

Sermon for Sunday, November 2, 2025--All Saints' Sunday

1 Kings 19:1-18

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you Oh Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Many of you are gathered here today because it's All Saints Sunday and you are here to remember your loved ones who have died and await us at the heavenly gates. You may not think there's a connection between the story of the prophet Elijah and All Saints Sunday, but I found one! My sermon outline: I will begin by sharing the context of the Scripture reading; then move to the point where God is present in the sound of sheer silence, and finish up with the grief and remembering that comes with All Saints Sunday. Let us begin.

The ancient Israelites tried to live in a theocracy; that is within a country that was governed by immediate divine guidance or by officials who are regarded as divinely guided. The story of David being anointed to become king was a way to indicate that God had chosen someone to be the king and that David's actions had divine blessing. Everything that had to do with governing was supposed to be an extension of divine will and religious practice. In other words, if you lived in Israel, you lived in a theocracy. To the Israelites of those days religion and government were intermingled in such a way that it was almost impossible to separate the two. A student of the OT will tell you that the ideal of living in a theocracy didn't last very long and that **the mingling of governance and religion doesn't really work.**

In the lead up to today's Scripture reading the king and queen of Israel were worshipping false gods and leading people away from worship of the one true God. In the chapter immediately preceding this one Elijah has participated in an amazing demonstration of God's power when God sends fire from heaven and burns up a sacrifice that Elijah has doused with water. Queen Jezebel is furious. Elijah flees from her wrath and in doing so travels a long distance on foot: perhaps about 80 miles. He's exhausted from the physical exertion. This exhaustion doesn't help his mental or emotional state. He feels defeated because the miracle didn't turn the heart of the Queen toward God. He also thinks that all the people of Israel have turned to false idols and abandoned worship of God almighty. He feels like his prophetic ministry has been a

complete waste. He eventually ends up at Mt. Horeb (Mt Sinai) hiding in a cave.

Which brings me to the sound of sheer silence. As Elijah hides in the cave the voice of God comes to him and instructs him to go out onto the mountainside. That's when he experiences hurricane force winds, earthquakes splitting boulders, and raging wild fires. But in each instance it is clear that God wasn't in the hurricane force winds; nor the earthquake, nor the wildfire.

Instead, God made God's presence felt in sheer silence. Translations vary in trying to convey the sense of the Hebrew words that we read as "sheer silence." Different versions say it in different ways: an older version describes it as a still small voice. Other places call it the sound of a low, gentle, soft whisper. Any of these words help to convey the sense of silence especially after the noise of wind and earthquake and fire. Sheer silence: it is exactly the opposite of the powerful God that we tend to imagine. And that's one of the important characteristics of God: just when we humans think we have a handle on God and God's presence and God's behavior we discover that we have it wrong. *(Pause)*

Today is All Saints Sunday. Every year we gather on the first Sunday of November to remember those loved ones of our friends and family who have died. Remembering in this way has been a practice of the church for hundreds of years because the church recognizes the pain of grieving and the value of acknowledging that pain among friends and fellow believers.

For those who have navigated the death of a loved one: especially the death of someone like a spouse, parents, or a very close friend, you recognize that there is a period of time both before and after the death that is a time of "noise." People coming and going. Phone calls. Arrangements being made. It is a time of turmoil. It can feel like a hurricane or a blizzard or an earthquake or a dumpster fire; you know this....you have lived it.

It's at these moments of great turmoil and anxiety that we desperately long to hear from God. But as we learn from Elijah's story: God is not in the hurricane, or blizzard or earthquake or dumpster fire. God certainly is active and at work in that time of turmoil, but may not be perceived clearly. God is in the sheer and utter silence. God will most likely be heard by us in a still small voice speaking to us in the quiet places of our lives.

I want to reassure you that even though All Saints Sunday can feel like the reopening of a wound it is important to be here. It is important to acknowledge the loss and weep if needed. It is important to wait in the silence trusting that God is going to show up and impress something on your heart. (*Long Pause*)

Let's return to Elijah. Elijah's assessment of the situation in Israel is pretty bleak. He believes that there is no one left in Israel following God and that he is the only remaining prophet. He believes this so strongly that he lays down under a tree waiting to die. Elijah wants to be done. But Elijah's work as a prophet isn't over yet. God has need for Elijah to continue. Through his words Elijah has power that is recognized by the Israelites. When Elijah speaks people listen. But notice also that God is providing a succession plan. He is to perform three anointings: two men to be kings: one for the northern kingdom of Israel and one for the kingdom of Aram—modern day Syria. Finally he is to anoint his prophetic successor: Elisha. Elijah still has work to do.

We who remain still have work to do. We need to use our "status" as the elders of the family (perhaps as the one who has gone through the trauma of grief) to pass on the wisdom and faith teachings of those who are no longer with us. The family stories, the genealogy, the faith: all are important items that must not be lost. We don't know very much about Elijah: but one thing we do know: he is faithful. His faith inspired people in Israel to remain faithful to God—even when it was very difficult; even when the political powers put enormous pressure on the common people to follow false gods. We "elders in the tribe" need to maintain and share our faith with the younger ones around us even though life and faith may be very difficult just now.

In a few minutes, you will be invited forward to light a candle in memory of your loved ones. The names that we memorialize today were pillars of faith in this congregation and beyond. We knew them and were influenced by their faith. We give thanks for their example. But we also give thanks for the promise of the resurrection; a promise to which we cling as followers of Jesus. We will see our loved ones again; that's the promise of Jesus. And Jesus never breaks his promises. Amen.