

“After the fire, the sound of sheer silence”

Our lectionary reading for today is from the first book of Kings. Kings is an ancient historical narrative of sorts, full of legends and folktales, strange miracles and other events. While it details the history of the rise and fall of the kings of Israel and Judah, most scholars believe its primary purpose is to tell a theological narrative. If you recall, in 2 Samuel YHWH had made a covenant with David, promising that his family line would rule forever. As part of that covenant the people of Israel were to remain faithful in their promises to worship YHWH alone, refusing to worship other gods. Kings tells the story of how the kings of Israel consistently fail to hold up their end of the covenant. The text follows a familiar biblical pattern: God makes a promise and enters into a covenant with Israel, the people break the covenant by their unfaithfulness, and this issues forth the judgment of God, often proclaimed through the mouth of a prophet. The author(s) of this text seeks to show how YHWH, the God of Israel, judges the kings of Israel and Judah according to whether they recognize the authority of the Temple in Jerusalem, guide the people to worship YHWH alone, and ensure the destruction of the sanctuaries of rival gods. The great tragedy of Israel’s history as told by the authors of Kings -- the division of the kingdom and the eventual destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem -- is due to the failure of the people and especially the kings to remain faithful to the covenant and to follow through on their promises to worship YHWH alone.

The prophet Elijah, who is the focus of our passage today, appears in just three chapters of the book, chapters 17 through 19. In chapter 17 we encounter Elijah who prophesies to King Ahab that God will bring about a drought in the land. Because Ahab had led the people astray into idolatry, the prophet Elijah comes on the scene to announce God’s judgment. Among all the kings described in the book, King Ahab is depicted in the worst light, as he colluded in the murder of many hundreds of YHWH’s prophets. The divinely ordained drought, then, is God’s judgment, but it also provides the context for the making the theological point that it is YHWH, and not Baal, the foreign god, who controls life and death, fertility and infertility. Despite the drought in the land, God provides for his prophet, Elijah.

In the third year of the drought, the Lord comes to Elijah and tells him to inform Ahab that rain will soon come again to the earth. Now, Ahab had placed the blame on Elijah and his prophecies for the drought, calling him the “troubler of Israel,” whereas Elijah, of course, holds that it was Ahab’s idolatry and apostasy, his worship of the gods of Baal, which has led to the terrible drought in the land. So Elijah decides to turn the issue into a kind of public contest of the gods. He tells the prophets of Baal to gather a bull, cut it into pieces, lay it on a piece of wood, and call for Baal to set fire to it; Elijah calls on the rest of the people to do the same, to gather a bull, cut it into pieces, lay it on a piece of wood, but for their part, they were instructed to call on YHWH to set it on fire. You can probably anticipate what happens. The prophets of Baal call upon their gods for hours and hours, but there is nothing, no fire, no response, nothing. By contrast, the prophet Elijah calls upon the Lord, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel to display God’s power, and the Lord miraculously answers with a *consuming fire* that burns the wood and the offering, and even the stones and the dust and the water nearby. When the people see this *marvelous* and *wonderful* spectacle, this amazing demonstration of power and might, their eyes are opened, they fall

on their faces and say, “The Lord indeed is God; the Lord indeed is God.” The story then proceeds with Elijah and the people seizing the prophets of Baal, bringing them down to the river, and killing them. And then, the rain returns. The drought is over.

But Jezebel, Ahab’s foreign wife, who the text blames, in part, for Ahab’s apostasy, is not at all happy about all this. After all, Elijah has killed the prophets of Baal with whom she has been associated. And this is where our passage for today begins, with Jezebel sending a messenger to Elijah informing him that his life is in imminent danger. Prudently, Elijah flees the area. After a day’s journey into the wilderness, Elijah is tired, probably dehydrated, clearly in a desperate situation, so much so that he is ready to give up, so he calls on God to take his life. But, once again, God proves faithful to Elijah in his time of need by sending an angel who tells him to eat and drink the food and water that had miraculously appeared before him. The text says that this food and water was so nourishing that Elijah was able to live on it for another forty days and forty nights. Truly this must have been food and water from heaven! We’re not told why, but Elijah decides to travel to Horeb, the Mount of God.

Now, Horeb is not just any old mountain; it is another name for Mount Sinai, the very mountain upon which Moses stood when God encountered him with breathtaking power, and made a covenant with Moses, it was the site at which Moses received the Decalogue, or what we call the Ten Commandments, which would become the cornerstone of the faith of the people of Israel. So, the author of 1 Kings has Elijah heading to a highly significant, even sacred site, in this passage. We can only assume that Elijah is expecting YHWH to do something spectacular and breathtaking as YHWH had done with Moses on this very same mountain, and we as readers of the theological narrative expect this to happen because in the previous chapter YHWH had just powerfully demonstrated superiority over the prophets of Baal by sending a consuming fire.

