

## IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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The Reverend Mary Newberg Gale  
Sunday, June 22, 2025

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Let us pray.

Gracious and holy God, thank you for your voice that spans generations, that spans lifetimes, that calls us, immediately moving within us to hear your voice. This day our hearts and open our minds that we might hear you clearly and that hearing we may turn once again to your path. Amen.

Our scripture this morning comes from the 19th chapter of the book of First Kings, Now First Kings is a history, part of First and 2 Kings, a history book that tells the history of the biblical nation of Israel. We enter into the story in the middle of a story about the prophet Elijah and King Ahab. I invite us to hear these words from our Hebrew Scriptures.

*Now Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done and how Elijah had killed all the prophets of Baal with the sword. 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 one of them by this time tomorrow." Then Elijah was afraid. He got up and fled for his life, and he came to Beersheba, which belongs to Judah. He left a servant there, but Elijah 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 saying, "It is enough now, O Lord, take away my life for I am no better than my ancestors." Then he lay down under the broom tree and fell asleep. Suddenly an angel touched him and said "Get up and eat." And Elijah 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. The angel of the Lord came a second time, touched him, and said, "Get up and eat or the journey will be too much for you." So Elijah got up and ate and drank. Then he went in the strength of that food 40 days and 40 nights to Horeb, the mount of God. At that place he came to the cave and spent the night there. Then the word of the Lord came to Elijah saying, "What are you doing here Elijah?" Elijah answered, "I have been very zealous for the Lord the God of hosts for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left. They are seeking my life to take it away." God said to Elijah, "Go out and stand on the mountain before the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by." Now there was a great wind so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence. 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?" Elijah answered "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 prophet with the sword. I alone am left and they are seeking my life to take it away."*

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*Then the Lord said to Elijah, "Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus and when you arrive, you shall anoint Hazael as king over Aram."*

Friends these are the words of our Lord. Thanks be to God.

As I shared with our members who live at Trezevant who joined me for communion and chapel on Tuesday, this is one of my favorite stories in the Bible. And having said that, I have not yet ever preached on it before today. I like this story so much because of how relatable it is at its core. I mean how, truthfully, how many of us when we are at the end of our rope, when we want to quite literally lie down on the ground and pitch a fit like we are three years old...that the world is ending and we cannot do it all and it would be better if we were dead; and then we take a nap, and we have a little bit of water and some food, and we feel a little bit better. Essentially, to Elijah's tantrum God says the thing that parents say to hangry children all the time, "Take a nap, have some food, it'll be fine."

But once again in our...as is the habit of our lectionary, we are dropped into the middle of a broader story. Our scripture starts out "And then Ahab told Jezebel." So to give us a framework of what is happening as we drop in the middle of this story, King Ahab is king over the northern kingdom of Israel. He is quite literally one of the worst kings in the history of Israel, and if you read our text carefully or if you read First Kings carefully, the text will try and blame his queen Jezebel, and we shouldn't do all that. He was the king, and he married a non-Israelite in order to try and bring peace to his kingdom. Jezebel and her people brought in false prophets, in particular the false prophet of Baal; and the people, as was common in the region at the time, began to worship Baal and to try and worship Yahweh, the God of Israel. Now that is the context for what's happening with Elijah, and yet today we find him immediately previous to this text. He is on a roll. He has just in chapter 18 embarrassed the priests of Baal, where they take...they go head to head, Elijah, and the priests of Baal to prove that Baal is more powerful than God. And they cannot get Baal to respond, but Elijah takes an altar and dunks it in water...like, until it is absolutely wet...and calls down the fire of God from heaven, which immediately lights the altar. The priests of Baal are embarrassed. All of the people who saw this immediately fell to their knees and repented. The drought that had been over the land eased, and rain began to fall. He is quite literally at the pinnacle of his prophetic career, and yet our text this morning finds him so afraid and so disheartened. Elijah is exhausted. He flees to, the text says, Beersheba, which was a portion of the southern part of the biblical kingdom of Israel, to move as far away and out of the hands of Ahab and Jezebel as he could. He leaves his servant there because he is giving up. He wanders into the wilderness to die, but God doesn't let him. The Hebrew scriptures make a pretty big deal out of connecting the prophet Elijah with Moses. The parallels of their

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story would have been obvious to anyone hearing and experiencing this text, that the people at the time had turned away from God and would not listen to the prophet or the leader. The prophets beg to be set aside, beg to be set free. Moses says "Send anybody but me." And Elijah says "Just let me die, almighty God." They are driven out into the wilderness to Mount Horeb, to the mount of God, the place where Moses received the Ten Commandments. The Hebrew text is particular there in verse 9 where it says "At that place Elijah came to the cave and spent the night here." Not a cave, not a random cave, the cave—Moses's cave, there on Mount Horeb. So Elijah gets up after his tantrum, and he travels to the cave, and he experiences the earthquake and the fire and the flood and the wind, and then the text says, the sound of sheer silence.

