

Silence; Silence: Silence

Gordon Wiersma

June 23, 2013

Text: I Kings 19

Introduction to the Old Testament Lesson – I Kings 19

The lectionary has followed the book of 1st Kings for several weeks now, with stories of the prophet Elijah – he’s the good guy - during the reign of King Ahab and Queen Jezebel – they are the villains. But just in case you’ve been keeping track, the order of the stories for the last 4 weeks has been from chapter 18, then 17, then 21, then today chapter 19. I have no idea why the lectionary does this, but for the purposes of this sermon, I would like to mention the events of these stories in chronological order: first Elijah is helped by the widow of Zarephath; then Elijah confronts the prophets of Baal, which ends with Elijah executing all of those priests; then is today’s story in which we will hear of Elijah threatened by Jezebel; and finally last week’s story about Ahab and Jezebel stealing a vineyard by murdering Naboth, and then they are confronted by Elijah. So today, before last Sunday, from I Kings 19. *(reading of 1 Kings 19:1-15a)*

The first part of the story today from I Kings 19 is about silence – the silence of the prophet Elijah – which is to say, the prophet Elijah has been silenced. And how does this happen? – the mighty prophet Elijah who has rained down fire and the sword on the prophets of Baal – how is it that this powerful prophetic voice for the LORD is silenced? Jezebel! King Ahab tells Queen Jezebel what Prophet Elijah has done, and Jezebel has a little message for Elijah: ‘what you did to those prophets, I’m going to do to you, Elijah’. And, we are told, very plainly: ‘then Elijah was afraid’. Now it should not be lost on us that the great man of God Elijah is afraid of a woman – I realize that sounds very sexist, because it is! - in that culture where men were at the top of the hierarchy of power, part of what is being expressed is just

how twisted and out of whack things have become. The mighty King Ahab? - as is his custom, he goes and complains to Queen Jezebel to do his dirty work. The mighty Prophet Elijah? - he can stand up to other prophets and to King Ahab, but Jezebel? - 'then he was afraid.' There is a chauvinistic irony going on here which we have to see if we're to get the full sense of how this story was told and heard. But there's also the raw power of Jezebel as a person - her power as a tyrant and insidious agent of evil: Jezebel, man, she was one bad woman. Bad people can be very powerful - evil has the power to threaten, harm, control, destroy - evil is vicious and deadly in the hands of Jezebel. With Jezebel, as with any purveyor of twisted power, there is much to fear - whether ruling a nation or in smaller realms of community, vocation, home, evil has the power to do great harm - and to make a person afraid.

But there are some particular things about how this plays out for Elijah that are important for us to see. What fear does to Elijah is about silence - Elijah flees for his life into the wilderness - which is to say, Elijah stops doing what a prophet does, which is speak - speak against harmful power, speak for the power of faithfulness to the LORD - and instead he flees, and so is silenced. In fact Elijah is ready to call it quits all together: 'it is enough now - LORD, take my life...' - Elijah takes a nap, content for it to be his last sleep. Then, let me recap quickly - despite his intentions for a sleep of death, Elijah is provided with some sustenance in the wilderness, and he ends up at a cave by Mount Horeb; Elijah hears God asking 'what are you doing here, Elijah?' Elijah says 'well, I've been a very good prophet, what with destroying the Baal altars and prophets and all, but...' and this is the part I want to get to...'I alone am left in following the LORD', Elijah says. I alone - only me - the only one faithful to the LORD...really, Elijah? Just you? Well, Elijah, no - no, that's not true - it doesn't say 'no' in the story, but it says it around this story. Just before this in chapter 18, Elijah speaks with the faithful prophet Obadiah; immediately following this in chapter 19, we hear of 1000s in Israel who remain faithful. Only you, Elijah? - no - but that is the

power of fear – it isolates, it skews perspective: “I am alone” in this struggle; it is fear festering into despair, because it’s scary to be alone – being alone cements the silence.

So – Elijah’s fear that tries to convince him he is alone – let me just take that in a few different directions. There is from this story a sense we can all share in of what it is like to struggle for something good, and to face opposition, insidious power, and to feel afraid or discouraged – probably not exactly like in this story for us (although for many people in our world they face situation very much like this)...but we all know opposition to good. But then comes the temptation: ‘only I care about this’; ‘only we advocate for justice’; ‘we are too few – the challenge is too great’; ‘it’s up to me, only me’. So I think let’s just lay down and let this thing die – it’s too much for me...no – that’s not right; that is fear messing with your vision – just you? no, that’s not true.

And then, what about this – what about when someone is not a prophet for justice, but just in a bad situation? There are places in our lives and in other’s lives in which harm is done – violence of body and mind and spirit is inflicted upon. It is bad and it harmful – it is fear. But then in this place that is bad enough, comes an insidious temptation – that you are alone in this: ‘no one else knows’ ‘no one else cares’ ‘no one else would understand’ ‘it’s just me’ – so just lay down and give in... No – that’s not right; that is fear messing with your vision – just you? no, that’s not true.

