

“OUTSIDE VOICE”  
1 KINGS 19:1-15  
FOR WESTMINSTER PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, GREENVILLE, SC  
9 JUNE 2024

We continue our story with verses 11-15. Continue to listen for God’s word to us:

<sup>11</sup> [The word of the Lord] 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; <sup>12</sup>and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence. <sup>13</sup>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?’ <sup>13</sup>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?’ <sup>14</sup>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.’ <sup>15</sup>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.

This story, odd and captivating, is the word of the Lord. ***Thanks be to God***

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Generally, one of three things happens when, in a social context where I am not known, someone finds out that I am a pastor.

- one: they tell me all the reasons they no longer go to church, whether hostile or benign;
- two: and this is likely to happen in bars for some reason, they begin to confess something to me that I really don’t necessarily *need* to know;
- or three: they ask me my favorite verse in the bible.

It’s always interesting to me when that happens. There are thirty-one-thousand, one-hundred-and-two verses in our Bible, but only a handful of them most commonly appear on the Bible’s “Best Of” lists:

- Philippians 4, “I can do all things through Christ who gives me strength.”
- Or, a staple at weddings: “Love is patient, love is kind. Love is etc. etc.”
- And Romans, “.. we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him.”

I'll add today's text to that list— well, not today's text, exactly, a verse from today's text, verse 12, which I read just a moment ago.

You likely remember the King James Version: “a still small voice.” It's a notoriously difficult passage to translate, not because the Hebrew is cryptic, but because it conveys two opposites at once: silence and muted sound. The Common English Bible translates it as “a sound. Thin. Quiet.” Jewish scholar Robert Alter gives us “minute stillness,” while the NRSV, read in worship today, prefers “sheer silence.” In each case the voice — or the weighty, meaningful stillness — stands in contrast with that which has immediately preceded it: wind, fire, and earthquake.

But of course it's not the wind and the fire that we remember, much less the threats from Ahab and Jezebel. What we recall is the “still small voice.”

We remember old favorites from Philippians, First Corinthians, Romans, and 1st Kings, but how many of us, if we are honest, have any idea of their context — the setting, story, and characters from which the verse arose?

Why is it that I am more likely to hear “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me” after an athletic victory than from the depths of a prison cell, as when Paul wrote it? It's not that one usage is wrong, per se, but Philippians 4:13 is not about defying the laws of physics or the will of a generational wide receiver. It is about placing our hope squarely in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ despite our situation. Understanding the context makes a difference in understanding how God is at work in our lives.

Or take First Corinthians. “Love is patient” is an admonition directed to a feuding community — a motley crew of ethnic groups, classes, genders, and nationalities — all of whom are trying to figure out how to live in Christ. “Love is patient” is a condemnation of the vitriol with which Corinthian Christians disparaged one another. I suppose that can apply to marital bliss, but as with Philippians, it's far more than it first seems, and the context matters.

Likewise, it makes a difference if, in telling ourselves over and over again that “God works for the good,” we come to conflate Scripture with its non-biblical appropriation: “everything happens for a reason.” In the latter, God is a puppeteer, determining every

moment of our lives, whether trauma or joy. Reading *Romans* in context, however, we meet the God of Genesis, the one who works with and creates through the chaos and unpredictability of our days. The God who, like a quilt-maker, *brings order, beauty, and unity* to disparate pieces of our lives. God is not pulling at strings, God is crafting a work. The context makes a difference.

When we repeat these verses without considering their contexts we invariably miss something. Now this is not a rant against “favorite bible verses.” I have my favorite verses, those lines that, for whatever reason, animate my imagination and give meaning to my faith. Sidle up at the barstool and I’ll tell you that “God is love,” that there is no place we can flee from God’s presence, and that we feed and clothe Christ when we feed and clothe folks in our own world.

But the point stands. When we reduce the story to one element, we miss the myriad other ways that the quilt-maker might be trying to pull at the threads of our lives. To create seams where there were once only patches.

