

Faith Mennonite Church
October 13, 2013
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God Speaks Love
1 Kings 19:11-13; John 3:16-17

How many of us are feeling at least a bit (perhaps a lot!) unsettled by the government shut-down and the threat of default on our national debt? How many of us are unsettled by the fact that we seem to have entered a new Gilded Age, one indication being that 10 percent of the US population has garnered nearly 50% of the financial gains in the recovery since the recession of 2008? How many of us are unsettled by the fact that 150 years after emancipation and nearly 50 years since the Civil Rights Act we are still a highly segregated country with serious employment and income disparities and educational achievement gaps between white children and children of color...and that one of the most egregious gaps exists here in Minnesota? How many of us are unsettled that while National Coming Out Day (this past Friday) offers hope to many lgbt persons, many youth still face bullying and others face alienation and exclusion? How many of us are unsettled by the fact that worldwide 33 million fewer girls than boys are enrolled in primary school?

There's a lot in our world to unsettle us. And there are various ways that people respond when they are unsettled. Some choose to scapegoat others and blame the victims. Some choose to take advantage of the goodwill of others for personal gain. Some grapple with deep questions of faith and wonder where God could possibly be when things have run amok and suffering is so profound. And sometimes those questions loom so large that we simply want to hide away.

That's what Elijah was doing when our scripture reading this morning picked up his story. He was a prophet in a time of as many challenges as we know today, although certainly of their own variety. The people of God had chosen to be ruled by a king and the experiment with monarchy wasn't going so well.

King David, considered a great leader had so much blood on his hands that God would not allow him to build a temple as he desired to do. And after his son Solomon built a temple, and a fine palace for himself, his wealth and power turned him toward foreign women and alliances and away from God. After his death, the kingdom broke into two parts, and a string of kings followed with records that speak primarily of evil and idolatry.

And then there came king Ahab, who "did evil in the sight of the Lord more than all who were before him" (1 King 16:30). Ahab married Jezebel, of the royal family of the Sidonians, and he joined her in worship of Baal, including erecting a sacred pole to this god. In so doing, the text tells us, he "did more to provoke the anger of the Lord, the God of Israel, than had all the kings of Israel who were before him" (v. 33).

Not a pretty picture. Not a good place if you were a prophet of this God of Israel. A good number of the prophets, in fact, took to hiding out in caves. Elijah came on the scene and enacted a confrontation between the prophets of Baal and the prophets of the God of Israel. It was a dramatic story: each side built an altar but had to depend on their god to light the fire. The prophets of Baal prayed and cried to no avail. Their altar would not catch fire despite the fact that the wood was bone dry, following a multi-year drought. Then Elijah called the prophets of God to drench their altar in water, and praying to God, they watched fire descend, igniting and consuming the sacrifice, including the water in the trench.

Now fire is a dangerous thing. And whether Elijah was impassioned by the heat and triumph of the fire or whether he was led by God (the text does not tell us which) he proceeded to kill the prophets of Baal. And so the conflict continued. Jezebel flew into a rage and put out a death warrant for him. So Elijah fled. He fled to a cave at Mt. Horeb, the mountain of the God of Israel.

God's voice came to Elijah in that cave and asked: "What are you doing here?" And Elijah answered that he had been zealous for God, did what he thought God wanted, and now he was the only faithful one left and there was a bounty on his head. He was all alone."

Historians and anthropologists surmise that religions began because of the fear of the elements—storm, wind, earthquake, and hail. Our earliest human ancestors had little protection against the vagaries of nature and no way to predict when cataclysm might come. And so they formed rituals and rules they hoped would appease the gods whom they did not understand.

Although there are certainly references to God working through nature—through drought and flood in the Hebrew Scriptures—and we also have stories of Jesus calming storms in the Gospels and mention of an earthquake at his death, the dominant way that the God of Israel spoke was through people and in very personal ways. In this story of Elijah, right on the heels of the grand display of fire from God consuming the sacrifice, God shows up and speaks in a very different way. God tells Elijah to come out of the cave for God will pass by. A cyclone passes through, the earth quakes, and fire explodes, but Elijah didn't experience God's presence in those spectacular events. It's not until silence settles in—complete silence—that Elijah moves into the presence of God. And the voice comes again, repeating the original question: “What are you doing here, Elijah?”

Elijah reiterated his refrain...as if God had a short-term memory loss. (Or maybe Elijah did!). He reminded God of all he had done and how he was the only one left...all alone. And out of that silence God responded that no, no he wasn't alone. Life would go on, more kings would come and more death, *and* there were 7,000 faithful ones! Seven thousand! And he had the audacity to think he was all alone.

Nicodemus, whose story is told in the third chapter of John, was also someone who thought he was all alone. He was a Pharisee, a leader in the Jewish group who took their religion very seriously, but so seriously that they sometimes set the boundaries much too narrowly, much too impermeably. They were concerned about not upsetting the status quo with the Roman occupation because stability protected their institution. Something about Jesus attracted Nicodemus but the fear factor was huge. He came to Jesus under the cover of night, not wanting to be seen, going to a cave of sorts, hiding away with Jesus to try to understand what he and his teaching and his healing—what John refers to as his signs—were all about.

Jesus speaks to the unnamed fear of Nicodemus, the fear of being alone, the fear of not understanding or obeying perfectly, by speaking of the Spirit. The Spirit of God lives and breathes through us just as wind blows around us. We can't see it, but we feel its presence. And Jesus says that Spirit is what enlivened him, what enabled him to communicate God's word. And that word was love. “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him” (John 3:16-17).

In the silence and through the Spirit, God speaks into our doubts and our unsettled, fearful hearts and says: “I am love and you are not alone.” And the small actions we take on behalf of that love, actions that are never insignificant in the kingdom of God where the mustard seed, the smallest of all seeds grows into a tree of blessing, our small actions are being multiplied by 7,000 others—and many more!

On Friday night as some of us women and girls gathered in the fellowship hall to celebrate the International Day of the Girl, we watched an inspiring movie clip of how one man, a teacher, began to teach a young bonded house worker to read and then connected her with a group of other similar workers who began to attend evening classes. And how the social workers who taught those classes began to boldly confront the master/owners, working for the freedom of these young girls. And how the young girls once freed, in turn, began working to free additional ones. Each of those girls began feeling starkly alone, forsaken, without worth, severed from their families. Each found community as they set their faces toward working for the good of others.

We are not alone. God is love. God's Spirit wants to be powerful among us as individuals and as this gathered body that we call Faith Mennonite Church. Enter the silence...listen for God's voice. Attend to the wind of the Spirit when it blows through you.