

June 23rd 2019  
1 Kings 19:1-15a

*A Sound of Sheer Silence*

Four years ago in late May I stood before you for my 'call Sunday' where I preached a call sermon and then you as a congregation voted whether to call me as your pastor. I remember after the worship service was over sitting in my now office with Pat Barth waiting for the results of the vote. She assured me all would be well. But, I had no idea what I was doing or what to expect. When Rob Brown came in to announce that I was officially voted in, I remember feeling a little in awe.

"These people really want me to be their pastor?" I thought to myself. "They have no idea what they are in for."

Then I asked Rob what the vote tally was. It was 139-1, he said. I remember thinking to myself, "yikes, that one person must really not like me."

I learned later who that person was who voted against my call. Their reason was not as political or malicious as it sounds. One of the things I've learned about leadership in my four years here is to value the loyal opposition as much as it might drive me crazy. This person took up the mantle of loyal opposition and wanted to keep everyone honest, and their way to do that was to be the still small voice of dissent.

Four years later I stand before you today after submitting my letter of resignation earlier this week. I want you to know that my resignation is in no way because of a person, a group of people, an event, or my being tired of ministry or St. Mary's. As I explained in my letter, it is because of a personal joy. When Eliza and I were talking about whether she would move here or I would move to State College, it was a hard decision. She likes being here and I enjoy being your pastor. But when it came time for me to think about the possibility of being deployed for 9, 12, or 15 months and her having all of her close support network two hours away in State College, I made the hard decision to leave. I also considered asking if I could commute between State College and Silver Run. But, I've learned that being a pastor means being

present and dividing my time between two places separated by 110 miles was not a recipe for success in a relationship, a future marriage, or a ministry.

I recognize all of this comes as a shock. Every time I delivered the news in person, I saw blank stares staring back at me. One person said they kept hoping they would wake up and realize that it was a bad dream. When I called Linda late last week to inform her, there was a moment of silence on the other end.

I remember feeling that same shock, sadness, and fear when my home pastor resigned. No joke, I cried when she announced she was leaving. Then I felt abandoned. Then I got angry. Then I worried that the church would fall apart. She played such an instrumental role in my life growing up and our Church that I didn't know how I could be a part of a Church or be a Christian without her.

None of that has turned out to be true. My home church is still strong. My faith in God has grown. I am still a Christian without her. And I still hold her in the highest regard for the work she is doing in Frederick and I understand her reasons for leaving my home church. But anytime we lose something or someone we love, there is a process of grief. Psychologists call them the six stages of grief and they all fit the ending of a pastor/parishoner relationship: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, acceptance, and finding new meaning. I am not here to tell any of us how we should feel or what we should think about this news or my decision. But I am here to ask us to trust in the God who calls and gathers people together in Christ's name by the power of the Holy Spirit.

It is fitting that the Old Testament lectionary reading is from 1 Kings 19. It is the story of Elijah fleeing for his life from the terror of Queen Jezebel. Elijah was a prophet and he spoke against how the wealthy were treating the poor. He also called out Israelite society out for its decadence and its focus on material wealth and things. But what really got him in trouble was his stepping on the toes of the idols Queen Jezebel and her prophets of Baal created.

We pick up the story with Elijah on the run from Jezebel's assassins. He is pinned down on Mount Horeb pleading with God for his life. Mount Horeb

is also known as the 'Mount of God'. It is the same mountain Moses climbed to receive the 10 Commandments from God. When Elijah complains to God that he has done everything God called him to do, how he stood up to Jezebel's wickedness, but yet his life is still in danger, the Lord tells him to stand on the side of the mountain 'for the Lord is about to pass by.'

Here is where the story is interesting for us. We are told there was such a strong wind that it split rocks into pieces, but the Lord was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake that seemed to shake the foundations of the world, but the Lord was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake there was a fire that consumed everything, but the Lord was in the fire. Finally there was a sound of sheer silence, silence so deafening Elijah felt overwhelmed.

If you have ever been deep in a cave with no running water and no human activity, you know what sheer silence sounds like. It is eerily. Silence and solitude are healthy spiritual disciplines, but to sit in silence takes nerve. In my experience silence is also an opportunity to sit with the feeling over being overwhelmed and enter into the presence of God.