Remember, then, as we consider the story of the silence, that Scripture is much richer when we engage it in its messy fullness,

and I’ll tell you what: *this is a messy story.*

Today we are beginning a sermon series exploring the ways in which we come to *hear God (recognize God, confront God) in our lives.* We’re using figures from the Hebrew Scripture to ask how we might hear God’s call.

Now when I settled on this text I did exactly what I just spent ten minutes warning against. As we prepared the scope and sequence of the series I suggested that I’d kick it off with “the one with the still small voice.”

Forgetting much of what surrounds 1 Kings 19:12, I reduced this rich text to three words, assuming I would preach a sermon about silence. But then, well ... I read for context.

Between a death warrant, a prophet’s desolation, and a wicked case of “hanger,” First Kings 19 gave me much more than silence.

Elijah gave me a glimpse of God that I — and I suspect some of you — sorely needed to see, a God who will not relinquish his grasp on our lives, who, no matter where we are, meets us the triumphant and messy circumstances of our living, but rarely allows us to stay there;

And it all starts, as so many of these stories do, with a divine showdown on Mount Carmel.

Just before the text we read today, the Prophet Elijah, having been in hiding for years, decides to confront wayward King Ahab. Despite warnings, Ahab, whose Kingship is predicated on exclusive worship of God, has allowed his spiritual devotion to wander. Under the sway of his wife Jezebel, whose evil is so caricatured (and oddly gendered) that her name has become a noun, Ahab turned Israel (and his heart) to Ba'al, a foreign god.

Intending to end Ba'al worship in Israel once and for all, Elijah confronted Ahab and 800 of Ba'al's prophets, goading them to a contest to see whose god would prevail. For hours, in view of "all Israel," the prophets attempted to bring forth fire in Ba'al's name. But the foreign god was silent. Only when Elijah called on the God of Israel did a mighty bolt ignite the mountain. Elijah's triumph was total. The prophet — and the prophet's God — was vindicated.

But the mighty acts of God did not endear the prophet to the palace. Jezebel, having been told of Ba'al's defeat, swears that she will end Elijah's life. And thus begins our reading.

On the day of his great triumph, the prophet who healed in God's name, who worked wonders, and sheltered believers, is found desolate. Which is precisely why I think this wild wonder of this text can speak to our lives today.

I suspect that many of us, at one point or another, have felt like Elijah in the desert. We've come to the end of some supposed victory only to feel a sense of overwhelming purposelessness. Only recently Gallup reported that among Americans, mental health is at a "new low." The Surgeon General has suggested that we are in the midst of an epidemic of loneliness.

There are Elijahs everywhere in our community, our pulpits, and our pews. Our lives are centered around success, pushing more and more, improving more, selling more, acquiring more. We are on the precipice of *another* divisive election, prone to demonize all with whom we do not agree. And at the end of our days, victory or not, that push, that division, often feels untenable, isolating, defeating, even to the most faithful among us.

How many of you would rather take to the bed, to your own little broom tree, than hear one more minute of it? Elijah's circumstances may not look like ours...but his anxiety, his despair, his frustration with the world — that is all too familiar.

In the vast desert Elijah sits down under his lonely little broom tree. Afraid, hungry, and tired, he asks God that God would take his life.

The request is not granted. God has plenty more in store for Elijah, and Elijah has more sand ahead of him than behind him. Twice as he sleeps under the tree a messenger of the Lord comes to him offering food and water. The messenger knows what's ahead, and knows that God's call occasionally requires carbs ...

For forty days Elijah survived on hot-coal pita and water. On the 40th day, stuffed to the brim, the word of the Lord came to Elijah.

And what does Elijah do?

Does he fall on his face in unyielding praise? Sing hallelujah till he can no more? Not Elijah! Confronted by the Word, Elijah, in his despair, did what faithful folks have been doing for centuries, what, if we're honest, we might do too.

He complains.

Elijah makes his despair known to God in sweeping, overly-generalized, and twice repeated hyperbolic complaint: "I *alone* am faithful, a prophet among fools, and it hasn't yielded me a thing."

Elijah has fled from the eye of the emperor.

He does not wish to be, he feels alone, and he lets God know it.

God hears him in the desert.

