

## The Voice in the Chaos

Jubilee Mennonite Church

January 27, 2019

**Purpose:** To call the congregation to listen for the voice of God with an awareness of the layers in which we listen.

**Message:** As people, we are called to listen together for God's still small voice speaking to us in the midst of the everyday.

**Scriptures:** I Kings 19:2-16[I will read], Psalm 29 [please read with gusto!]

**Synopsis:** Often times, the concept of listening to the voice of God seems a bit incredulous to us. We are not a people who are given to definitive statements of "because God said so." With all of the voices and controversies that we are often met with, to actually listen for the voice of God in the world and in our time seems like a task for a bygone mystical age and identity. Yet, we are called to come before the words of God, both recorded in scripture and that are still being spoken, with awe, reverence, and an openness to hearing that which presents itself.

**1 Kings 19:2-13** <sup>2</sup> Then Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah, saying, "So may the gods do to me, and more also, if I do not make your life like the life of one of them by this time tomorrow." <sup>3</sup> Then he was afraid; he got up and fled for his life, and came to Beer-sheba, which belongs to Judah; he left his servant there. <sup>4</sup> But he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a solitary broom tree. He asked that he might die: "It is enough; now, O LORD, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors." <sup>5</sup> Then he lay down under the broom tree and fell asleep. Suddenly an angel touched him and said to him, "Get up and eat." <sup>6</sup> He looked, and there at his head was a cake baked on hot stones, and a jar of water. He ate and drank, and lay down again. <sup>7</sup> The angel of YHWH came a second time, touched him, and said, "Get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you." <sup>8</sup> He got up, and ate and drank; then he went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights to Horeb the mount of God. <sup>9</sup> At that place he came to a cave, and spent the night there. Then the word of YHWH came to him, saying, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" <sup>10</sup> He answered, "I have been very zealous for YHWH, 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." <sup>11</sup> He said, "Go out and stand on the mountain before YHWH, for YHWH is about to pass by." Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before YHWH, but YHWH was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but YHWH was not in the earthquake; <sup>12</sup> and after the earthquake a fire, but YHWH was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence. <sup>13</sup> When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. Then there came a voice to him that said, "What are you doing here, Elijah?"

## **1 Kings 19:1-13**

Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done, and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword.

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and breaking rocks in pieces before YHWH,  
but YHWH was not in the wind;  
and after the wind an earthquake, but YHWH was not in the earthquake;

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Sometimes the best we thing we can do is pretend not to notice. I grew up at church conventions. In the States, long tradition has held the bi-annual meetings that are held to conduct the business of the national church is a time for the youth to gather too. These are Big gathering, with the youth fundamentally overshadowing the adult gathering and their far more sedate business meetings. Think 6-9 thousand youth turned loose in a major convention city (you can't pull this off in a church basement) in hotels, in the city, and with all the goes with it. As you would well imagine there is a particular art in managing this madness. Before hand you get this letter—the does and don'ts of urban living. Some of it is a bit funny if you know Mennonites—like instructions on who to tip, how much, and when (not a natural set of knowledge I suppose in our lot). Some of it is more serious, like how to stay safe in the city It's the handbook for how to be in a city and some of the tips—like don't wear your nametag outside the convention center, walk in groups, and don't make eye contact one public transportation. It's the stuff that if you have spent much time in urban contexts, you are taught early on or you learn the hard way of how to make the cultural adaptation to a new place. As someone who has spent time in cities, including living and working in some of the tougher neighbourhoods of Chicago, it is good advice; trying to build quickly the bubble of disinterest and competence that one adopts in threatening situations to keep safe. But I never quite get over seeing it written down as a list of helpful hints for 14 year olds turned relatively lose for the first time—it seems a bit too little, too late.

Elijah encountering God on the mountain a well-loved encounter. We reference it at various times when we want to euphemize about what it means to listen to God. But the setting is not exactly ideal. We read the Elijah listening to God part and mostly skip the setup: Elijah is on the run from the rulers of the age and is lead up the mountain. This prophet who just days before had taken on the entirety of the prophets of Baal with mockery and derision before leaving none of them alive, is now driven to the wilderness, fearing before YHWH God for his very life as revenge is sought. He is ready to die; the situations seems hopeless. Yet he is lead to the holy mountain to hear from God. There he endures the dreadful forces until a still silence is found outside of all the he has thus far found. To him in the silence outside the conflict, and in this exchange he is given peace to go on about the work of God that was given to him. Most often, we allow the moral of the story to be this: Seek the silence. God speaks in the quiet places of our

lives and in the special places we know and love. God was not in the earthquake, the wind, or the fire, but comes by later on, when the need for walls and security has lapsed and let's us know everything is alright. We listen for God, then, when the still small voice can be heard; where we are comfortable, where we know the words and the terrain well, and need not worry ourselves with the challenges more unfamiliar territories might present.

