

I Kings 19:1-15
Luke 11:1-13

July 25, 2010

Not in the Earthquake

A week ago Friday I was awoken at 5:04 AM to a continuous shaking and rumble. We live a quarter mile from the Amtrak line but this was different. Trains don't shake the house like that. I woke Kelly up and I said did you just feel that earthquake? She grumbled something like, "no way did we just have an earthquake, go back to sleep." She sleeps soundly and for her it was no big deal. For me it was a ten second event that really had my attention. Driving to church that morning everybody on the radio is talking about the earthquake in Montgomery County. According to the US Geological Survey's National Seismic Hazard Map, Earthquakes in Maryland are uncommon but not unprecedented.¹

The prophet Elijah is in retreat and on a 40 day retreat. He is living in a cave on Mount Horeb in the southern Sinai desert. He is on the same mountain at which Moses received the Ten Commandments. He is in prayer and dialogue with God and he is pouring out his heart. All his senses are in tune and there is gale

¹ http://pubs.usgs.gov/fs/2008/3018/pdf/FS08-3018_508.pdf

force wind, lightening and fire and there is an earthquake but for Elijah these are no big deal, for God is not in the fire. God is not in the wind and God is not in the earthquake.

Elijah was on retreat and in retreat because Queen Jezebel wanted his hide skinned and pinned to her living room wall. Elijah was a bit of a wild man preacher and he had a way of mouthing off, which the monarchy often found very disturbing. Elijah could not help himself; he truly felt that his sermons and prophetic speeches came from God. Elijah condemned King Ahab's marriage to Jezebel because Jezebel worshipped the Baal idols. Elijah felt that Jezebel and her counterfeit religion were destroying the country of Israel. One day push came to shove and Elijah had a duel of sorts with the Baal priests that were the darlings of Jezebel. As the story is told in I Kings, Elijah was able to call down fire from heaven and the Baal priests could only dance with a limp. After the duel, Elijah had the 450 Baal priests put to death. In mere hours word reached Jezebel and she signed the warrant for Elijah's death.

One evening I came up to the church and two young girls were playing while their mother was working on a project. When they both wanted the same toy, a struggle ensued and the larger and older of

the two triumphed. The younger was quite upset. She had a laser tongue and with all the precision that anger can muster, she glared at the older and shouted with disdain – You Jezebel!

Jezebel was no Laura Bush and no Michelle Obama. The first lady of Israel was a mean and scornful woman and to this day when you are called a Jezebel; it is not a very nice thing. Elijah has every reason to fear for his life, so when the text says that Elijah was praying and whining to God, believe me he was praying. When your world crashes all around you, when life hits the bottom, when you are threatened, when people deeply hurt you and the ones you love; one very common reaction is retreat and prayer. When we are down and out, we often look to God for a little justice and help. Of course another very common reaction is anger and retaliation. Those people are mean. We figure they got us, we will deliver some equal justice and we will get them.

Many of us in this church have been reading the book *Forgiving Ararat* by Gita Nazareth.² The main character, Brek Cutler a young mother and lawyer, arrives in Shemaya Station somewhere on the way to and edge of heaven, after she has been shot and murdered by

² Bette Press, 2009 Kennet Square Pennsylvania

a man name Ott Bowles. I am waiting to see how others view Shemaya Station; but I see it as a place where people try to bring other people to judgment and justice. They makes their cases, that other people should be punished by God for the evils they perpetrated while they were on earth. I am not going to give away the ending, in case people have not finished the book; but one of the things the author does is make us come face to face with the justifications we all make for our behaviors. What I do to you is justice. I make things fair. I have a moral grounding and compass. What we do to them is justice. We make things right. However what you do to me in the name of justice is not justice at all; it's unfair, it's uncalled for, unacceptable and ungodly. What you do to me is hurtful and evil. What you all do to us is demonic; and thus the age old giant dilemma of the double standard unfolds on the pages of the novel. We see God in our way and we are sure you have no God.

Politics in our country has a hit a rather high level of partisanship. Not only are our opponents wrong but our opponents are evil. Two often told in the Op-ed, blogosphere and junk e-mail world illustrate the bottom fishing. One is that every Tea Party activist is a racist; the other is that that president Obama is out to

get white people because he is really an Arab with no American birth certificate. We see God in our way and we are sure you have no God.

Elijah was so sure that the Baal priests were irredeemable, he had 450 of them killed. Jezebel is so sure she hates Elijah she signs his death warrant. We for our part tend to hold Elijah up as the great Prophet of the Old Testament; but what does it mean that we praise a man who had 450 religious opponents killed?