And makes provisions for his life.

As it turns out it's not only Jezebel who's been chasing Elijah,

God has too. And God is not going to let Elijah go.

There are a million things we can take from this story, but this morning I'm aiming for three. Number one: context matters (we covered that).

Number two: there is no desert, spiritual or otherwise, in which God is not active. Elijah's God is ours, too. Even in the wilderness, even in the face of our frustration, our complaints, and our hanger, God provides and abides.

Which is to say — again — that ours is a God who, *no matter where we are*, meets us in the mess of our lives. God does not let go.

Do y'all remember the third thing? I told it to you way back 1,000 words ago: God never leaves us where we were found.

The Voice of God meets Elijah in his despair. But God will not leave him to his broom tree. God does not crush Elijah for his complaint. God doesn't even correct him. Instead, God leads him into a deep, dark cave, and tells Elijah to watch.

Elijah is so lost that he barely registers the windstorm,  
and after it the earthquake,  
and finally the fire.

It's only after all that noise,  
after the chaos, when there is  
sheer silence  
a minute stillness  
a thin, quiet sound  
that the prophet is stirred from his despair.

The prophet who called down a bolt of lightning on Mt. Carmel, who heard the roar of the crowd when they saw the Lord vindicated, is granted a view of the divine — not in unyielding power, but in a small, gentle, silence. From outside the cave, outside the quake, outside the wind, a silence summons Elijah.

Here's another place context matters. If you glance at the chatter online about the “still, small voice,” you'll hear from a lot of folks who've only read those three words and

therefore assume this text is about finding your “inner voice,” some true north within you that stills and directs you. People seem to think that Elijah has discovered the voice of God in his gut.

I’m not opposed to the voice of God within us. But that’s not what’s happening in 1 Kings 19. Elijah can’t talk himself out of his despair any more than we could, it consumes him. But he can listen. Because impossibly, from outside the wind and beyond the silence, outside his hunger, his loneliness, and his broom tree, God is calling. The God who provides, the God who abides, who makes himself known to us when we are lost in self-serving isolation. The God who called forth light and lightning accommodates himself to us, speaks to us in ways we might hear from *outside* of our desolation. And in it, through it, alongside it, *God’s Word calls us onwards*.

Don’t be fooled.

Even after the theophany, Elijah is still lost.

Knowing God is with us doesn’t solve everything in the moment.

He still worries that he has no purpose, and that he’s been set up for failure.

Which is why it’s notable that God tells Elijah that he has another job to do.

The God who meets Elijah in the desert,

who provides for Elijah’s needs,

who shows Elijah himself,

also sends him on.

God does not leave him to the loneliness of his despair,

God leads Elijah to a community and gives him work to do.

This passage is not about a still small voice.

It is about a relentless God who knows us, seeks us, and,

despite our condition, sends us to do the work of the Kingdom.

That’s what we miss when we miss the context.

We miss a sympathetic portrait of a rightly cranky prophet. We miss seeing ourselves in the text. And we miss the reminder that God is calling us *from* somewhere *to* somewhere. Maybe it is not to Mt Carmel, or to anoint the next king over Israel. But it is the God of Moses, of Elijah, of Jesus Christ, who calls and provides all the same.

The context of our lives matters. But context will never stop God's relentless pursuit. No matter where you are right now, in the joy of the mountain or under the despair of a broom tree, God is calling. You're allowed to complain, Elijah did. And by all means don't forget a biscuit. But do follow.

God will lead you to work that only you can do.  
And to a community to comfort you in your despair  
and rejoice with you in your triumph.

God will not let you go.  
And neither will we.  
That's Kingdom work.  
Not only here: our work is out there too —  
where God meets us, feeds us, comforts us,  
and always pushes us on.

From outside of ourselves a voice is calling.  
In and through all that we try to hide, it seeks.  
God is speaking. It's not always a word we want to hear.  
But we are made all the better for following,  
for stretching out,  
and walking  
along the road  
that leads to crosses and broom trees, yes,  
but also to life, to community, and to empty tombs.

*—Leigh Stuckey*