“The Sound of Silence”

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1 Kings 19:1-15a

1 Corinthians 16:13-14

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The Old Testament lectionary text for today comes from 1 Kings 19 verses 1 through the first part of verse 15. Because we haven’t spent a lot of time in the Kings books this summer, some background information will be helpful before we dive into today’s text.

Under Solomon’s rule, Israel has been split into two kingdoms - Israel in the North and Judah in the South. The Kings books deal with the histories of these two kingdoms.

After reading about a succession of kings in both kingdoms, we learn that Ahab has become king of Israel and, just like many of the kings before him, did evil in the sight of the Lord. He was so evil, that he married Jezebel, who was a foreigner and who worshipped the foreign god, Baal. Ahab’s marriage to Jezebel resulted in him not only joining her in worship of Baal, but he built a temple to Baal and encouraged everyone to worship Baal and not Yahweh.

Enter Elijah, the prophet of the Lord who is able to predict a drought, who is protected by the Lord in a desert, and who revives the deceased child of a widow.

An important scene occurs in the chapter before today’s text. God sends Elijah to King Ahab and his wife, Jezebel.

Elijah asks the people of Israel, “How long will you go limping with two different opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him, but if Baal, then follow him.” What occurs next is a contest between the prophets of Baal and Elijah. It’s the one prophet of the Lord, Elijah, versus the 450 prophets of Baal. They bring in two bulls and Elijah instructs the prophets of Baal to call to their god and have their god set their bull on fire. A few hours pass and nothing happens to the bull. Elijah begins to mock the prophets of Baal. He says to them, “Cry aloud! Surely he is a god; either he is meditating, or he has wandered away, or he is on a journey, or perhaps he is asleep and must be awakened.” As time passes, Baal neglects to set the bull on fire. Yahweh, however, not only manages to set the bull on fire, but does so after the bull has been soaked in water 3 times.

The result of this showdown is that the people of Israel turn away from their worship of Baal and back toward their worship of Yahweh. Elijah instructs the people of Israel to seize the prophets of Baal and to kill them.

And that is where today’s text begins. I know that was a lot of history, and you’re probably wondering if maybe Sarah has already started her sermon, but it’s important for us to understand the context behind today’s passage so we can fully understand Elijah’s despair and his fear.

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In my reading for the text today, when I pulled out the Interpretation series’ book on 1st and 2nd Kings, I chuckled to note that this section is partly titled, “Elijah Burns Out.” It’s a great way to describe this text. Because that is exactly what appears to be happening to Elijah.

Elijah is a prophet of the Lord and he has watched his kingdom slowly turn away from God and turn toward a false god. Elijah knows that the Lord is all the omnis - omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent — powerful, knowledgeable, and everywhere all at once — and that an idol can never be those things. And yet, his people have been taken in by a foreign queen and by the promises of false prophets.

When Elijah learns that Jezebel is going to kill him, he is afraid. He flees for his life to Beersheba which was in Judah, the southern kingdom. He goes as far away as possible from Jezebel and Ahab and his own people. He leaves his servant and goes into the wilderness. Exhausted, he plops down under a solitary tree and begs the Lord to take his life.

Elijah is burned out. He thinks he is all alone. But is he? Not really. You see, a few chapters earlier, we learn that Obadiah is *also* a prophet in Israel and he has already protected 150 prophets of the Lord. Elijah is not alone in being a prophet in Israel, but he certainly feels like he is. Elijah feels burned out and so he is blinded from everything else but his feelings of loneliness.

I don’t know if you’ve ever experienced burn out, but I know I have. I love my four years spent in the classroom, but there were times when I felt completely burned out. I remember one time when I was having a particularly bad day and while my students were at their elective classes, I turned the lights off, locked my classroom door, crawled under my desk and cried. I felt completely alone and overwhelmed and all I could do was cry. If someone had walked into my classroom at that moment and tried to commiserate with me, I would not have been able to hear them. I was the only one in this predicament and I was overwhelmed. I’m sure I’m not the only one in this sanctuary today who has had a moment or two like that.

