

**Hearing Amongst the Noise**  
Menno Mennonite Church

August 13, 2023

**Purpose:** To embrace the call of God in the many ways that the voice speaks.

**Message:** We are called always to listen for the leading voice of God, even in the midst of the noise of our usual life.

**Scripture:** 1 Kings 19:1-13 (I will read); Psalm 29

**Synopsis:** Listening to the voice of God can, at times, leave us a bit incredulous. We speak of it, we anticipate it, but when it comes down to it, we are not always sure what or whether we have heard. We are not hugely given to the absolute statements of “because God said so”. How, though, do we work at processes that allow us to listen with intention and integrity to consider the ways that God is speaking in our lives individually and corporately? We do so with intention, deliberation, and most of all, hope.

1 Kings 19:-1-13

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

<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> God said, "Go out and stand on the mountain before YHWH,  
for I am 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?"

There is a certain preparation to taking some time in the city. There are the tips and tricks to urban dwelling that need to be remembered and rehearsed as we take on the challenge of city streets. Attending church conventions so long that I can never really recall NOT attending (an occupational hazard when your father was involved in church education), you learned how this works. Not that this was the only experience I had with the urban realities, and how to carry oneself, but it is the context in which I remember the advice being so explicit. About a month ahead of time, there would come a letter as part of packet outlining the conference. This letter would give the needed reminders: that service staff work for and expect tips, that public transit, as wonderful as it is, has a cultural protocol all its own, that while absolutely needed inside the convention hall, your name tag is not particularly helpful to be worn outside the convention hall—all the stuff that we need to bear in mind to step from contexts where these needs are less explicit to a new and challenging place. Somehow, though, you could always spot a Mennonite at convention time—whether they are wearing the name tag or no when many hundreds are gathered together. As someone who has spent time in cities, including living and working in some of the tougher neighborhoods 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. Yet it is always one of those discontinuities that I find hard to square of coming together to be body in the name of Christ with the cautionary tales of how to keep people whom Christ loves at arm's reach. We need the awareness to active our bubbles even as we too are called to bear witness.

This text of Elijah encountering God on the mountain is a favorite. We excerpt this, citing the still small voice speaking in the silence when we wish to evoke the sense of the Spirit. Especially for we who are not particularly given to announcements of what God spoke to us the other night, or are waiting on the active voice of the Spirit as a needed element of worship, we like the emphasis of God's silence (though make no mistake: the Spirit does speak, and through our worship every bit as much as that of the more charismatic experience—it simply takes a more subtle form). 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 for his very life as revenge is sought. He is ready to die; the situations appears 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 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.

But this can lead us to a bit of an unfortunate collar; namely, that then God must ONLY speak in silence. We can lead to think that since this is so much the experience both then and now, we need not give the noisier moments of life much consideration when looking for the voice of the Lord. So, like those moments when we take to the city streets, we opt for our protective bubble against those places where we are least at peace since we know that this is not where God tends to speak. We steel ourselves from the discomfort of encountering that which we might not want to hear and the context where we may not be prepared to hear it. We do it on the streets; we do it in our spiritual lives. We have barriers and layers of soul protection, 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. Yet, sometimes, in order to experience something extra ordinary you need to break the bubble at least a little bit along the way. Sometimes you have to risk something in order to learn something; to encounter that which you may not be expecting.

I think we too can do this Spiritually as well. 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 it is simply the protection of have never been done that way before. 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 as opposed to risk listening for something that we may not wish to hear. Like “my love extends even to those who you despise.” 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.”

My point is this. We are people of selective hearing. We know this and experience it all the time in our lives. It can be amazing the lengths we can go to adjust ourselves to hear that which we expect and the way that we want it. Listening for the voice of God, if we do it, is something that we want to keep safe, so we listen selectively. We would much rather stay safe when it is time to hear what God might say. Yet that isn't the way of discipleship. 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 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, in our lives or in our congregation—stay the course, whatever you do don't change a thing. 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 constructive, and what might be standing in the way of our listening for something that, perhaps, we have not heard before.

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 steadying, hopeful voice of God at work. As 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. What is it about Paul or the Old Testament that makes you cringe? Where can you perhaps find God where you do not presently see a hand at work? Find these spots and just ask yourself why these barriers exist for you. Is it worth it to maintain these walls? Where might you be invited to come, step outside, amongst the noise and hear the voice speaking still.

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.