This is an impulse that we all have to listen where we think God is most at work. But as Emily spoke to a couple weeks ago, sometimes the voice of God is a thing to be feared (but you know, in a non-scary way), and is accompanied by the shaking of the very foundations of our worlds. Like the kids in the city, we build protective bubbles around ourselves to ensure we can get through the hard times. But sometimes, just as in the city, you need to break the bubble down in order to gain the grace of the moment. We balance the question of protection and experience, of when to remain in protection and when to reach past our protective barriers reaches well past the concerns of life on the streets of a new city or a new experience. We do it on the streets; we do it in our spiritual lives. We have barriers and layers of protection in our spiritual lives as well, filtering out all that we don't wish to encounter, all that we don't want to challenge us, all where God cannot be speaking. We erect barrier and layers of security of all shapes, sizes, and purposes, in all areas of our lives for any number of purposes, both consciously and unconsciously.

There are ideas and concepts that we each encounter in different ways and with different results, ways that we are just not at ease with and the walls go up. Perhaps it is a scripture that you do not care for or that has been interpreted in ways that have been hurtful to you, and you deflect engaging what it has to say. Perhaps a style or quality of music is not to your liking and the decision is that worship is not possible within it. Maybe it is that the world in which we are moving is just too complicated and messy for us to even consider that God might be around, let alone have anything to say. Perhaps there are circumstances and realities whose consequences and weight bear down so hard that it might be preferable not to look for God within them. Whatever the trigger is, we have a similar response; the walls go up—these are times of winds and earthquakes—surely God is not here. Surely I needn't listen now. I will stay here in my cave. We much rather protect our spiritual selves until the challenge has gone by that risk

listening for something that we may not wish to hear. Like “my love extends to those who you hate.” Or “even here, even now, grace is offered.” Or “nothing here is about who deserves what; it is just my being with people in what they need when they need it most.” Perhaps it is simply the protection of have never been done that way before.

I have done an admirable job thus far of obscuring my point. My point is this. We are people of selective hearing (ever try calling a dog in on a nice Spring day—its not going to happen. But do it with some bacon in hand, and we have different story). It is worth noting here the Elijah’s work to encounter God did not permit him stay safe inside the cave to wait it all out until he understood it all—not completely in any case. There was still a discernment of where God’s voice was. There was much to be endured before he could hear the still small voice, even stuff that we know to be troublesome. We need to say it out loud—we know what we want God to say. We know what the call of God to be, be it in our lives or in our congregation—stay the course, what ever you do don’t change a thing, and yes-siry Bob, everything is just going to be fine. And while it is possible the God may be saying as much, at least in part, there is at least a good chance that it might be something else. As much as we all would prefer to remain where we are the most safe, residing in our caves where the noise and the threat of the cacophony of life has died down outside, that may just not be in the cards for us. We might need to allow that even here in the seeming chaos, God is still at work, and still speaking, even when we struggle to imagine what might be said.

That is not to say the we somehow welcome the troubles of life as God’s narrative on reality, or seek to assign meaning on events that hold no external message of God then that they simply and sadly just happen. We are called to allow for God to speak in the way God chooses. It is our job to listen, even in the seeming danger of the moment. We are called to be aware of our barriers, those layers through which we listen for the word of God, those things that can keep us from hearing what God is saying. By being aware of them we can evaluate what is helpful and constructive to our identity and support, and what might be standing in the way of our listening for something new.

We all experience times of change in our lives. Sometimes these are welcome experiences that come with grace and hope, opportunities to allow us to grow into new beliefs and understandings with joy. Other times these are experiences that we do our best to block, to protect ourselves from; as we must. Sometimes, the best anyone can do is survive. We are called to discern together, to listen together, seeking God in all things, the good and the bad, listening for the steady, hopeful voice of God at work in our midst in all times and all situations. We are called to hear the divine voice at work in our midst, calling to us in all times, all circumstances, and all happenings in our lives. It is easy when we encounter such occurrences for us to retreat within our protective shells, to stop listening for the voice inside the storm, inside the ideas and concepts that make us profoundly uncomfortable. Listening; really listening asks us to risk hearing all of what God is saying and being changed by what we hear.

I want to challenge you to think about how you listen for God, where you work for God's hand at work, and where you do not look. What might God be saying to us that would completely surprise you, and perhaps ask yourself if that might be possible. Find these places, those spots where what is going on forces you inside your protective barriers, those places where you want to stop up your ears and stop listening. Look at those. See those and ask yourself why those things exist. Find these spots and just ask yourself why these barriers exist for you. Is it worth it to maintain these walls? Or may it just possibly be that even here God speaks?

May you be blessed to hear the quieting calming, loving voice of God wherever you incline your ear, however and where ever God chooses to speak.