

THE SOUND OF SILENCE

Sermon preached by the Rev. Douglas Clark, June 26, 2016

Ordinary 12/Pentecost +5

First Congregational Church of Haddam

Higganum Congregational Church

“In essentials, unity; in nonessentials, diversity; in all things, charity”

Text: 1 Kings 19:1-15a (NRSV)

¹Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done, and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword. ²Then Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah, saying, “So may the gods do to me, and more also, if I do not make your life like the life of one of them by this time tomorrow.” ³Then he was afraid; he got up and fled for his life, and came to Beer-sheba, which belongs to Judah; he left his servant there. ⁴But he himself went a day’s journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a solitary broom tree. He asked that he might die: “It is enough;



now, O LORD, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors.”

⁵Then he lay down under the broom tree and fell asleep. Suddenly an angel touched him and said to him, “Get up and eat.” ⁶He looked, and there at his head was a cake baked on hot stones, and a jar of water. He ate and drank, and lay down again.

⁷The angel of the LORD came a second time, touched him, and

said, “Get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you.” ⁸He got up, and ate and drank; then he went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights to Horeb the mount of God.

⁹At 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?” ¹⁰He 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.” ¹¹He 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; ¹²and after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of [fine] silence. ¹³When 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?” ¹⁴He 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.” ¹⁵Then the LORD said to him, “Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus.”¹



The prophet Elijah was, by almost any measure, a successful man of God.

Elijah was **faithful**. When God told him to live by a stream, and to drink water from the stream and trust the ravens to feed him, he did; and God's promises were fulfilled.

Elijah was **fruitful**. When he told the widow in Zarepath to bake a small cake of bread, using the little flour and oil she had left, she reluctantly followed his instructions. And what Elijah had told her would happen, happened: “The jar of flour was not used up and the jug of oil did not run dry, in keeping with the word of God spoken by Elijah” (I Kings 18:16).

Picture Credits: Tree: http://2.bp.blogspot.com/-c_zeHj6sO4A/UCkKWbmo2BI/AAAAAAAAAUM/YcXu_PVPBvE/s1600/tree+.jpg; Cave: https://www.tonycooke.org/images/featured_articles/regular_articles/elijah-cave.jpg.

Elijah was **powerful**. After God had defeated the 450 prophets of Baal in a contest on Mount Carmel, Elijah singlehandedly slaughtered each and every one of those “false prophets.” (I hasten to add that I'm not in favor of mass killings, but this is how this particular story shows Elijah's power.)

Given these successes, Elijah had many reasons to trust and obey God. But strangely, when his adversary Jezebel issued a death threat against him, he was filled with fear and fled for his life (I Kings 19:3). Even more strangely, when he had fled from her death threats and found refuge under a single broom tree in the desert, he felt that his life was no longer worth living, and he prayed that he might die. “I have had enough, LORD. Take away my life; I am no better than my ancestors” (I Kings 19:4).

Barbara Brown Taylor points out that when Elijah lay down under the broom tree, he was prepared to die, “but instead of dying he fell asleep.” She comments that “if you have ever suffered from depression, then you may recognize this as one of the signs. A depressed person can sleep twenty hours a day without ever feeling rested. Every time the eyes open, the brain says, 'Go back to sleep. You aren't up to this. You don't want to see this. Go back to sleep.'”²

God, however, won't let Elijah succumb to despair. God doesn't answer Elijah's prayer—or rather, God doesn't give the answer Elijah is looking for. God won't let Elijah give up on life just yet, since God has at least two more prophetic tasks for Elijah to fulfill: to recruit and anoint Elisha as his successor; and to confront Ahab and Jezebel over their murder of Naboth and the theft of his vineyard. So God sends an angelic messenger, not once but twice, to wake Elijah up and provide him with sustenance for the journey that awaits him.

What it takes to lift Elijah out from his despair under the broom tree is a no-nonsense angel. The angel touches Elijah, wakes him up, and wastes no time getting to the heart of the message from God: Get up and eat. Which Elijah does—and promptly goes back to sleep. So a second time, the angel touches Elijah, wakes him up, tells him to “Get up and eat”, and then explains, “otherwise the journey will be too much for you.”

I find it interesting that the angelic messenger refers only to “the journey,” without saying anything more about the duration or destination of this journey. But Elijah sets forth on a journey through the wilderness that will take him 40 days on foot, and will bring him to Mount Horeb, which is also known as Mount Sinai, which is where Moses met God in the cloud on the summit and received the Ten Commandments.

