

“What Are You Are Doing Here?”

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First Presbyterian Church
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Old Testament Lesson – 1 Kings 19:8-13
New Testament Lesson – Luke 6:12-19

A Midwesterner from the farm was visiting his college roommate in New York City. Walking near Times Square one day, the farm boy suddenly remarked, “I hear a cricket.”

“You’re crazy,” said his city friend. “It’s the noon rush hour, and in all of this traffic noise you heard a cricket? C’mon, man!” “No, I did hear a cricket,” the visitor insisted. Focusing more intently, he walked to the corner, crossed the busy avenue and looked all around. Finally he approached a shrub in a large cement planter. Digging beneath the mulch, he found his cricket.

His friend couldn’t believe what he had seen. But the friend from the farm said, “My ears are no different from yours. It simply depends on what you have learned to listen for. Here, let me show you.” He then reached into his pants pocket, pulled out a handful of change, and dropped the coins on the sidewalk. At the sound of money hitting the pavement, every head along the crowded block turned. “You see what I mean?” said the visitor, as he began picking up what was left of his coins. “It all depends on what you are listening for.”¹

In our Old Testament lesson today, Elijah had to be shown how to listen for more than just a cricket – he had to learn to listen for the voice of God; He too, had to focus more intently. And that is the last thing on his mind.

Elijah has just completed the hardest journey of his life – 40 days and 40 nights in the desert; the only thing keeping going was a little bread and little water. But remember from last week, this was the physical and spiritual sustenance given to him by God. By relying on what God placed before him, Elijah gained the strength to move forward.

He reaches Horeb, the mount of God, crawls into a cave and collapses. He’s made it there, but he’s in no shape to engage with God – to seek God’s will for what’s next. I mean, just last week, he asked God that he might lay down and die because of all he’d been through.

And just in case God has forgotten what kind shape Elijah is in – how his faith is waning, how weak and tired and unworthy he feels, even here at the end of a long and faithful career as a servant of the Lord – just in case God has got something else in mind when it comes to Elijah’s future, here’s what he says to God when the word of the Lord comes to him and asks, “What are you doing here, Elijah?” Elijah says,

¹ As told by Donald J. Shelby, Santa Monica, California, “Hear Here!” 8 September 1991, 1-2.

“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.”

In other words, God, I've done everything you've asked of me, as best I can, and I'm no better off than this – people tearing down what you, O Lord, are trying to build up; people allowing the false gods of society to lead them astray; people no longer even sure if you're a God worth following and listening to.

We can relate to that, can't we? Our society, even more than that of our spiritual ancestor Elijah, our society is full of false gods, distractions and barriers when it comes to putting our time, energy and resources into building up the Kingdom of God.

That's the way it is nowadays, which makes for a tough situation for us, similar to that faced by Elijah. We as a community of faith are set against the tide of an entire nation and our society as a whole when it comes to keeping the faith and building up the Kingdom.

It's no wonder we sometimes feel like Elijah, when he says, God, I “have been very zealous for the Lord ...; but the Israelites (or society in American) has forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars (ignored your places of worship and service), and killed (or marginalized) your prophets with the sword (or with our endless list of 'better things to do' with our time and money and energy).

I alone am left,” says Elijah (we alone are left, says the church), and they are seeking our life (*our weekly worship*; our children's, youth and adult *Sunday school* time; our tireless *service to others*; our joy and celebration in recognition of *God's blessings*; and our grief and compassion that finds its solace – *its comfort* – in you and you alone O Lord; they are seeking all this), to take it away.”

That is Elijah's complaint to God; and for the church in North America, it is our complaint, as well. Turns out, complaining to God is one way of seeking answers and direction from God.

When Elijah complains to God about all the distractions of his day and age that threatened to tear down the faith, God says to him, “Go out and stand on the mountain before the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by.” And 1 Kings tells us that, just as Elijah stepped out of the cave he was hiding in, “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; and after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence.

When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle (because he knew in that silence he had found the Lord). And (he) 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?’

That's the same question that prompted Elijah to complain about all he'd been through just a moment ago – What are you doing here?

And then, in response to Elijah's frustration, God sends a mountain-splitting wind, an earth shattering quake, and a soul-searching fire. It's as if God is saying to Elijah, yes, there are winds of change in this world that can bring down mountains; yes, there are shake up in society that can split the earth in two; and, yes, there are fires of the human heart that can burn away all that is good and right and holy. But over and above all that, still, there is God.

In fact, **God is in the midst of all that**, but not primarily as a force to be reckoned with (as if doing more and more as quickly and forcefully as possible is the answer). No, God is not in the rush, rush of life; No, God is in the silence.

We have a hard time with silence in our society. It takes effort and practice to sit quietly and listen for God. And actually, true silence is nearly impossible to find given all the distractions around us.

During our Contemporary service at 11:30 this morning, I'm going to play a video that illustrates this. It's from the TV show Last Comic Standing. In the show, comedian Jon Reep comes out and says, "Hey, if you like to have fun, do this; next time you're out in public and you see one of those guys talking way too loud on their cell phones, do this, gently walk up to him like this, and then lean in, and start listening to him. 'What's he saying? ... Can I talk on it? ... Gimme cell phone!' They'll say something like, 'Excuse me, can I have a little privacy please?' That's when you say this, 'No.

Because you're in public; that's how the system works. As it turns out, there is no privacy in public. In fact, you're privacy is invading our public. Why don't you go somewhere where we can have a little public around here. Stop shh'ing people.'