There is now a fierce debate being waged in New York about whether a Mosque should be constructed in or near ground zero at the world Trade center rebuilding. The rather shrill voice of Sarah Palin has weighed in against the Mosque saying that it would interfere with healing. So why would Christians whose ancestors justified the murder trips called the Crusades and whose leaders tolerated the Holocaust, suddenly oppose a Mosque? Is not freedom of religion an American value? Most Moslems around the world condemned the 9/11 attacks. Would not temples, churches and Mosques at ground zero teach terrorists of all stripes that we all stand against hate? We see God in our way and we are sure you have no God.

A lot of the time when people talk; they open their mouths to change their feet. They spout careless rhetoric. They make allowances for themselves but are intolerant toward others. They place too much confidence in the sound bite and ignore the context and substance of real conversation. They spew out rhetorical noise and clichéd rumbblings. They make wind with their words. They shake the ground with careless casual conversation. God is not in the earthquake. God is not in the fire. God is not in the gusty thoughtless wind. God comes perhaps with the sound of sheer silence. Anne Lammott, Presbyterian Elder, in her book Grace (Eventually) Thoughts on Faith writes this - “There is not much truth being told in the world . There never was. This has proved to be a major disappointment to some of us.”³

In the Simon and Garfunkle Song, the Sounds of Silence, which certainly can be interpreted in several ways they sing “And in the naked light I saw, Ten thousand people, maybe more People talking without speaking, People hearing without listening, People writing songs that voices never share And no one dared Disturb the sound of silence.”

³ As quoted by Carrie N. Mitchel in Feasting on the Word, Westminster John Knox Press , Louisville KY, 2010, Proper 7, page 146

People talking without speaking, people hearing without listening. In the case of the song - the silence does not announce the presence of God but perhaps describes humanity's failure to listen for God's voice.

In the Paul Simon Song, In the Book Forgiving Ararat, in our story from the pages of scripture; it is clear that humanity has a hard time listening for God's voice. We place enormous trust in people who think and act like us. We see ourselves as the center of attention. We justify our excesses as response to the evil of others. There was a long but pretty well done three part series in the Washington Post last week about how the size of the Intelligence Community is really so huge and so extensive; no one in Government truly has a handle on what everyone is doing. We are literally throwing billions and billions of dollars into Military and Homeland security intelligence every year. Opportunities for needless redundancy and tremendous waste abound. But we feel we must do this because of terrorists and rogue governments. We see God in our way and we are sure they have no God.

Because Elijah was being chased because he feared for his life his despair polluted his world view. Because he was so fearful and

exhausted he lost faith in others. And so He says to God " I and I alone am faithful to God" I have been very zealous for you God and Only I know this pain. In his depression Elijah concludes that he has monopoly on misery. God doesn't try to talk Elijah out of a thing, but as Elijah is praying, he hears God's voice telling him "Go out and stand on the mountain before the Lord, for the Lord is going to pass by.

Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake came a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire. And after the fire a sound of sheer silence. When Elijah heard it, he pulled his mantle over his face and went out and stood at the mouth of the cave.

Did you catch it? It's almost hidden in there, because even after it happens, Elijah is still discouraged. God was not in the fire the noise or the wind. Finally, a sound of sheer silence a gentle whisper, a still small voice, and there He was. Elijah starts to listen. Elijah comes back from the edge

Elijah was out of focus. He was looking for God in Wind and Earthquake and Fire, but God snuck up on him in the sounds of sheer

silence. Often we look for God in the wrong places. Our preconceived notions about God blocks our senses with static.

The story is told of a lost Pocket Watch. Before refrigerators, people used ice houses to preserve their food. Ice houses had thick walls, no windows, and a tightly fitted door. In winter, when streams and lakes were frozen, large blocks of ice were cut, hauled to the ice houses, and covered with sawdust. Often the ice would last well into the summer. One man lost a valuable watch while working in an ice house. He searched diligently for it, carefully raking through the sawdust, but didn't find it. His fellow workers also looked, but their efforts, too, proved futile. A small boy who heard about the fruitless search slipped into the ice house during the noon hour and soon emerged with the precious pocket watch.

Amazed, the men asked him how he found it. "I closed the door," the boy replied, "lay down in the sawdust, and kept very still. Soon I heard the watch ticking." Often the question is not whether God is speaking, but whether we are being still enough, and quiet enough, to hear because God is not in the Earthquake.