The interesting thing about this passage is that the three natural phenomena mentioned - wind, earthquakes, and fire - are all natural events associated with the presence of God in the Old Testament. If you remember the story of the Hebrews receiving the 10 Commandments from God, there is a small detail about the mountain being consumed with lightning and thunder. It is a reference to the great and terrible power and glory of God. But here in this passage, the Lord is not in the wind, the earthquake, or the fire. The way the Hebrew translation works, we are not even sure if the Lord was in the silence.

For me, this story is a testimony that the Lord God, the Creator of heaven and earth, works in mysterious and ambiguous ways. I think most of us would prefer to have the presence of God more in things like earthquakes and winds. At least he would be obvious. But that is not how God operates. I think the term ambiguity is particularly helpful. Elijah didn't know if the Lord would be in the fire, the wind, or the silence. Everything in Elijah's life was uncertain and his world was seemingly falling apart and God did not so up in some grand, obvious way. It is the sound of sheer silence that gets Elijah's

attention that turns his attention and preoccupation from himself to go out and hunt for the divine glory which has the power to make him feel alive.

Part of what Elijah experiences as he is wrapped in divine glory without any of the trappings of religion is that he gains the fortitude and strength for the next day. But Elijah first needed to walk through the uncertainty and the ambiguity in order to gain new strength, new resolve, new ideas for the way forward. Elijah eventually hikes down the mountain and continues the work God has given him.

This is how the interim process in the United Church of Christ works. Interim times are filled with change and ambiguity. But like Elijah, they can also be times of growth and new directions. Your Consistory will be working with the Central Atlantic Conference to come up with an interim process. They will also work on setting up a search committee. John and Rebecca Shillingburg have pledged to support you until an interim can be called. Through this process, we are each asked to do the hard work of seeking out the presence of God.

St. Mary's - you - have so many gifts to offer. I can't tell you how many people have commented to me when they visit how welcoming you are and how beautiful this building is and alive they feel in the presence of God. There are also many people, most of whom we will never know, who are impacted by the work we do. Just this week, Debbie sent in a donation of \$1000 to the Carroll County Rape Crisis Center from our fundraising proceeds. These are women and men we'll never meet. We are also going to be a Shepherd's Staff satellite location for folks to register for and pick up back-to-school backpacks. Additionally, we do the important work every week of worshipping and being in fellowship.

So as shocking and hard as this news is that I will be leaving in September, I am confident in you to continue your ministry. You have a talented Consistory President in Linda and your Consistory is very good at thinking strategically and making decisions that are good for the church as a whole. Please show them your support and care. They want to help us all say goodbye, but they also want to continue the work of the church.

To that end, as someone who loves this church, I encourage you to keep moving forward. I encourage you to continue with the building improvements. Most pastors don't enter ministry and most people don't come to church to talk about flooring options and paint colors. So, if you can get that done before your next pastor arrives, that will set him or her up for a fruitful ministry with you. Because other than refurbishing parts of the building, we have done most everything else building-wise and administratively like Safe Church, and organizing the office and documents, and reorganizing committees to reduce burnout and training new leaders that needs to be done. Any pastor will be very fortunate to be coming in to St. Mary's. They will also be set-up to hit the ground running.

I also encourage you to move forward continue pursuing a Minister for Children, Youth, and Families. This was one of the harder things for me to leave since I believe strongly in investing in the next generation of Christians. But you can still make that investment and I would guess your next pastor would be excited that you are doing that.

Finally, I would like to say a little about how thankful I am to have been with you for the past four years. When I started here, I had no idea where this call would lead me. I had no idea that I would be so sad to bury people like Nancy Dutterer, that I'd have the opportunity to work with a group of people who raise over \$15000 a year to give away to others, or that I'd have so much fun seeing kids and adults come out on Sunday afternoons to garden. I also learned a couple things about children if I should have them one day. First, I learned how chaotic it can be when you let kids have it at with soil, water, and seeds and tell them to plant. I also learned that three olds will try to eat everything, even the marigold seeds.

But it has been such a joy being here. I am looking forward to my next 10 weeks with you and saying goodbye. If you'd like to grab lunch or coffee, I would be happy to do that. But know that I love this church, I love you all, and that I believe in you and this church. We all know the church is going through a lot of change, but I believe that St. Mary's can and will continue its ministry here for another 250 years and I am incredibly blessed to have had the opportunity to lead you for 4 of those years.

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you now and always. Amen.