

## *The Sound of Silence*

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Text: I Kings 19:1-15

When I announced my retirement as pastor of our church in Rhinelander—and I freely confess that I haven't been much of a success at retirement—I shared with the congregation a little illustration that I had heard at a retirement seminar sponsored by our church's Pension Boards. It had to do with a retired pastor's relationship with that pastor's former congregation. "Imagine that you're a bus driver," we aspiring retirees were told, "and you're driving a bus on a segment of a cross-country route. You begin with the group of passengers that were there on the bus when you started your part of the trip. Along the way, some passengers get off at their stops and others board. When it's time for your replacement driver to continue on the route, you have to get off the bus. You don't stay on the bus and critique the next driver's skills. It wouldn't be good for you, wouldn't be good for your passengers, and it certainly wouldn't be good for the person who is taking over for you. You have to turn over the safety of the passengers to your successor as you wish them all well." That's what I told the good folks in Rhinelander.

On my last Sunday in that church, my friend Bob Lee, a pastor from Vermont, led the pastoral prayer, and he wandered through the congregation with a microphone asking people to say a word that came to mind as they thought about me and my pastorate. People said nice things, of course, but one little boy—he was little then, but he just graduated this spring from Three Lakes High School—said, "bus driver." Bob was puzzled, but the congregation loved it, and had a good laugh. Well, I haven't been pastor here as long as I

was in Rhinelander, but I've been here long enough that we've gotten used to each other as pastor and congregation, and so I will be getting off the bus for a time to let my successor move on with this congregation without having a former pastor looking over her shoulder. But, when it seems a good time for me to return, and Pastor Jane and I will decide that together, I will come back as a passenger, not as a would-be driver.

But it *has* been a journey, hasn't it? And it's been a journey I've enjoyed. Everybody in a bus except for the driver is a back seat driver, I guess, but I have to say that you have spared me negative commentary about my driving skills. And for that I am grateful.

One of the things I *would* critique myself about, though, is that in my sermons I have not spent nearly as much time as I should have on readings and stories from the Hebrew scriptures. There is such wisdom in those stories, and I sometimes worry that we've forgotten many of them, and that we haven't nurtured our children with them. So, this is a confession. And although it's too late to remedy that, during this, my last sermon as your pastor, I want to spend some time with one of the those Old Testament accounts. It *is* assigned for today by the lectionary, and besides, Pastor Wayne Drucek, who filled in for me one Sunday in early February—you all remember February, right?—preached back then on today's Gospel reading from the lectionary, and it was a really good sermon. So I don't want any comparison to be made between his driving and mine. And besides, I think that our passage from I Kings in the Hebrew scriptures has something to tell us about where we are on our journey of faith, a journey I have been privileged to share with you.

In today's reading, we have heard about Elijah, a prophet who was on the run from an enraged Queen Jezebel and her complicit husband King Ahab. Jezebel and Ahab had been warned by Elijah that history swings on an ethical hinge, that their injustices would come back to haunt them. Like other rulers we can think of, Jezebel preferred to listen to her own advisors, her own group of court prophets whose sole qualification was that they

would tell her exactly what she wanted to hear, regardless of its relationship to the truth. A confrontation was inevitable, the end result of which was that Jezebel's court prophets were all killed. Don't try this at home. It was this slaughter that had enraged Jezebel and led her to send her minions to do to Elijah what had been done to her beloved court toadies.

And so Elijah ran off into the wilderness. He was so frightened and so discouraged that he asked God to get it over with. "Take away my life," he pleaded with God. And then he fell asleep in the shadow of a tree. During his sleep, an angel appeared to Elijah, touched him, and said, "Get up and eat." And lo and behold, food and water had been provided for him, out there in the wilderness. And then, later, the angel touched him again, fed him, and told him to get a move on. So he traveled for forty days, always a significant number, to Mount Horeb, the very mountain where Moses had his encounters with God.

So, here is lesson number one from this story: just when things seem to be at their most desperate, God provides us with what we need to get on with our journey. We always have a choice, of course, as to whether we will take advantage of those resources, but if we are open to listening to God's messages for us, God has a mission for us. I really believe that. But it's a big if, that "if" of whether we're willing to take advantage of what God provides for us for the journey.