Burnout is real. Sometimes I wonder if that’s what’s happening with the decline of the Church. Perhaps we’re experiencing some burn-out. As a 34 year old, I am by far in the minority among my peers when it comes to church attendance. Not only do I go to church, but I *work* in a church. And when I ask people my age about their decisions to attend or not to attend church, I get many of the same answers — burn out. Burned out on mandatory attendance as children. Burned out on the expectations of their parents. Burned out on what they perceive to be contradictions between the teachings of the Bible and the actions of Christians.

Perhaps we are a people who are burned out. And so what are we to do with ourselves when we feel burned out? Perhaps we are to follow Elijah’s lead and quit.

Because that’s what it looks like, right? Quitting. Elijah repeats the same speech twice to God: “I have been very zealous for the Lord, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away.” While Jezebel, the foreign queen, has introduced the people to Baal, it is the people who Elijah blames for forsaking the covenant. Elijah is done with God’s people. Elijah is done with being God’s prophet.

One of the commentaries that I read presented Elijah’s flight to the wilderness as not only an example of a prophetic burn-out, but as an example of political dissent. Elijah is so tired of seeing the ways in which the people of Israel have rejected Yahweh and the teachings of Moses, and he is appalled by the way Ahab, a king of Israel, has rejected Yahweh and has turned instead to Baal, an idol and a foreign god. And so after doing all that he could, he dissents and leaves the kingdom.

Elijah is exhausted and disappointed and he sees no other option for his ministry, but to end it. And so he does. He flees into the wilderness — as far away from God’s people as he can get. He feels completely lost and alone and so *done* with things. But God isn’t done with him. God continues to show up and provide for Elijah in the form of food, and safety, and rest.

One of my favorite posts from Twitter is from a woman who retold this story. She wrote, “This is your gentle reminder that one time in the Bible Elijah was like, “God, I’m so mad! I want to die!” so God said, “Here’s some food. Why don’t you have a nap?” So Elijah slept, ate & decided things weren’t so bad.” And the moral of the story, according to the tweet was, “Never underestimate the spiritual power of a nap & a snack.”

Because, that it one of the most important parts of this text. It’s that Elijah was burned out…was fed up…was protesting his call….and God said that was fine and God still showed up and cared for him.

God met Elijah where he was and provided for him.

At the beginning of this sermon, I mentioned the section title from the Interpretation series — “Elijah burns out.” But the rest of that section title says, “And is Recommissioned.”

Once Elijah is rested and his moment of despair is over, God gives him a new task. God tells him, “God, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus.” If our lectionary text continued, we’d see that in the very next verse, Elisha is introduced and a new prophet with energy and the Word of God is poised to continue the work. Elijah is recommissioned to go back out into the world and to continue God’s work.

Friends, it is perfectly natural to feel burned out. In today’s times, with the constant onslaught of terrifying news — potential wars, another long and bitter election cycle, the border crisis and arguing the semantics between concentration camps and death camps — it is perfectly natural to feel exhausted and overwhelmed.

It’s okay to long for all of the noise to stop.

I think that’s why God gave us summer.

It’s okay to retreat. It’s okay to long for silence. It’s okay to follow Elijah’s lead and cry out to God, “I am done. I am so done.”

But know that God isn’t done with us yet. After we’ve turned off the news, after we’ve exhausted our tears and our grief, after we’ve rested a little bit, don’t be surprised when God comes to us and says, “Are you feeling a little bit better now? Okay. Let’s get back to work.”

Our work as Christians never ends. I’m sorry to tell you this, if you were expecting this Christian journey to be easy. Sorry, y’all. But the Gospel that we cling to is that we believe in a God who is *alive* in the world, actively working to turn the world upside down and reorient it to the way it should be. Unlike that false idol Baal that Elijah helped destroy, or the false idols of today — greed, fame, power, whatever, *our* God is *alive* and compels us to join alongside God’s important work.

Today, our youth will head south to Danville to participate in Passport Missions at Averett University. They will spend their week participating in mission and service projects and Bible study and fellowship. The theme for their week comes from 1 Corinthians 16:13-14: “Keep alert, stand firm in your faith, be courageous, be strong. Let all that you do be done in love.”

This is God’s word for us today. In the midst of all the things that pull us in opposite directions, in the midst of the distractions, in the midst of all the people who tell us we’re not good enough, let us keep alert. Let us help each other to be courageous and to be strong. And above all else, let all that we do be done in love. And with God’s help, may it be so.

All praise be to God.

Amen.