

Hush, Children, What's That Sound?
The Monroe Congregational Church, UCC
Rev. Jennifer Gingras
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1 Kings 19:1-18, John 12: 27-28

Jezebel is angry. Embarrassed. Furious. Elijah has just killed her prophets. In the most Game of Thrones moment in Hebrew scripture, she publically threatens to make... Him... Pay.

We don't know where Elijah came from, and aren't told much about him. He's an odd character, rough around the edges, an eccentric, crusty old prophet dressed in animal hair and a leather belt. He doesn't have wealth or education. He hasn't been to seminary. All Elijah has is a word from God that has called him to speak truth to power.

That's what prophets do in the Bible. They're not fortune-tellers who predict the future. Prophets are people who confront the king: they speak out against corruption, the accumulation of wealth at the expense of the poor, the failure to care for the widow and the orphan. So they tend to get into deep trouble.

Jezebel's words have pierced him to the bone, all he can think of is his own fear and he wonders if any of this is even worth it. He runs into the wilderness to lay under a bush and die because he's had enough and he just can't take it anymore.

As Elijah falls asleep, an angel of God wakes him up with some bread and water tells him to get up and eat because the journey he is about to take is a long one. His belly full, he nods off to sleep again.

The angel comes to him a second time. Like a good mother, she makes him get up and eat a second time. Strengthened by this soul food, he gains strength enough to travel on foot the 40 days to Mount Horeb, a mountain of God. When he gets there, he spends a night in cave where he'll encounter the presence of God in unexpected ways.

Elijah is called by God to come stand outside. A powerful wind blows, shattering rocks on the mountain but God wasn't in the wind. And then there was an earthquake. And then a fire. But God wasn't in those either. God's presence was in the quiet stillness that came after. That's the moment that God was choosing to renew Elijah's hope, showing him that the children of Israel still had a future.

The Gospel of John tells us about Jesus having his own Elijah moment. He's in the Garden, he knows his death is coming and his soul is troubled. He wants his life to be spared but he knows the mission he's on was greater than even his own life.

What followed, after all the horrible moments of that time were three days of stillness... three days of weeping...three days of sadness... three days of utter hopelessness. Out of that stillness the world would be forever changed. God spoke new life into the world after those three quiet days.

Storms will come. Earth shattering moments will happen. You'll get burned by the fires of this life. That's an unfortunate given.

Let's face it. Sometimes you don't feel like doing a happy dance. Sometimes you just want to call in sick. You can't face the people in your office, or the other kids at school, you can't face your life. You want to stay in bed, pull up the covers and curl up in a fetal position. If you're human, you've been there.

Unlike our physical health, we might feel embarrassed to talk about our mental or emotional health, or we may feel weak and ashamed to share our struggles. But here's Elijah, the great and famous prophet with his hurt and pain right out in the open for everyone to read about.

I'm no psycho-therapist, but there are some folks with psychology degrees in our church whom I learn a lot from. I remember one of them saying to me years ago how we're usually quite comfortable taking a sick-day for our physical health, but we often feel ashamed taking a day off for our mental health. And that's not right.

We need places to run to when we've lost perspective on our lives. We need sanctuaries, not just for our happy dances, but to also be a container for our sorrows and our fears. On the mountain, Elijah hears the quiet voice of God. But before God says anything to him, God listens. Like a divine therapist, God asks an open-ended question, "Elijah, what are you doing here?" And then God just listens as Elijah pours out his anxiety and loneliness, his fear and despair.

In the United Church of Christ, we have a motto, "God is still speaking." That's a true enough statement, but if you're like me, sometimes what I really need is not a God who is still speaking but a God who is still listening.

When we're full of fear and anxiety and just need to unload, we don't need someone to give advice right away and tell us what to do. We need someone to just listen. To really listen to someone is one of the greatest gifts you can give. And it's not easy to do. We get so absorbed with our own lives, caught up in our own thoughts.

The God we meet in scripture is a God who speaks and call the worlds into being, a God who commands, but this is also one who listens to our cries, who is willing to be silent and absorb all of our complaints and our frustration and our fears.

God can take it. And God is still listening.

When God finally speaks, God sends Elijah back to work, back to where he is needed. He sends him back down to the valley, to the work that he has been called him to do, back to being a prophet. It's as if all Elijah needed was to pour out his heart to someone who would really listen to him and the healing begins.

But that's not where this story ends. Did you notice? At the beginning, Elijah is utterly alone, curled up in a ball at the back of a cave. At the end, he's come down from the mountain and as he walks back into his life there is somebody else walking by his side in the road; it's Elisha.

God brings the gift of Elisha into Elijah's life. He's no longer alone. That's why God calls us to be the church: children dancing a happy dance together before Sunday School; teenagers being confirmed into their faith community; adults of all ages trying to show what it looks like to live like a Christian. God calls us out of solitude and into the gift of being the church to share our joys and to bear each other's burdens and lighten our loads.

I like to imagine an end to this Bible story. It's not found in the Bible, and it would probably be totally out of character for this crusty, old prophet Elijah. But I like to imagine that Elijah and Elisha, as these two prophets ease on down the road side by side, that they're not just walking down the road together, they're doing a happy dance. Amen.