And of course nowadays, we actually have the opposite problem. Too much commotion and not enough quite; not enough, "Shhh, I'm trying to listen for God; I'm trying to hear what God is saying to me, about my life choices, about how I spend my time and energy and resources; what God is trying to tell me about what my family and friends and I do to kill time together, about how we treat each other, about how we treat other people; I'm trying to listen for information from God on how best to live my life so that God's vision of the world becomes clear to everyone, so that God's vision becomes a reality, so that all people are restored to faithful and fruitful living.

Now, wouldn't that be something worth listening for, something worth investing in, something worth getting behind, something worth pouring your life into? I think so – God's people actually rallying all the world around God's vision. I think if we as a church were up to that, we'd have people flocking here to be a part of it. And in fact, that's just what we're up to.

The Church Session (or church leadership) has set up a committee to look at how well we at First Presbyterian Church are positioned to grow and thrive in today's complex and contrary world. It's called the Vitality and Growth Committee.

And the first order of business will be to ***listen for God***. Their second step will be, to listen for God. And their third step and every step after that will be to listen for God.

If we do that – not just on the committee but each and every one of us – if we truly carve out some time to listen for God, if we pick up and develop some habits that help us listen for God – like prayer, reading scripture or spiritual books or religious magazines, sharing about God with one another – not easy things to do – but if we truly put forth the effort, than we, too, will hear the voice of God saying to us, “What are you doing here,” what are you doing here, asked in such a way as to lead us to a life-affirming answer; that’s what you are doing here, listening for God.

The first time God asked that question in our reading today,- what are you doing here- he let Elijah vent a bit, and that gave Elijah an outlet for setting aside all those worldly distractions that lead them astray. And then, God spoke to him again, from the quite place that was created.

So that, the second time God spoke to Elijah saying, “What are you doing here,” Elijah was actually able to hear God speak, and to respond in keeping with God’s will. What God spoke to Elijah after the second time (which I didn’t read for you but which I will paraphrase for you now) – what God spoke to Elijah is this. God told Elijah to go back down the mountain, return to where he came from, and go out anointing kings and prophets in the name of the Lord – anointing rulers and advisors to serve the Lord by equipping and inspiring the people to do the same – serve the Lord.

All of us, as members and friends of this church, have been anointed as rulers and advisors to serve the Lord. Each one of you has been equipped and inspired to be here today, to listen for and share about the word of the Lord, if you can carve out some quiet time to do so. And if you can, and if God does speak to you, I’d love to hear about it.

In fact, All of your elected representatives on Session, and particularly those on Session’s newly created Committee for Continued Vitality and Growth, we want to hear what God is saying to you.

We want to hear from God. If God has put anything on your heart concerning this church, let us know. Maybe it’s something about how we’re structured, how we allocate our resources, what we pour our energy into, what this church has done for you and your family – or failed to do to help you keep the faith alive and growing in your household or among your friends.

If God has whispered anything in your ear about the state of faith in America today, let us know.

There’s a box on the Credenza in the Parlour for collecting your thoughts and ideas, your complaints, your frustrations, your brainstorms, your inspirations and flights of fancy; anything goes; put it in there. Or email me or another member of the committee as listed in the July PresbyTimes newsletter that’s coming out this week.

A committee such as the Vitality and Growth committee needs to explore the universe of options in order for God to guide us as a church to just the right options that fit this time and place. And that's what we're going to do.

And, thank God, we are blessed to not be in crisis here. The writing may be on the wall in regards to the trend for church growth in America, but it is not carved in stone. We can make a difference.

And we are blessed at this church to have the financial and spiritual and physical resources to take our time, to act in God's time. As I said in the June PresbyTimes newsletter which announced the Vitality and Growth committee, we have the freedom to work without any undue haste or added pressure. Just like God was able to clear away all the distractions for Elijah, so that Elijah could actually hear God's word and follow God's leading, so too, God is ready to clear the way forward for us.

So, let me thank you in advance for your prayers concerning the future of this church. Let me thank you in advance for your participation in our exploration of new possibilities at First Presbyterian Church.

God has given us ample provisions for the journey ahead, God has led us up the mountain, and God has shown us how to stay connect to God's wisdom and how to follow God's ways.

And, in that, God will continue to guide us and direct us and equip us for a long and glorious and fruitful future as a community of faith in service to the Lord.
Amen

Pastoral Prayer

Holy God, we sometimes find ourselves, like Elijah, weary, discouraged and afraid. We give of ourselves, respond to you in faith, do that which we feel led to do, and the results aren't always what we hope for or expected.

In these moments, we long to hear your voice speaking to us a word of comfort and encouragement.

Like Elijah, we need to separate ourselves from the busyness of doing so we may be in your presence – quiet, still, open and expectant.

We pray your presence and protection on our youth and their advisors as they travel to Estes Park next week.

We pray for those who are sick and recovery from debilitating conditions.

We pray for those for whom debilitating conditions are a new normal that they must get used to.

We pray for those who grieve.

And we thank you, O Lord, that you answer prayer; that you continue to make your presence known; that your still, small voice continues to speak to us;

and that you provide nourishment and refreshment while also sending us out again with renewed mission and purpose.

It is to you, Lord that we look for direction in our lives and the will and power to move forward. We take inspiration and assurance from your presence, both as minister among us and as risen Savior.

For you taught us how to live faithful and fruitful lives, even as you taught us how to pray rightly. It is your prayer that we take as our own at this time, saying together:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.