

All Saints' Sunday

Text(s): 1 Kings 19:1-18 and Matthew 6:25-34
- Pastor Mike Pancoast

Here's the heart of the matter for us from these texts today: burned out...worn down, physically, spiritually, and emotionally...seemingly at the end of his rope, Elijah resorts back to an instinct of faith and hope even in the face of borderline hopeless despair. It has been messy, bloody work serving God in the midst of a time and people who want to do their own thing, who don't want to be bothered with hearing about repentance and changing their lives. Elijah has become brittle, constantly looking over his shoulder, wondering when and where the king's and queen's agents will appear to brutally do him in. I take him at his word, even in the expression of his depression, when he throws himself under the scrubby, desert shrub—tired of running...tired of working: “*Enough,*” he sighs. “*I've had enough. Take me now, O Lord*” (1 Kings 19:4). *Then he lay down under the broom tree and fell asleep* (v. 5).

Maybe you know EXACTLY what Elijah's feeling. Different work. Different tasks. Same feelings. Name them: burned out...worn down...at the end of your rope...hopelessness...despair...brittle...thin...stretched like butter scraped over too much bread... in need of a trip from which one might be tempted never to return. Go ahead: you who've been laboring in the valley...who've been crammed into a cracker box...name it: what's your Elijah Feeling?

But again, here's the heart of the matter for us from these texts today: Elijah resorts back to an instinct of faith and hope even in the face of borderline hopeless despair. For he knows where to go. He knows where to return. He knows where home is. As the poet Robert Frost once expressed: *Home is the place where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in.* And so Elijah goes to the place where he knows he will have to be taken back in...and it's not where we might expect. It's not the hubbub of Jerusalem or the magnificence of its temple that we heard about last week. It's not a place of comfort and familiarity, of home cooking and warm feather beds. Elijah flees to a place of complete and utter isolation...out to the desert...out to the place where God continually meets his people...back to the Mountain of God, called Sinai by some, Horeb by others. Reminiscent of other journeys of faith, 40 days and 40 nights of flooding that lifted the ark... 40 years of wilderness wandering for Moses and the Children of Israel in which God and his people became reacquainted with each other... Elijah travels for 40 days and 40 nights, empty and ill-equipped for the journey yet sustained by food and drink given him by God himself...away... far and away from the threats, from the anger, from the frustration, from the rejection that had become his life...back...back to the place where his instinct of faith and hope tells him that when he goes there, he'll have to be taken in. And that instinct does not fail him.

But Elijah's perception of his situation DID fail him. What Elijah thought he knew and was certain about in his predicament and tribulation did not serve him well with coping and dealing. “*What are you doing here, Elijah?*” God asks. And as if simply waiting for the invitation to unload, Elijah does: “*What am I doing here? WHAT AM I DOING HERE? Have you not seen how hard I've been working here, Lord? Have you not seen the state of affairs down here? I've been busting my keester for you, and for WHAT?!? Your people hate me. They want nothing to do with any sort of practice remotely related to knowing you! They've killed all my colleagues. They've emptied out the places of worship. AND I AM UTTERLY ALONE!!! THAT'S what I'm doing here!*”

And rather than upbraid Elijah...rather than contradict and argue, God simply asks Elijah to step

outside for a moment that they might have some time together. And poor Elijah, as if he hasn't had enough spectacle and drama—first there is a wind, perhaps a tornado, “*so strong*,” we are told, “*that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces*.” But the Lord was not in that mighty movement of power. And then there was the earthquake, shaking and shifting the ground beneath Elijah's very feet, but the Lord was not in that mighty movement of power, we are told. And then as if that wasn't enough, then there was a fire that raced across the drought-stricken mountainside, perhaps even singeing the fringe of Elijah's beard a little bit, but the Lord was not in the that mighty movement of power, we are told.

And after that... there was nothing... nothing but “*the sound of sheer silence*.” That...that and the voice, and one at that perhaps even as just a whisper, the voice of the Lord. And that...that, dear friends, was what Elijah needed to hear. His instinct of faith and hope in God was not wrong, even though his perception of his situation was: for indeed, Elijah was NOT alone. Far from it. Not only was God with him, even in the face of fire and earthquake and rock-splitting wind...even, we must add, in the midst and aftermath of stinking, filthy flooding...there was a solid remnant people of faith and hope like him: 7,000 people of faith and hope, just like him.

This voice of the Lord that Elijah sought did not solve every minute detail of his predicament and situation. In fact, in some ways it just further complicated his life. That commission Elijah is given to anoint kings and prophets who were also men of great skill in making war and sowing conflict upon each other is going to make things even more complicated on some level. But it was enough. And that voice carried with it power to hold, sustain, and carry Elijah. For it turns out, the sound of sheer silence in the presence of God is even more powerful yet than earthquake, wind, fire, flood, rejection, or murderous queen.

You know this too, don't you? Even if your perception about abandonment and isolation have led you to believe that silence means you are indeed alone, you've heard this cry of dereliction, this effusion of emotion and longing, this shout of abandonment: “*My God, my God, WHY HAVE YOU ABANDONED ME?*” The same one who gave this cry is the same one who tells us today, “*Seek first the kingdom of God and everything else will be added*” (Matt. 6:33). And the answer to Jesus' cry from the cross? First, silence, the sound of sheer silence. But second, resurrection. For it turns out, the sound of sheer silence in the presence of God is even more powerful yet than death itself. AMEN.