

“Keep Listening”

Do you ever feel like the world is against you? That’s a loaded question, isn’t it? Especially given the kind of world we’re dealing with right now. There are the obvious realities weighing on us and we speak about them often; a worldwide pandemic, the struggle to end racism, the political tensions in our nation, and the devastation in the wake of storms on the East coast and following the explosion in Beirut. The world is a challenging place. But the challenges closer to home can bring the weight of the world down on us, too. Those of my generation, whose children are now grown, have said to each other recently, “I’m grateful I don’t have kids in school right now. I’m not sure I could do it or figure it out. What are parents to do?” When we say this we don’t really mean we’re happy not to be you, you who are parents of children and youth of school age. It’s more an acknowledgement that this is really tough, figuring out what’s going on and what is right regarding our children going back into the classroom, not to mention the concerns of teachers and administrators. And, for parents who work and grandparents who don’t live close by and uncertainties regarding fall sports and schedules that keep shifting - well, you know what I’m talking about. Sometimes it just feels the world is against you. And, while we are focused closer to home, there are the challenges we deal with even when a pandemic isn’t happening; serious illness or loss, damaged or broken relationships, and disappointments that mount up and become a dark cloud that blocks out the light. It’s an honest question, I think, “Do you ever feel the world is against you?” And, if that’s not where you are this morning, it’s important to know this is where the prophet Elijah was, as he ran into the wilderness to save his life.

Being an Old Testament prophet was risky business. We are reminded that biblical prophets didn’t predict the future as much as they pointed to the way things really are in the present. Prophets stand up to kings and pharaohs. Prophets speak truth to power. They challenge the status quo and their lives are regularly threatened because of it. This was Elijah’s situation. Earlier in the book of 1st Kings, Elijah stood up to King Ahab and his wife, Jezebel. That didn’t go over well, and with the royal wrath turned against him Elijah ran for his life. The weight of the world was against him, we might say, so much so we’ve heard in our reading how he crawled under a scrub tree and decided his life was over. This is when God took charge. I’m going to stop here and say this is the overarching message of Elijah’s story for us. If this scripture says nothing else to us let it say this, that no matter what’s happening, no matter how heavy things are, no matter what trouble we’re facing, God is ready to take charge. The point I’m making isn’t to convince us that God is involved in our lives. We wouldn’t be connecting through worship this morning if we didn’t already decide for ourselves that God is real. The more relevant point is whether or not we hear what God is saying to us in the midst of a troubled time. God was not going to let Elijah just crawl under a tree and fade away. God stayed with him and kept nudging him until he heard God’s message of encouragement and strength. God lifted the weight of the world off of Elijah’s shoulders and God wants to do the same for us.

There are plenty of times in life when we ask God tough questions. One of those questions is a short but very honest one, “Why me?” Behind that question are others, of course, like, “What did I do to deserve this? And, God don’t you love me? Why would you bring this hardship to my life?” These questions were undoubtedly on Elijah’s mind but the story we’ve heard isn’t focused on Elijah’s questions. What matters is the question God asks. God says to the prophet, “Elijah, why are you here?” In other words, “Why are you at this place with no hope? Why have you forgotten my provision for your life? Why are you ready to give up when I’m still with you and guiding you?” God questions the prophet not only when he’s huddled in the shade of that tiny tree but also when he hides in a cave up on the mountain. Elijah just wants to curl up and give up but God wants Elijah to listen because God has something to say that will restore Elijah’s confidence and get him moving again.

If it was possible to have a virtual highlighter at this place in the sermon this is the section I’d highlight for us today. As Elijah stands at the mouth of the cave trying to listen for God it’s striking the ways in which God’s voice is not heard. There was a great wind but God didn’t speak in the wind. There was a shaking of the ground but God didn’t speak in the earthquake. Friends, in our own spiritual lives we come up short if we assume God only speaks to us in earth shattering ways, or only in high and glorious moments, or only in experiences that are so inspiring we are caught up in the power of it. That day God spoke to Elijah is what is described in some translations of the bible as a “still, small voice” and what our passage today describes as “the sound of sheer silence.” Isn’t this just like God? At those places in our lives where we assume nothing can be offered to make a difference or no word will come to us and everything regarding our faith is just like silence to us, God is there to speak the very word that gets us going again.

There's plenty of noise in our world and I'm particularly thinking of the noise that comes at us from social media or network news. Tweets, posts, running commentary, all these ways and more bombard us 24/7, and Elijah's story reminds us that God is ready to speak to us in the quiet and silent moments, if we are ready to listen. In the gospels we learn that Jesus regularly went away to a quiet or deserted place. I'm sure this wasn't so Jesus could tell God what he was on his mind but more the place where Jesus could listen for what God wanted to say. With that in mind, I encourage us to find those moments this week where we close out all of the other noise of the world to listen for God. Turn off the TV. Let the Facebook feed rest for a while. The world isn't very fond of silence but our faith depends upon it. Is there a place where you can go or a time you can create where you might quiet your movements and mind, and listen. Maybe it's as simple as happened at another place in scripture, where the one called by God said, "Speak for your servant is listening." (1 Samuel 3:11)

I'm not here to say what God wants to say to you but I am here to encourage you to listen for God's message in your life. In the silence, God told Elijah that God was leading him into a future where everything would be given to keep the mission going. In our lives, even in the midst of the hard decisions and uncertainty of the future, God is ready to give us just the word we need to hear. Sometimes we end our worship with a rousing hymn or with a song that energizes our hearts. Today we recall the message of a hymn that quiets our souls. Let this be our calling today, "Be still my soul, the hour is hastening on, when we shall be forever with the Lord." Amen.