

## **Elijah and the sights and sounds of God**

In the beginning a wind from God swept over the waters of chaos, and a universe was born.

In the thunder, fire, and the quaking of a mountain, God made a covenant with a people and a nation was born.

In the howling wind and flame of Pentecost a church was born.

But for Elijah, God was not in the wind or the fire or the earthquake. In the sheer silence, Elijah finally emerged from the cave in which he had hidden, and God said, Elijah what are you doing here?

True confession – I've always had a hard time getting into the Elijah story. I don't know why. There are actually some pretty cool images. This one might be familiar to you, although you might have heard the sound of sheer silence translated as still small voice.

Elijah's story is also the origin of the chariot of fire coming down from heaven, which gave us the spiritual *Swing Low, Sweet Chariot* and the movie title, *Chariots of Fire*...with arguably one of the best theme songs ever.

Mostly I think I really just struggle with this whole section of the Old Testament from Joshua to the later prophets. It can get tedious.

This section of the Bible that deals with the judges and kings is important for one major reason. It helps us see how the abysmal failure of Israel's leaders led to the exile, one of the most defining events in Israel's history.

The exile event is the setting in which we can understand the major and minor prophets. In the time after the exile, when God's people were still struggling, the prophets begin to point to something new...a Messiah from God who would come and set things right. With this historical grounding, we can begin to grasp salvation history as it stretches forward into the future.

So, we can't really skip over that section of the Bible without losing some sense of where the story is heading. So we'll briefly address Elijah. But then we'll move on to what did captivate me reading the story this time...and what gives us our connection for this All Saints Sunday.

Elijah had a very difficult prophetic career. Most prophets do. But Elijah's was especially so.

Elijah's ministry began during the reign of King Ahab in Israel. We're about 4 or 5 kings in from the division of the nation that we read about last week.

It has not gone well in either Israel or Judah. Most of the kings were terrible. Elijah is a prophet in the northern kingdom of Israel.

King Ahab married Jezebel. To this day, the name Jezebel is equated with an immoral, backstabbing woman.

Jezebel was a Baal worshipper and when Ahab married her, he became one too. By now, you know that idolatry was the big sin in those early days. Worshipping Baal was not only a violation of the first commandment, but it was a more violent religion with human sacrifice as one of its practices.

Elijah had been in conflict with Ahab and Jezebel and the prophets and priests of Baal from the very beginning of his ministry. He has been a constant thorn in Ahab's side. He's been on the run more than once.

Before today's story, on Mt. Carmel, Elijah called down fire from heaven to prove that Jahweh, the God of Israel, was the true God. Then he had the priests of Baal killed.

As you can imagine, that did not go over well with Jezebel. Jezebel vowed to kill Elijah. Elijah ran away and just wanted to lay down and die. God sent an angel to feed him and give him water. Then he traveled 40 days to Mt. Horeb. But that's not actually where God wanted him to go. God wants him still in the fight.

God asks what are you doing here?

God I've done everything I can for you. But these people are impossible. I'm the only one left who is faithful. And now my life is in danger.

Elijah is worn out. Scared. Challenging oppressive kings and queens and rampant idolatry is hard, dangerous work and Elijah seems to be done.

With a sigh, God gives instructions for Elijah to pass his mantle on to Elisha.

It's not quite the end. Elijah has a couple more confrontations with the king. Then, when he and Elisha were on the road a chariot of fire appeared and Elijah ascended to heaven in a whirlwind. Elisha picked up from there.

But I want to go back to where I started and to what captivated me...the sights and sounds of God.

In the beginning a wind from God swept over the waters of chaos, and a universe was born.

God came to Adam and Eve with the sound of a breeze rustling through the leaves in the garden. God walked through the garden calling “where are you?” But Adam and Eve hid because they knew they’d disobeyed God and they were ashamed.

God spoke to Abraham with words of promise and blessing.

In the thunder, fire, and the quaking of a mountain, God made a covenant with a people and a nation was born.

For Elijah, God was not in the wind or the fire or the earthquake. In the sheer silence, God’s presence hovered and that still small voice, said Elijah, what are you doing here?

God came to the prophets in words and strange visions of heavenly throne rooms with angelic creatures singing.

An angel from God appeared to first Mary, then Joseph with puzzling but hopeful words. A choir of angels sang to shepherds on the night the savior was born.

In the howling wind and flame of Pentecost a church was born.

But the sights and sounds of God aren’t just relegated to a dusty history, however holy that history might be.

The sights and sounds of God are present in and around us. The cosmic Christ – the divine logos present at creation – is the beginning and the end...and everything in between. Christ is in the sounds of creation...the chirping birds and the barking dogs and the roaring lions. The splashing whales and the scurrying mice. In the rustling trees...and even in the apparent silence of microscopic creatures.

Christ is present in the very first squall we make as we emerge from the womb and Christ is present, with us and in us, at the sound of our last raspy breath.

Christ’s presence is heard in our laughter and our tears...and in the silence of our own awe.

Christ, the alpha and omega, is with us as we grow, learn, and love. In the Spirit, we are taught, inspired, comforted, and assured of God’s promise, from beginning to end.

On this All Saints Sunday, the day we remember those who have died, we give thanks for that eternal presence.

We respond to the sights and sounds of God through our song and our prayer...our worship and our love for neighbor...until the day when our own voices in this life fall silent.

The voices of the Saints we remember today have fallen silent in this life. But Christ still sings through them as they join all the voices of the saints in the heavenly places. In a few minutes we will begin our communion liturgy. We too will be invited as the church on earth to join that chorus...and so with all the saints, with the choirs of angels and the hosts of heaven, we praise your name and join your unending hymn...holy, holy, holy Lord, God of power and might.