**June 23, 2019**

**1 Kings 19:1-18**

Christians ask ourselves over and over again, “How do we know God’s voice?” What distinguishes God’s voice from others? And when we do hear God’s voice, what is God saying?

As theologically Reformed Christians, we believe that God speaks to everyone in the congregation – ordained and lay, young and old, men and women. We lean into the story of Pentecost, trusting that the Holy Spirit is burning within all of us. So when we gather each Sunday morning, we are both listening to God’s voice as a community *and* sharing how God is speaking to us individually. Now, we have more than 100 different people with 100+ personalities and habits in our church, each bringing thousands of different questions and distractions. So how do *we* know what God is saying? What if God tells *you* something different from what God tells me? What if we misunderstand God’s Word?

It would be so much easier if God spoke in bright neon signs, unable to be missed amongst life’s traffic, and unmistakable in the message. I often wish for a private email from God – something clearly meant for me. A word of the Lord with specific instructions about how far to go, where to turn, and who to take along the way. A message to which I could reply and confirm receipt.

You know the neon sign moments in Scripture: angels’ instructions, voices from heaven, burning bushes and talking donkeys, visions and calls for the people of God. We read these biblical stories of divine revelation with envy and awe. It is encouraging to see God speaking to specific people, at the same time, but it is also easy to be jealous of their experience. Why doesn’t God appear in the sky over us? Where is our burning bush?

When Matthew told the story of the shepherds’ call after Jesus’ birth, they were doing their regular job on a regular night, thinking regular thoughts in their regular space; they *weren’t* looking for God. Nevertheless, when an angel appeared and called them to Bethlehem, they left everything in the field and followed God to a new place. They didn’t wait for daylight. They didn’t stop to find someone to watch their sheep; they heard God’s call and responded immediately. They left what they were doing and walked toward this new thing God called them toward.

When God appears to a community (like on Christmas Eve), it seems easy. There are fewer questions about, “did you see what I saw? Was that really just there?” The shepherds were given explicit instructions. They knew what to do. If they had been *Presbyterian*, they would have stopped to form a task force to write down the message before they forgot what the angel said, then another group would study previous divine revelations and pray about what just happened, and then another group would organize shifts to watch the remaining sheep on the hill… But instead, the shepherds *trusted* that God was in their midst and responded immediately. The people were called together to come and see God’s self – Jesus Christ. This seems to be the ideal revelation – it is for the community, it is specific, and it is a call to God’s self.

But not all revelations are so clear. If I read the beginning of Elijah’s encounter in 1 Kings and stopped just after he was told to wait for the Lord to pass by, I would expect to see a burning bush, or God’s glory streaming from heaven (like the shepherds’ story in Matthew). If anyone told me to stand on our front steps because God was about to walk down Old Country Road, I would expect to see something big and bold and loud, worthy of God’s grandeur and stature. Not only do I expect that, but I *hope* for that because it’s clear who and where God is. There would be no mistaking God for an ordinary beam of light or gust of wind.

Elijah was different. He didn’t have a community to stand with him. There was no one to confirm or deny the experience, no one to question or form a committee. Elijah was called to stand alone on the side of the mountain. And the wind passed by – a big wind that split mountains and broke rocks. A wind that felt different from other winds. But God wasn’t in the wind. So Elijah waited for God to pass by. Then an earthquake happened – the ground shook, the rocks fell, but God wasn’t in the earthquake. So Elijah kept waiting. Then, a fire came on the mountain, but God wasn’t in the fire. One big thing after another. It wasn’t until *after* these big events that God came. In a gentle whisper. In a small voice. In thin silence. God was there. And Elijah knew. He **knew** that God was standing with him. He wasn’t distracted by the disasters outside; he didn’t panic. He waited until he just knew that God was there.

When the wind and fire come to us, we waste time and energy running around like Chicken Little screaming, “The sky is falling! The sky is falling!” When trouble threatens to overwhelm us, we either retreat into a more comfortable place, or we flail around, creating more chaos as we desperately look for what we want or expect. We pay attention to the wind and fire because they are big, and then ignore the thin silence that comes afterwards. We assume instead that God must have been *there* in the big noise and chaos, but surely isn’t here in the quiet and in the nothing.

Life is full of loud, distracting storms. Just because it makes a lot of noise, though, or turns the world on its side – that doesn’t mean that God is there, or that God caused it, or even that we should be distracted by the chaos from where God really is. We must learn to be still in the midst of chaos so that we can hear the gentle whisper, to discern God’s voice from the incessant white noise around us, to wait and see to what new thing God is calling us.

One of my former congregation members was named Kathleen. She was a brilliant, focused women in the middle of her life. Her career was wonderfully successful. She had just married and was in the glorious haze of new love and adventure, when a doctor’s visit changed everything. Just days before Christmas, she received the news that her cancer was terminal and she didn’t have much time left. Her body experienced its own earthquake, shaking her foundation loose and turning things upside down. She was a wreck – understandably. But as it happened, she was the liturgist on Christmas Eve; she was the person who was already signed up to read the scripture lesson in worship. And she agreed to continue as planned. Without the congregation’s knowing her diagnosis, Kathleen stood up and read the traditional Gospel story from Luke. Her gentle whisper was so quiet that the microphone had trouble picking her up. Her small voice read the angel’s words: “Be not afraid, for lo, I bring you good news of great joy…” While storms raged all around her, she got very quiet… and watched God pass by… In her reading the shepherds’ call, Kathleen testified to God’s presence on a still and silent night. She heard God’s quiet, comforting voice while her body descended into loud, destructive chaos.

Each of us experiences big storms in our lives. Changing health is often a cause, though other things like finances, family dynamics, our job situation, relationships, or even global politics may threaten to shake us loose from our foundations. We fall into the trap of thinking that the loudest parts of life deserve the most attention, which often leaves us ignoring the simple, quiet, or silent life-giving things in our lives (including our relationship with God). We fail to notice the child or spouse who always listens and does a good job – because they always listen and do a good job, so we take it for granted instead of regularly saying “thank you” or “good job” or “I love you.” We stop saying a blessing before meals because we don’t want to take the time or make a scene or tell God what God *should* already know: that we are thankful. We don’t make time to read the Bible at home because we’ve *already* read it, or spent an hour in church this week, so what is there left to learn or consider?

Silence and stillness and normal are worth paying attention to – even worth celebrating and investing in. There are things to be noticed – holy things – which could transform us.

It is our practice to spend some time in worship in silence each week. Often these moments are in prayers. A few minutes are built into the end of the sermon when each person is invited to personally reflect on God’s Word and God’s presence that day. These minutes may seem like a simple transition. You may spend them flipping through the bulletin or finding the next hymn. but they are meant to be a serious and intentional encounter between each individual and God. The sermon is not the beginning or end of God speaking to Sweet Hollow. The sermon is just fodder for reflection. The real “*meat*” of proclamation comes when we put God’s word into practice in our own lives, and this cannot be done without further prayer and thought.

So today I invite you to use these next quiet moments as a time to listen, *really* listen to what God may be saying to you… TODAY. Don’t fill the time making your grocery list or chattering to God, filling all the space with words and noise. Stop your mind. Stop your mouth. And just *listen* – intently -- (like you would listen as your mother whispered directions from across the room). Squint your spiritual eyes and tune your ears to that particular voice. Wait for what God may say to you today. Perhaps an image will come to mind. Perhaps a question will rise from the depth. Perhaps a prayer will make its way to your heart. But don’t force anything. Just wait. And listen for the Word of God as God speaks to us (even you) here and now…