When is the last time you have heard the sound of sheer silence? Even now I can hear the clock here in the pulpit ticking. We can hear the birds outside. The closest that I think I can come to conceptualizing what sheer silence is is, you know, here in the spring and summer in Memphis when a nasty thunderstorm has rolled through at night and the power goes out and then it is quiet. No one's air conditioners are running in the neighborhood. You don't hear the hum of the street lights. You don't even really hear cars on the road. It is a silence, a silence that can feel heavy like it weighs us down. And yet, as Stephen shared with the children, sometimes in the silence is when we begin to hear things that we might have missed before.

The thing that makes sense to me is to think about it similarly to when the lights indeed go out, like when you have turned all the lights off and you cannot see anything, but the longer you stand in the darkness your eyes adjust to see flickers of light from places you would not have been able to recognize before. That moment where you put your hand in front of your face and you can't see it until you can begin to see its outline, and you begin to be more accustomed to seeing and hearing, maybe, something that you would have missed in the hustle and bustle of daily life. And into this silence Elijah covers his face so as not to look on God directly, and God asks a question, a second time, God asks Elijah, "What are you doing here?"

Now some commentaries I read talked about this as if God is frustrated that Elijah is out in the wilderness on Mount Horeb, because God asks that question first when he's in the wilderness and then he is taken on the strength of his food to the mountain, but I don't, I don't hear an accusation in that question. I don't hear God saying "What are you doing here Elijah?" It sounds a bit more, particularly in that moment of sheer silence, it sounds like more of an invitation. Elijah has been fed. Elijah has been re-energized. Elijah is being refocused so that he can be sent again on the journey of God.

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Now I did say I liked this story because it was relatable, but it's also a little bit deeper, I think, than we sometimes give credit to it. Elijah's exhaustion is not simply an existential exhaustion. He's not just bearing down under the weight of the world like all of us every day, it feels like now, where each moment it feels harder and harder to hear what is happening next or to figure out what we're supposed to do. Elijah's exhaustion is deeper than that, because his exhaustion is based on his confrontation with authority. He is exhausted because he has been fighting Ahab and Jezebel and the powers that be in the biblical nation of Israel. He is, he has been using his very life to confront the status quo that paid no attention to the poor, the widow, or the orphan. That kind of speaking truth to power is not easy, and it takes a toll on a life. All of the stories of the prophets can attest to this. They make enemies, not friends, when they speak the word of God, and there is something about the wilderness, something I think is often overlooked in this story, the wilderness as a place where Elijah once again encounters God. I think that can be informative for us, because like Elijah we can feel exhausted, self-righteous, alone, and under attack when we look out at the world and we search for signs of God's presence and God's direction. We feel driven into the wilderness, or maybe even we wake up and find ourselves in the wilderness with no knowledge or memory of how we ended up here. When did this become the wilderness?

But God is at work in the wilderness, friends. Thomas Steagald frames wilderness this way. He says, "The wilderness is a place of both giving and resting, a season of provision and obedience, a time of weakness and even despair, but also an occasion of spiritual strengthening and vocational redefinition. Our scriptures attest to God's voice in the wilderness in the most unlikely and unexpected places, in the burning bush, in the rush of the wind, in the still small voice. It's in the wilderness where we remember that God can do what the world...what we don't expect or prepare for. God's voice is heard even in the silence."

Too often I think we shift this text to say that in order to actually hear God, we have to get quiet. I'm not saying that we don't, but God is not only present in silence. It's not that God was not inside the earthquake and the fire and the flood, it's that Elijah needed the juxtaposition to hear God in a different place, not in the power and authority of the world, but in a still small voice. The voice of God that separated the land from the sea, that calls the mountains down from their heights, that splits the cedars of Lebanon, that God is present in the quiet and the small, present in the lost and the forgotten.

So, as we sit with our text from Elijah today, friends, we can ask ourselves. Is there a still small voice that you've been wanting to ignore, that you have been, as Steven said with the children, frantically buzzing and staying a busy bee in order to not hear? Is there a still small voice that

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you can recognize as the voice of prophetic dissent that says this is not right? Sometimes we need to still ourselves enough to hear God, still the noise of the way we've always done it, still the noise of our own expectations, still the noise of our fear, still the external and internal stimuli that keep us from tuning in to God. Sometimes we need to be reminded that those things are a distraction, and that they are distracting us from where God is calling us here and now.

So God asks us, friends, just like God asked Elijah, as we take this moment to pause, to gather in community, to recalibrate, to block out the noise external or internal, God asks us "What are you doing here?"

Where is the voice of God calling us to speak and to move and to be, both individually and as a congregation? Because now more than ever, it feels we must attune ourselves to the God who speaks for the lost and the forgotten, the unwelcome and the ashamed, and calls us to do the same, trusting that, like Elijah, God meets us, God nourishes us, and God sends us back to work sharing the good news to all the world. Amen.