

“Earthquake, Wind and Fire”

*A sermon preach by Rev. Daniel Smith
at First Church in Cambridge, Congregational, UCC
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The Lesson: I Kings 19: 1- 19

I’ve told some of you a story or two of what it was like to be a student in Peter Gomes’ preaching class when I was still in graduate school. On the first day of class, we were asked to read a writing sample from the pulpit of Memorial Church to the private audience of our seven classmates and Gomes himself. Gomes wanted to get a basic sense of our delivery in its still to be polished form. Once we all had a turn, we adjourned to a room on the lower level where Gomes told each of us what he thought. Quite literally, his first words to me were this: “Mr. Smith, there will be no wannas and gonnas in Memorial Church, you come from a tradition of Jonathan Edwards, not the New Kids on the Block.” I’m glad you are laughing because that is about the only funny thing I have to say to you today. Our text for today from 1 Kings is not a funny text. This sermon is not a funny sermon. I tell that story by way of introduction to another piece of lasting preaching advice that came from the good Dr. Gomes. He told us if we *want to* engage our audience in the study of a scriptural text, which I am *going to* try to do today, we would do well to identify “the stone in the road.” The stone in the road is that surprising or even disturbing word, phrase or sentence in a given passage that will predictably trip up the listener. It may be an apparent contradiction. It may just be something we would not have expected the Bible to say.

Well . . . do I have a stone for you! Before we zero in on it though, I need us to get our bearings on the road itself that is the book of I Kings. It is one of several volumes that chronicles the rise and fall of the various lesser known rulers of Ancient Israel. Throughout them, the leadership qualities of the kings are measured first and foremost by their faithfulness to Yahweh. Not surprisingly, most of the kings are too consumed by a thirst for their own power to pay much attention to God’s will. And so, in almost all of these stories, there is a prophet, one called by God to speak out against the dominant culture of idolatry, corruption and injustice.

Towards the end of I Kings, we meet the prophet Elijah. He quickly develops a reputation as one of the most beloved of prophets. But, his tenure is severely complicated by the fact that the current King Ahab had just married Jezebel, queen of the neighboring Phoenicians. Politically speaking, the marriage was a solid move – nothing wrong with expanding the Kingdom, right? Religiously speaking however, its a disaster, for Jezebel wanted nothing to do with Yahweh. She was content with her own Phoenician sky-god, Baal, who was believed to control the rain. So what does he do? Ever the obedient partner, he turns his back on Yahweh and starts erecting altars to Baal. Meanwhile, the people of Israel fall into a deep crisis of religious identity. And guess who comes to save the day? The prophet, Elijah. He puts a straightforward question before Ahab and the Israelites: “How long will you go limping with two different opinions? If the Lord is God, then follow him. If the Lord is Baal, then follow him.” What happens next is a contest of epic proportions between Gods to be staged on Mt.

Carmel. In the right hand corner, an altar to Yahweh. In the left hand corner, an altar to Baal. The first God to send down fire upon the altar at their prophet's request wins the loyalty of King Ahab and the people of Israel. Well . . . who do you think wins? Of course, Yahweh sends down the fire and Elijah is sent down in history as the one who saved the Israelites from their misguided worship of Baal.

Now, here is where the road gets rocky. Apparently, Elijah did not want to have to fight this fight again, so get this, just after declaring victory – our beloved prophet Elijah, *the* Elijah - orders that all of the prophets of Baal, all 850 of them, be slaughtered. Can you imagine? Elijah literally killed what was left of the competition! What we have here is not merely a stone in the road, my friends, but an outright roadblock to finding meaning in this passage. Was Elijah taking his prophetic zeal too far? Did he overestimate the means necessary to prove his point? Did he underestimate the faithfulness of his own people? Was he acting out of righteousness or was he acting out of fear that the prophets of Baal would return and threaten his own job security? If only we could write off Elijah's excessive violence as a product of a different time, we could better deal with our stone in the road, but the sad fact is that such violence is of our time as well. What underlies this story is an all too familiar set of dynamics that is present in our world today. At the most basic level, we find a conflict between two seemingly incompatible religious and cultural ideals. Each party believes that their God, and by extension, their nation, knows best. The leaders declare a contest. The contest escalates. Eventually, there is bloodshed. Lives are lost. Victory is won, but at what cost? The saddest fact is that this is one of our guys, Elijah, the prophet of our God, who sees fit to slaughter 850 people because they didn't believe in what we believe. So much for a "go and do likewise" sermon! . . . How do we get around this stone?

At this point in the story, the text itself takes a detour into the soul and psyche of the prophet himself. After Elijah's and God's victory at Mt. Carmel, Elijah disappears from the public eye for awhile. All I've said until now is just background for the encounter between Elijah and God that occurs in our passage for today. Having received vengeful death threats from Queen Jezebel, Elijah runs. He runs, hard and fast, into the wilderness, where we find him not merely scared, but depressed, possibly suicidal. He collapses under a broom tree, and says "Enough, Lord. Take this life from me." With some prodding of an angel, he finds his way to a cave at Mt. Sinai where he hears the word of God. God asks him, of all things, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" (Word to the wise: if God ever asks you a question, chances are it's rhetorical!) Elijah answers, "I have been very zealous for you God, but these people keep forsaking you and throwing down your altars. I've had it!" Seems like he's more interested in talking about Israel's behavior than his own. Well...Elijah is commanded to go out and stand on top of the mountain and wait for God to pass by. Our story continues on top of the Mount: "Now there was a great wind, but the Lord was not in the wind, and after the wind a great earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake, and after the earthquake a fire, but God was not in the fire and after the fire, a sheer sound of silence". When Elijah heard the silence, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the mouth of the cave, as if for a closer listen, and God spoke to him and said, again: "What are you doing here, Elijah?" Why repeat this question and why choose to speak from this sheer sound of silence?