One of my favorite preachers was the late Fred Craddock, a Disciples pastor whom I occasionally got to hear preach at Disciples General Assemblies. Craddock told of his first parish, in Oak Ridge, Tennessee. It was at the beginning of Oak Ridge's becoming a center for the development of nuclear energy, and people from all sorts of backgrounds were beginning to move into the area to take advantage of the new employment opportunities being offered. This alarmed members of the congregation who pretty much wanted to keep things just the way they were. The church council voted not to accept as a member anyone who wasn't a property-holder in the community. Soon after that, Craddock left

that congregation in protest. Some years later he and his wife were passing through Oak Ridge and decided to see what had become of that church. They discovered that the church had closed and the building was being used as a barbecue restaurant. They decided to eat there. In the restaurant were all sorts of people, different ages, races, even languages. Craddock said to his wife, “It’s a good thing that church closed, because otherwise there wouldn’t be all these different people here.” God gives us the resources; we have to be open to receiving them.

Back to Elijah. Now he was in the sacred precinct of Mr. Horeb. And the word of God came to him—we’re not told precisely how—and the word was in the form of a question, “What are you doing here, Elijah?”

So, point two. God is a persistent questioner. God is always asking us what we are doing here, what are we doing with the mission that God has given us. It’s our job to keep our ears open to hear that question, to be bothered by it, to be challenged by it. It is so tempting both in our individual lives and in our church life, to say, “OK, I finally got there. Here I am on the sacred mountain. I made it. My journey is over.” But if we listen, if we really listen for God’s word, if we listen for God’s voice as we hear it in the needs of the human beings of this community and the wider community, we’ll hear that insistent question, “What are you doing here?” There are people in need. “What are you doing here?” There are people who are excluded because they are different. “What are you doing here?” There are the false prophets who tell us that if things are OK for us, then things are OK. “What are you doing here?”

But to continue. Elijah again whined to God about his plight. “I alone am left, and the powers that be are trying to take my life from me.” How often do we feel alone totally alone when we’re facing tough times? “Go out onto the mountain,” God tells him, “because I am about to visit.” And so Elijah did as he was told, and there were the well-known earthquake, wind and fire referred to in our opening hymn. But God was not in

these spectacular events. There was instead the sound of sheer silence and God's voice was heard in that sheer silence. I know, it's an assertion that seems to contradict itself. After all, how can you "hear" silence?

The first time my daughter visited us after we had moved to Eagle River, she told me that she couldn't sleep because it was too quiet. "It's so quiet, it's loud," she said. Laura grew up in New York City, the city that really does never sleep, as that Frank Sinatra song tells us. So her discomfort, which was temporary, was understandable. But up here, we have silence, the blessing of silence, if we choose to hear it, the sound of silence in the midst of the noise of our lives: the noise of lawnmowers and snowmobiles, jet skis or souped up motorboats, or ATVs, to be sure—but more profoundly the noise of opinions that replace reflection, arguments that replace conversations, public prayer said aloud that replaces listening for God's answer. The Quakers have something in their appreciation of silence. Sometimes we can only hear God in the loudness of silence. So, point three, listen to the silence. It's not deafening; it's eloquent.

Frederick Beuchner wrote of such an experience of silence. At sunset on a winter evening, on an impulse he entered his classroom full of eager college students, turned out the lights in the room, and he and the students sat in silence for twenty minutes as they watched a beautiful sunset unfold outside the classroom windows. He thought it was one of the best classes he ever taught. "We were bound together simply by the fact of our being human," he wrote, "by our insignificance in the face of what was going on out there through the window, and by what was going in that classroom. The way this world works, people are very apt to use the words they speak not so much as a way of revealing but, rather as a way of concealing who they really are and what they really think, and that is why more than a few moments of silence with people we do not know well are apt to make us tense and uneasy. Stripped of our verbal camouflage, we feel unarmed against the world and vulnerable, so we start babbling about anything just to keep the silence at

bay. But if we can bear to let it be, silence can be communion at a very deep level indeed.”

When Elijah “heard” the message of God’s profound silence, he went out and stood at the entrance of the cave in which he had been hiding. And then again, there was God’s voice and that insistent question, “What are you doing here?” And then, again, he offered that plaintive, “I alone am left.” And then came God’s instruction, “Go! Return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus.” We need to hear God’s silence; we need the solitude of the cave; but ultimately silence and solitude are not our destination. They are the sustenance we need to reenter the world and be faithful to God in the way we live our lives.

When I began my ministry in Rhinelander, one of the members of the Church Council asked me what programs I would institute to help rebuild the church after a period of division and decline. My response was to say that my first priority was to make sure that we had good and faithful worship. It was another way of saying that we need to hear God’s question of “What are you doing here?”, to hear God’s assurance of sustenance for the journey, to listen to God’s loud silence as we quiet the noises around us and are told by that still small voice, to “go.” “Go! Return again and again to the wilderness.” Go in the assurance that God is always with us. So, dear friends, *Allah ma ’kum*. “may God go with you.” *Ma ’a Salameh*, “Go in peace”. Amen and amen.