And then, what about this – what about something not at all about being prophetic or being hurt, but just doing wrong yourself? What about when I am trapped in a cycle of harm to another? When you are stuck in a pattern of destructive behavior? What about ongoing choices that diminish relationship and denigrate others? We are broken people, you and I, and while it is important to name some things just as wrong, I will say too that it is scary to see such evil in me, in you. I’m not excusing us, but saying there is a part of us too that

startles at our capacity, and wants to run from what we do. But there too, the temptation – ‘it’s just me who is so bad’; ‘I’m the only one who wrestles with these things’; ‘I am a uniquely deeply messed up individual!’ – so lay down and give in, no use trying to change. No – that’s not right; that is fear messing with your vision – just you messed up? no, that’s not true.

Now it may not seem like the best news simply that there is suffering and evil shared among us, but it is a truth to start with because it gets at the temptation, the fear, that tries to convince you that you are alone – because with such fear there is silence – silent prophets; silent victims; silent sinners – all ready to give in. Silenced - the first part of this story is about silence.

But the second part of this story is very different – it is about silence – a very different kind of silence. This is a very well-known passage in scripture as Elijah is at the cave and told that the LORD will pass by: there is a gale force wind, but the LORD is not in the wind; there is an earthquake, but the LORD is not in the earthquake; there is a fire storm, but the LORD is not in the fire. And then: “a sound of sheer silence” – how’s that for a conundrum? – a sound, of silence, which Elijah hears! – “a sound of sheer silence” Perhaps some of you like me are familiar with other translations of this passage that are rendered as ‘a still, small voice’ or ‘a gentle whisper’ – it’s an extremely difficult translation to do. The Hebrew words are ‘*qol demamah daqqah*’ which one commentator points out can mean: sound or voice; whisper, silence or stillness; thin, small, fine or sheer. Put those together in any combination and you’ll be close, yet never quite capture it all. But let’s go with “a sound of sheer silence” – what does that mean? Well, of the many profound meanings that can be mined from this mysterious revelation, for this day I think it is faithful to say simply this: God is present; or maybe even more basic and profound, God IS – no flash, no wise words, just presence – silence not as absence, but as the reality of presence. And this silence is, I

think, the answer to the first silence in the story – that silence of fear and temptation of believing you are alone. To the fear of being silenced, comes this sound of sheer silence – and in it an answer: you are not alone. That’s it, but for prophets, and victims, and sinners that is everything.

The first part of the story – silence; then very different in the 2nd part of the story – silence; and then altogether different in the last part of the story – silence, but a different silence than the first 2. Now you are going to have to see if you buy this in what I have to say here, but I want to try to convince you that at the end of this story while it appears that nothing has changed, in fact everything has changed. The case for ‘nothing has changed’ could be made in that at the beginning and end of the story there is the exact same exchange between the LORD and Elijah: you can take a look if you want, pp. 284-285 in your Bible, the end of vs.9 to10 and then the end of vs. 11 to 12 – Both times God asks “what are you doing here?” and both times Elijah gives the exact same answer: ‘I’ve been zealous for the LORD; everyone in Israel has strayed; it’s only me; they’re going to kill me’. OK, the same – but then, here’s where it’s all different – the 2nd time there is not some revelation from God about not being alone, this time Elijah simply senses this word from the LORD: ‘Go on your way, to Damascus’ or ‘get moving, Elijah – get back to being a prophet’ ...AND since we know that the Naboth vineyard story comes after this, starring Elijah the prophet confronting King Ahab, we know that getting back to it is precisely what Elijah did. Instead of giving up, Elijah is back at it – and what does that mean? Well, it seems to me that now what is silenced is the fear, the despair - or maybe it’s more the silence like a mute button – you can still see the fear, but you’ve turned off the sound. And everything is different – Elijah moves back into his life, does not flee from it.

So that’s it – that’s the story of silence, silence, and silence for you and me and we together. In matters of justice, in matters of suffering, in matters of sin, the message is the same. The

power and temptation of all of those things is to isolate, discourage, make you give up – you are alone and you are silenced. But the power of the LORD gives something very different – the silence of presence that says this truth: you are not alone – in any cause, or pain, or sin, you are not alone – God is present; God IS. And that makes for a different silence in us – a muting of the fears, the discouragement, the defeat – and instead a going ahead: to face injustice, to find a way in suffering, to turn away from sin. Going ahead as we hear the question that abides in the sheer silence of the LORD – “what are you doing here?” – and to respond not with fear, but like this: do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with our God.

AMEN

Prayer for Blessing: "A New Creed" from the United Church of Canada

*We are not alone,
we live in God's world.*

*We believe in God:
who has created and is creating,
who has come in Jesus,
the Word made flesh,
to reconcile and make new,
who works in us and others
by the Spirit.*

We trust in God.

*We are called to be the Church:
to celebrate God's presence,
to live with respect in Creation,
to love and serve others,
to seek justice and resist evil,
to proclaim Jesus, crucified and risen,
our judge and our hope.*

*In life, in death, in life beyond death,
God is with us.
We are not alone.*

Thanks be to God.