take place in Gehenna (the closest thing to hell in Hebrew thought). Then the still small voice was the voice of God, who alone had the last word of judgment" (Ginzberg IV, p.200, cited in Williams p.168).

I share this, because when things are in an upset or an uproar, it is tempting to seek God only in some quiet space, away from the conflict. When things are chaotic, confusing, moving too quickly, filled with shouts and orders and too much urgency, I want things to settle down so I can find God – even though I know full well that God hasn't gone away anywhere. And I know that for many folks, with things already so chaotic and unsettled due to COVID, it was hard to know what to do with the insistence that the new normal cannot be the same as the old normal. The stories of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor and Ahmaud Arbery underlined that there are few places and few activities in the northern hemisphere where being black is safe, and from that arose a broad-based demand that we cannot emerge from this, with a social order that continues to be rigged in favour of white privilege. Yes, God does speak through the still and the calm and through non-anxious presence, God speaks to us in holy, mysterious, wordless moments, but God doesn't go away when voices have to be raised in the face of injustice. The fact that God's voice is so often found when we can get away from the distractions and the turbulence and the noise, does not mean that we need things to settle down before we can get about God's work. The Divine agenda of inclusive love, of standing with the oppressed, of expressing loving-kindness every way we can even when that is unsettling or risky, insists that we move out of our quiet place and back into the fray. Having a quiet place to come back to for reflection and replenishment is crucially important, and I hope that these days of social isolation have helped you find that quiet centre in your lives, but our mission in God's name does not just stay in that safe place.

Twice, in today's scripture reading (verses 9 and 13), God asks Elijah the same question: "what are you doing here, Elijah?" That may well be the question for us, as well, as individuals, and as Church. In the midst of these deeply unusual days, what "space" am I in... and in that space, am I actively advocating for those who are systematically pushed to the margins? Am I engaging the harder stuff that Christ calls me to, "taking up the cross and following him"? Am I really listening, with my heart, to the holy wisdom that tells me the truth of God's boundless love for me and for the plight of the world, or is there something I need to do in order to get to that place of receptiveness?

There might not be a lot in common, between the precariousness of Elijah's situation... and our efforts to be safe and respectful in these days of COVID... and the insistent voices that call us to wake up to the deep brokenness of this world and to lean into the movement for change. But there is at least this much in common: all of them, express a desire to find God, hear God, allow God to go deep into our spirits, to perceive what it would take to bring God's love into this situation. In the midst of the storm and in the calm clarity at the eye of the storm, is the love of that same God, doing what needs doing and calling us to be love, and become love, and enact love, in whatever ways we can.

Connected to God, the source of life; committed to Christ, the embodiment of love; urged to action by the Spirit, who gets us moving in new ways and new places, we seek God's will for these days. In all of this may we find God, and be found by God. Amen, and Amen.

References cited:

- Ginzberg, Louis. *The Legends of the Jews*, tr. By Henriette Szold (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1909/1937)... cited in...
- Williams, Michael E. *The Storyteller's Companion to the Bible, Judges-Kings*. Nashville: Abingdon, 1992. pp. 18-19, 166-170.

See also:

- DoSomething.org. <https://www.dosomething.org/us/articles/black-lives-taken> (background on Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, George Floyd)
- Fridays for Future. <https://fridaysforfuture.org/>
- Higginbotham, Stewart. https://day1.org/weekly-broadcast/5d9b820ef71918cdf2003565/awkward_silences