

## Elijah

I went to medical school in Omaha. Daryl and I lived in an apartment at 39<sup>th</sup> and Cass Street. It was about 3 blocks from Dodge Street, one of the busiest streets in Omaha. It was a typical urban environment. It was never completely quiet. There was at least some traffic all night. There were sirens. In a place where some places were open 24 hours seven days a week, you could go to the store at midnight if you wanted to. We lived in a four-plex so the comings and goings of other residents were often part of the background noise, even at night.

If you've lived in a big city, you know you just get used to it.

One of my first clinical rotations in medical school was a family practice rotation in Aurora Nebraska. The population then was around 3800. My living quarters were at Ken's Motel.

It was so quiet at night it took me several nights to even be able to sleep. There was nothing. Nothing was open at night so nobody had any reason to go anywhere. Sirens were rare. And not that many people inhabited Ken's Motel.

Until I got used to it, the silence made me uneasy. In a world of bustle and noise, silence can bring us up short.

That's the scene we're invited to imagine here on the mountain with Elijah. Would almighty God be found in the howling wind? The crushing earthquake? The roaring fire?

Or would God be in the unsettling silence after?

Let's back up and get the lay of the land here in this story.

Before our All Saints break, we talked about Solomon. Solomon was David's son. He reigned over a prosperous and united Israel. He built the Temple. But he made alliances with other nations that included worshipping their gods.

He used forced labor and was a harsh taskmaster during the building of the Temple. Resentment grew. His son Rehoboam succeeded Solomon and was an even harsher taskmaster. The Northern Tribes seceded – the Kingdom was split in two.

As we go through the story from here, especially as we deal with the prophets, we'll find that some of the prophets do their work in the northern kingdom of Israel, and others in the southern kingdom of Judah.

Elijah is a prophet in the Northern kingdom of Israel. At this point, we're about 7 or 8 kings into the history of Israel. Each king was more corrupt than the last.

Now it's Ahab. And he marries a woman who is not an Israelite...Jezebel. Jezebel and Ahab were both awful. Jezebel was sufficiently awful, that for a long time, her very name was synonymous with any treacherous, evil woman. Feminist authors in recent years have rethought that, but that's beyond the scope of this sermon. For our purposes today, it's clear that Jezebel and the prophets of her god, Baal, were in a fight to the death with the prophets of Israel.

Elijah has seriously ticked Jezebel off. First, in a contest between himself and the prophets of Baal, Elijah was able to bring down fire from heaven whereas Baal's prophets couldn't.

Then, Elijah killed the prophets of Baal...Jezebel's prophets. Now, Jezebel wants him dead...by tomorrow.

Long before the raging wind, earthquake and fire, Elijah's ministry has been a dangerous cacophony of rage and violence. Now, he fears for his life. So Elijah runs. He runs out of Israel into Judah and even further into the wilderness.

It's all been too much. He's hungry, thirsty, exhausted, and frightened. He's ready to die. Just kill me now God.

But, that's not what God does. Instead, God sends an angel to make him some food and tell him to sleep some more. Instead of 40 days of fasting like Jesus did, Elijah gets 40 days of God's tender care and some good rest.

Never underestimate the power of good food and good sleep to get you back in the groove.

After the 40 days, he's ready to go again. He starts off on the journey. But it's not clear what exactly he is supposed to do or what he wants from God.

What he gets from God first, is a question – Elijah, what are you doing here?

Elijah pours out his despair – God I've tried so hard. But nobody, and I mean nobody, has listened to me. Nobody has stayed faithful to you except me. And now they want to kill me to boot!

What did Elijah expect God to do? Maybe something powerful to bring down the Baal-worshippers and wicked Ahab and Jezebel. A well-timed natural disaster just might be the ticket.

First comes a great wind – a tornado maybe, tearing a path on the mountain. Maybe that's God's answer. But no, God isn't in that.

Second, an earthquake shakes the very foundation of the earth. God's not in that either.

Then a great fire – maybe like the images of roaring wildfires in the western United States.

But God isn't in that either.

After all the commotion, the silence was deafening.... unsettling, sort of like the quiet of Ken's Motel in Aurora.

And out of the silence comes the still small voice of God...Elijah you are not as alone as you think. 7000 others are trudging this road with you. And you still have work to do.

You've got new kings to anoint. And you won't have this job forever – Elisha will be your successor. Anoint him and begin getting him ready.

If Elijah expected a mighty act of God to set everything right, he doesn't get it. Instead, he gets the quiet assurance of God's presence and care.

He gets the quiet voice of God giving him the next things to do and he gets God's assurance that he won't be alone.

What do you expect from God? What do you hope for? When you pray, what do you think might happen? What do you wish would happen?

Are you waiting for some big powerful act of God to swoop in and wipe out evil and set things right?

We live in a noisy world. Even if you live out in the country with very little traffic, you can still be bombarded by the noise. 24/7 news channels bring news of conflict, conspiracy, violence, sickness, and death.

Divisiveness, bitterness, rage, hatred, howl at us from social media.

Preaching the love of God and love of neighbor Jesus called us to do can sometimes seem like as impossible a task as Elijah had.

Calvin and Hobbes is a comic strip with a precocious boy and his talking stuffed tiger wrestling with some of the biggest questions of life. A 1990 strip shows Calvin swinging on a swing set. A bully comes along and says, Get off the swing, Twinky. Calvin says Forget it Moe, wait your turn. Moe punches him and he flies off the swing and lands in a beat up heap. He says "It's hard to be religious when certain people don't get incinerated by a bolt of lightning."

That punchline has lived on. It became a Twitter post from the Calvin and Hobbes feed in 2018. I've seen it making the rounds on social media again.

Maybe we don't wish for certain people to get struck by lightning – or maybe we do, but would never admit it. But haven't we often wished for God to act in a bit more attention-getting way?

I mean would people change their self-centered ways if God showed up in an earthquake or howling wind and spoke from that?

Picture it – a great wind howls through – maybe like that derecho we had last year. And out of the wind comes a booming voice, Stop being such selfish jerks!

But our real experience is much more likely to be like that of Elijah's. God comes to us in the silence. God comes to us as we sit in silence...after we've poured out our hearts to God. After we've wailed and ranted about how bad things are and God why don't you do something.

And in that silence, God assures us that we still have work to do. We are the ones God depends on to make the world a little more what God intends.

In that intimate silence, God loves us into being someone who can love the world into healing. In that intimate silence, God assures us, you aren't alone. You've got God, ready to tend and care for you...and you've got others beside you on this journey.

It may not seem like enough at first – we were really hoping for a more impressive display of power. And yet, that still small voice of God works its way into our souls, and gets us back on our feet.