

Quiet

A Sermon for Pilgrim Church

Rev. Reebee Girash

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### **1 Kings 19:9-18**

19:9 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?"

19:10 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."

**19:11 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;**

**19:12 and after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence.**

19:13 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?"

19:14 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."

19:15 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.

19:16 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.

19:17 Whoever escapes from the sword of Hazael, Jehu shall kill; and whoever escapes from the sword of Jehu, Elisha shall kill.

19:18 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."

### *Prayer*

### *Sermon*

As so many students head back to classes and campus, I've been thinking about one of my own college returns.

The very first night I was back on campus a wild storm came up of the sort that only happens in summer, in flat lands, prairie and big

sky places, such as southern Minnesota. I lived that year in a dorm that overlooked the soccer fields, and beyond them, the Carleton Arboretum. The storm rolled slowly and mightily across the sky, lightning building and flashing in small pockets of mile-wide clouds, thunder almost continuous booming. I have never before or since seen a storm like this one. Even so I have no excuse for my completely stupid action: I ran out into the storm. I stumbled down the hill and on to the middle of the soccer fields, which I had entirely to myself, and I laid down on the field and watched the sky and I jumped up and danced in the rain. And I felt the glory of God. God was in the storm.

I came back into the dorm, soaked, amazed. And my roommate gave me a talking as only a Texan with her back up can do, and I never ever again danced in the thunderstorm.

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“19:11 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;

19:12 and after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire....”

This must have surprised Elijah, that God is not in the dramatic, mountain-splitting wind; that God is not in the rumbling earthquake; that God is not in the heat of the fire.

Because, you see, God was in the fire for Elijah, before. God was in the storm for Elijah, before.

King Ahab, of the northern kingdom of Israel when Elijah prophesies, King Ahab marries a follower of the god Baal - a woman whose name you know, Jezebel. Our 21st century ears may wonder what the fuss is about marrying someone of a different religion but in chapter 16 we find out that followers of Baal, now including Israel's king, practice child sacrifice.

So Elijah, God's prophet, challenges King Ahab and the prophets of Baal. Standing on the top of Mt. Carmel, with 450 prophets of Baal on one side, and just Elijah to represent the LORD, the contest is met. The people of Israel are gathered on the slopes of the mountain to watch. Elijah sets the terms of the contest:

“You call on the name of your god, and I will call on the name of the LORD. The god who answers by fire—he is God.” (1 Kings 18)

The prophets of Baal called out from morning till noon. “Baal, answer us!” they shouted. But there was no response; no one answered.

Elijah starts to strut. When it is time for him to call on the LORD, it is like he is putting on a magic show. Before I call on the LORD, he says, poor water all over this wood. Again. Again! AGAIN! Then, he calls on God.

And the fire of the LORD falls and burns up the sacrifice, the wood, the stones and the soil, and also licks up the water in the trench.

**39** When all the people see this, they fall prostrate and cry, “The LORD *is* God!”

God is in the fire. Surely, God is in the fire, that time. And the people’s hearts are changed.

Ah, if only Elijah had taken his bow then.  
Instead, he slaughters all of the prophets of Baal.

And Jezebel, the queen, takes offense and promises to slaughter Elijah. Who, surprisingly for one who can all down fire and rain, runs away.

South, through Judah, out of the northern kingdom, to the wilderness, Elijah runs in despair and fear for his life. I have to wonder, too, if Elijah is ashamed of the killing he has done.

God sends a new message to Elijah in the wilderness: food, and water, strength for the journey, a path to Mount Horeb (also known as Sinai). Elijah thinks he alone follows the LORD, but God’s voice reminds Elijah that he is not alone, that there are faithful people in Israel, that God is with him and them. On Mount Horeb comes “the assurance that God’s cause has a future in the world that does not depend only on Elijah’s personal success or lack thereof.”<sup>1</sup> Elijah has seen God in fire and in storm, but God’s

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<sup>1</sup> Dan Epp-Tiessen, “1 Kings 19: The Renewal of Elijah” in the Spring 2006 volume of *Direction: A Mennonite Brethren Forum*

love and renewing strength come to him in the stillness. In the dark night of his soul, God comes in a whisper.

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Never since that night on the soccer field have I sensed God's presence in such dramatic ways. There have been storms, but God has not been in the lightning. There have been sunsets over the ocean but God has not been in the wind or the waves. Yet...God is in the still small voice; the soft, murmuring sound, the low whisper, the quiet. When I pause, when I make room, when I listen.

And the thing is, I had no power to bring about an experience of God in the storm. It just happened, out of the blue, and *perhaps I should not* have experienced God in that storm. None of us can call God down in storm or fire, on cue. On the other hand: we *can* make room for God in the silence.

We might want to meet God in fire, in quake, in thunder. But most of us won't ever meet God there. Instead, we'll meet God in the silence, in the empty spaces, in the mystery, in the questions, in the moments we make room for her.

Perhaps this is the good news for us: God doesn't arrive on cue - but we can invoke God's presence by listening in the silence. By making room and by listening for the still small voice.

Amen.