Contrary to most of the commentary on this passage, I think God is rather short in compassion, at least in his words. We all know that if we need to be stern with someone, a little silent treatment can go a long way. Imagine the effectiveness of God's sound of sheer silence? God is disappointed and frustrated with Elijah. Something had gone awry in Elijah's spiritual consciousness – something had taken hold of him that was not of God. His anger towards his following began to consume him as did his arrogance. He takes pride in the idea that he was seemingly the only one who was truly devoted to God. God asks the same question twice because he wants to see if Elijah can recognize for himself these early signs of overzealousness. Perhaps God is even hoping that Elijah will consider for himself whether he had gone too far in killing the false prophets? If this is the case, we may have moved that stone at least just enough to squeeze by. The question at the end of the day then is not what about those 850 prophets? The more important question, for Elijah and for us, "What are you doing here, Elijah? You are my prophet and you are depressed? How did you lose the vision and the hope that together we could change the world? Where is all of this uncharacteristic fear and anger and isolation coming from? What are you doing here Elijah, in this rotten spiritual space? Have you forgotten that my love for you is sufficient to bring you through this? Have you lost faith in my people before I have? Elijah does not change his tune. He simply repeats his litany of sorrow and resignation. So, God gives Elijah a few minor tasks and tells him to seek out his successor Elisha to be prophet in his place. His time had come. Given his tenure of loyal service though, Elijah ends up with a free ride on a chariot of fire straight up to heaven. Not a bad severance, all things considered.

In the end, I believe the voice that emerges after the earthquake, wind and fire is the voice of God's compassion *and* God's disappointment. "What are you doing here, Elijah?" We don't need to be prophets to know what this question feels like. We don't need to be depressed either. I would submit that we are in that place, at the mouth of the cave, whenever we become overly aware that the world is not as it should be. Indeed, it is the prophets job and it is our job to be always aware that the world is not as it should be and always vigilant in finding ways to make things right. But to be overly aware of what's wrong in the world can lead us to dangerous places of apathetic giving up or to equally dangerous places of overextended burn out. This is not a giving up or burning out from our jobs mind you. It is a giving up or a burning out on our fundamental partnership with God to make the world a better place! Call it spiritual atrophy on the one hand, or spiritual hyperextension on the other. At base though, either of these predicaments point to a lack of faith that God is still at work in the world. We all fall prey to one of these forms of spiritual dis-ease, from time to time, even the great prophets. And, I'm convinced it breaks God's heart to see it happen. Some of us have been in this place where we have let our faith muscles wither, where we have tuned God out. And so, God asks us "What are you doing here?" almost as if to warn us. "You don't want to be here. This is not a healthy place." When we do find that we have given up on God, it may be that weeks, months even years may go by until that voice of God breaks through the silence and despair and asks us, pleads with us even "what are you doing here?"

The singer and songwriter David Byrne, of the Talking Heads, captures the feeling in the following 80's lyrics that I heard this week in a coffee shop:

And you may find yourself living in a shotgun shack
And you may find yourself in another part of the world
And you may find yourself behind the wheel of a large automobile
And you may find yourself in a beautiful house, with a beautiful wife
And you may ask yourself--Well...How did I get here?

And you may ask yourself
What is that beautiful house?
And you may ask yourself
Where does that highway go?
And you may ask yourself
Am I right?...Am I wrong?
And you may tell yourself
MY GOD!...WHAT HAVE I DONE?

And God's response, "what HAVE you done and what are you doing in this strange, cold place?"

How many of us have not been in this place at the mouth of the cave? Have you ever wanted to say, this is not my life - I am more than the sum of these parts that I fear have come to define me? . . . What are you doing here, Elijah?

The good news is that these moments of spiritual crises are opportunities for intimacy and closeness with God. When you get to the point where you want to say enough is enough, the world is too messed up to make a difference, or if you are saying enough is enough, I've done more than my part to make a difference. Stop. Listen for that voice of calm and perspective. Hear it saying: "What are you doing here? Have you forgotten that I, God, am your partner and that you don't have to, in fact you are not meant to, go it alone. Don't you know I've come to set you free and *together* we can, in the words of Isaiah, proclaim liberty to the captives and release to the prisoners? Did you forget that we would do this together?"

I believe voice of God speaks to us not only individually, but collectively as well. Can't you imagine God saying, "What are you doing here, my children?" If we listen at the mouth of the cave, God is reminding us as he reminded Elijah, that we are not alone. God might even be reminding us that we come from an entire tradition of prophets and seers and saints and even Jonathan Edwards. Can't you hear God asking, with great compassion and reluctant disappointment, "What are you doing here, America?" This is my prayer for us as people, for us as a nation, that we would hear this question and temper our zeal, remembering that it is God's grace, which extends to all peoples, that takes us wherever we are meant to go. I pray to God that in the midst of our war-torn world we can as individuals and as a nation move away from the mouth of the cave and reverse our spiritual atrophy. Amen and amen.