But what we see in this scene is actually quite strange, quite unexpected. First, it seems as though YHWH was not expecting Elijah at all; the Lord speaks first with, “What are you doing here, Elijah?” Elijah answers, “I have been very zealous for the Lord, the God of hosts.” Amid idol worship and unfaithfulness among the people, Elijah has been zealous and now he fears for his life. Then, God tells Elijah to go out and stand on the mountain. Standing upon this sacred mountain where God has traditionally demonstrated God’s power in spectacular ways, a rushing wind passes through that was “so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces.” Surely, Elijah must have thought, this was a sign of YHWH’s presence, but the text says, “the Lord was not in the wind.” After the wind had passed there was a great earthquake, but again the text says, “the Lord was not in the earthquake.” Next comes the fire. Surely, the fire would be a sign of God’s presence and power. But, again, the text says, “the Lord was not in the fire.” Instead, the text says that it was only *after* the fire that God’s presence was made known, but this time not through commandeering the environment through a violent rushing wind, the shaking of the earth, or through a consuming fire, but in and through the “sound of sheer silence.” Upon hearing the Lord in the sound of sheer silence, Elijah wraps his face in his mantle and goes out and stands at the entrance of the cave. Once again, the Lord responds with a question, “What are you doing here, Elijah?” Elijah pleadingly repeats that he is zealous in his faith and informs God of the situation that he and the people face. God tells Elijah to go back through the wilderness and anoint two new kings and a new prophet. He

tells Elijah that anyone who tries to flee will be killed, except for those who have remained faithful to the covenant with YHWH.

There is a lot going on in this passage and in this narrative, but what I want to focus on this morning is simply the section in which God appears not in the spectacular, but in the unspectacular silence *after* the wind, the earthquake, and the fire. I find this section particularly fascinating because it seems to depart from the familiar modes of God's presence. For much of religious history, including Christian history, people of faith have sought ways to secure the regularity and continuity of the presence of God in their lives in numerous ways. God, many of us think and anticipate, must prove Godself in great miraculous power through a burning bush or the parting of a sea; God, some of us think, must prove Godself through God's presence in the sacraments and institutions of the church or through the Bible or through some sacred site. We search for God in the spectacular and the miraculous. In his letters and papers from Tegel prison, the great Nazi resister, Dietrich Bonhoeffer reflected on the ways in which the modern secular world had in many ways pushed God even further out onto the spectacular and so also onto the margins of life. As modern science proved increasingly capable of explaining the life and activity of the world around us, God increasingly was pushed out to "the gaps" -- whatever science could not fully explain, wherever its explanatory power had been fully exhausted, *there* we may find God. The problem with such a view, according to Bonhoeffer, is that it fails to understand the ways in which God's presence encounters us not in the spectacular, on the outer edges of life, but right in the middle, the center of life. This, for Bonhoeffer, is the meaning of the incarnation. God so loved the world that God became enfleshed, fully entering into contingencies of a precarious and finite, human life. God is not content to stand at the margins of our lives, appearing only when our own energies are spent and exhausted in some extraordinary way; God is rather actively and lovingly present in the ordinary center of things and in our relationships to one another.

This past week my dad was digging through some old boxes left by maternal grandmother, Marian Louise Parrish. My grandmother -- or Granny, as I called her -- was an amateur writer and poet, and she left behind a number of short stories and poems that she had submitted for publication at various journals and magazines. He posted one on social media this week and I thought I would share it with you, because I think it drives home this point well:

"Fragile Moments" - September 26, 1971

It was a morning of awareness, a morning of insight. Perhaps you know the kind of morning I mean. Occasional flocks of birds veered back and forth across the sky in a seeming effort to establish their fall migratory pattern. The streets and yards were strangely silent as the neighborhood children returned to school, and the sun's warmth served as a reminder of the approaching winter. I was struggling to know how to relate to a young woman who had recently lost her baby, as well as the opportunity for ever giving birth again. Spontaneously, I called her. "Hi," she said. "What do you know that's interesting?" "You flatter me," I replied. "All I meant was, if you could say just one interesting thing today, what would it be?" "Do you mean something interesting to everyone," I questioned, "or just to you?" "Just to me," she said. My mind became an instant kaleidoscope of "interesting" tidbits of information. We were taking a trip. I could tell her about that. I had recently met a well-known missionary. She would find that interesting. Our daughter was working with brain damaged children. That was interesting. But none of

these things seemed appropriate. “. . . Just one interesting thing to say to you,” I mused aloud. “I guess I’d want to say I care about you.” Her reaction was immediate. “Wow!” And I knew that of all things I might have said, I had made the right choice. After I hung up, I couldn’t forget our conversation. I decided that perhaps the most interesting thing we can ever reveal about ourselves to another person is that we care for them and we are willing to say so. I guess that’s the real attraction Christianity has for us--that God cares and that through Jesus, he was willing to say so.

Sometimes God appears in the wind, in the earthquake, or in the fire, but more often than not God’s presence comes after the event has passed, *after* the service ends, in the fellowship hour, in the break, or on the way home from church, in the simplicity of silence or in the simple, but nevertheless profound, perhaps even prophetic, expressions of love like this. Sometimes the most interesting things we can share with another person are also the things that we so quickly skip over, dismissing them as unremarkable and unspectacular. But perhaps when we fail to stop and simply tell those around us that we love them and care for them, we end up missing God’s presence in our lives altogether. May we come to share in the love of God whose presence is at work in the sharing of ourselves, in the simplicity of being-with another, coming alongside another in joy and in pain, and expressing our care for another in love.