²Barbara Brown Taylor, “Four Stops in the Wilderness,” *Journal for Preachers* (Lent 2001), 7. Accessed online on 06/12/13 at <http://web.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?sid=f8e1d2b4-a21a-4bd5-8299-a4ac0f7502e2%40sessionmgr113&vid=2&hid=128>.

I find myself imagining these forty days in the wilderness as a journey from despair to hope, from disillusionment to renewal, from a major depressive episode toward relief and revitalization. It takes time for the cloud of despair and disillusionment and depression to lift. It takes time for the seed of hope and renewal and relief and revitalization to sprout and grow. Change doesn't happen overnight.

* * *

In the little city of Summerville, Georgia, there's a unique outdoor art museum called "Paradise Garden." This outdoor museum, if that's the right word, displays more than 46,000 items, all the work of self-taught folk artist Howard Finster.

The first time I heard about Howard Finster was when I read one of Barbara Brown Taylor's sermons on the gospel of Matthew. According to Barbara Brown Taylor, "Howard Finster started out as a Baptist preacher and served eight or nine churches in rural Georgia and Alabama before he became disillusioned in the early 1970's.

"After preaching 4,625 sermons, he says, after presiding at more than 400 funerals and 200 weddings, he conducted a survey at his church and found out that no one remembered anything he had said. So he retired from preaching and began fixing things instead—televisions and bicycles, mainly—until 1976, when an inner voice from God told him to paint sacred art."³

Howard Finster's disillusionment was in a sense the opposite of Elijah's. Elijah's problem was that Ahab and Jezebel did remember what he had said and done—and because of that, they wanted him dead, the sooner the better.

Elijah was exhausted. He wasn't exhausted because of a hard day's work. He was existentially exhausted, worn out, burned out. He had succumbed to discouragement, to disillusionment, to despair.

I can't speak for people in other fields, but I know about burnout in my field. I know about clergy burnout, from personal experience, from observation, and from reading. I'm fortunate that when I hit a wall of discouragement and disillusionment in 2001, I was able to transition from settled ministry to interim ministry, which has been for the past 15 years my true calling, my true vocation. Unlike Howard Finster, I didn't hear an inner voice telling me to make this change. Unlike the prophet Elijah, I wasn't fleeing from any death threats. My transition to transitional ministry just kind of happened—which is often how God moves in mysterious ways.

There's not much mystery in how God moved in Elijah's time of disillusionment. First there was the no-nonsense angel, telling him to get up and get going. Then there was the forty-day wilderness journey, recalling Israel's

³Barbara Brown Taylor, *The Seeds of Heaven: Sermons on the Gospel of Matthew*, 27.

forty-year wilderness journey. Then there was the no-nonsense, living, still speaking God, who asked Elijah, not once but twice, “What are you doing here?” **Before** the earthquake, wind and fire, and then **after** the earthquake, wind and fire, in the sound of sheer silence, God asked Elijah: “What are you doing here?”

Imagine being on a mountain in a violent storm, when all your senses are assaulted, fearfully awaiting the thunderous voice of God. And suddenly the storm is stilled, and your ears are filled with an eerie silence, and then, only then, in the sound of sheer silence, can you hear the voice of the still-speaking God.

Well, we're not in a mountain cave in a violent storm. We're in a sanctuary, a safe and sacred space, where there is neither the thunderous voice of God nor the sound of sheer silence. If, in this sacred and safe space, God were to ask you, or if a fellow church member were to ask you, or if a visitor were to ask you, “What are you doing here?”, what might your answer be?

“I am here because this past week has worn me down, and I need some respite care, and I need some encouragement.”

“I am here because I made a serious mistake last week, and I don't feel good about it, and I want to ask God to forgive me.”

“I am here because I have been blessed in many ways this past week, and I want to give thanks to God for the joy I have found—and the joys that have found me.”

“I am here because a friend or a family member is going through some tough times right now, and I want to lift her or him up in prayer before God.”

“I am here because if I weren't here, I would miss the music and the readings and the preaching and the prayers and the people who care about me.”

“I am here because God is here. I can't explain God, but I can feel a presence of Spirit.”

“I am here because God needs me to be here.

“God needs me to be part of something greater than myself.

“God has no hands but my hands, and our hands,

together in this church,

blessing one another,

reaching out to those in need,

embracing one another's joys and sorrows,

opening with amazement to the gift of life

and the grace of God.”

I am here because **God** is here.

I am here because God **needs me** to be here.

Thanks and praise be to God! Amen.