

“GODISNOWHERE”

Sermon Preached by the Rev. William H. Critzman

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Scripture References: 1 Kings 19: 9-18 & Matthew 14:22-33

Earlier this week, I had a difficult conversation with someone very dear to me. We were having lunch and I noted that she seemed distant and the conversation was hovering on the surface of pleasantries rather than swimming in the usual depths that our long-standing and much-cherished friendship privilege. When I inquired if something more might be going on, I was met with a polite sort of “oh, let’s talk about it some other time,” so I pushed a little harder, saying “no, no, tell me.” What came back at me then was hurt, feelings that were hurt because I hadn’t been as present in our friendship of late as history would expect. My friend, who is as much family and more than as anyone else, told me that it seemed hard to get on my calendar, that it would take me a few days to respond to a missed call and that even when we did get together I seemed preoccupied. I listened as carefully and as openly as I could, and I fessed up. All excuses of work’s been really crazed, or studies have been intense, or we don’t live in the same neighborhood anymore, or vacation schedules, or anything else didn’t matter—not to me then, not to her, and certainly not to us. The truth in that moment was that someone I love was hurt because I had been nowhere as close as I usually am.

Now the arc of our relationship is long, and our future together is longer still—this much I pray—so I know we’ll right the ship. There’s actually not that much to figure out; as repair work goes, the remit here is pretty straight forward, at least on the surface. My friend loved me enough to tell me how my absence had been hurting her. I love her enough to have first listened, and now to amend: to be more responsive, to follow my own heart and reach out to her, to do the work of tending and caring. But then it goes deeper—things generally do—and though there are certainly things I can do, there are also things I need to know. For me, accepting what another offers is sometimes so much more difficult than offering what I hope the other will accept. Over the course of many, many years—many cities, many dates, many adventures, many meals, many mishaps—our friendship has been an emotional bedrock for us both. But in my absence, my friend worried that maybe I didn’t need her any more, that I somehow no longer needed her or the emotional support she has always offered. What is difficult and humbling for me to hear in that expression, is that it wasn’t just cheerful, laughing, optimistic Will that she missed; she also missed vulnerable, crying, feeling lost Will. My friend rightly felt that I had been absent, and in my place fear and doubt were now here.

A long, long time ago, a far greater man than I sat alone in a cave. He had been really busy of late, and he was tired, worn-down, truth be told he was feeling a bit sorry for himself—and that’s OK, we all do it from time to time. Elijah had been prophesizing and preaching and running from his enemies. He had survived a famine and a draught and had been up and down all over the northern and southern kingdoms. No one, he knew, was working as hard for God and God’s people as he was—Elijah felt that he was alone in his pursuit of heavenly things. This morning we heard him describe himself as “zealous,” but if we were reading the King James Version, we would have heard him identify as “jealous”—both words expressing an extreme sort of attachment. These are words that Elijah uses to describe himself; they’re also words that other prophets and the psalmist have used to describe God. In other words, there’s a lot that connects Elijah and God; they’re pretty tight and they talk a lot.

Now up until this point in our story, God has been a boisterous God. Historically God has spoken in a big, loud voice. God speaks in earthquakes, fires, winds, and floods. Like the old *Batman* cartoons where every action is punctuated by a call-out expletive of “Wow!” “Ka-pow!” or “She-zam!” the voice of God in the dialogue between God and God’s people has been mighty and righteous. This is an extraverted God, a loud God, a fighting God. No one loved this awesomeness more than Elijah. And no one tried harder than he to emulate this God and to fight for God’s plan with a similar zealousness. But Lord, such thunder must be exhausting. We know it was for Elijah, I can imagine what the people who had to hear it must have thought, and I feel it was for God too.

Sitting in his cave, battle-scarred and road-weary, Elijah wonders why God is nowhere to be found. Just then, the voice of God appears saying “What are you doing here, Elijah?” This is a bemused sort of question, the puzzlement of which you can hear even more in the King James where God says, “What doest thou here, Elijah,” as if this were Gertrude speaking to Hamlet. Another way I imagine this scene is by picturing Elijah stewing alone in his own jealousy when the voice of God comes over the loud speaker saying “Pity, party of one?” To which, Elijah launches into a litany of all that he has done and how he is all alone, and I have a hard time listening to this without wanting to respond, “what are you talking about – didn’t God just speak to you?” Maybe God was equally confused by Elijah’s petulance, maybe that’s why God tells him to go out to the mountaintop for the LORD is soon approaching. So out Elijah goes, probably expecting or at least hoping for a big, showy revelation of God.

And sure enough, there was a great wind. And Elijah leaned in, but God was not there. And then there was an earthquake. And eager Elijah looked, but God was not there. But then, then there was a fire. And excited Elijah looked, but God was not there. “God was nowhere,” Elijah must have thought, “I am still all alone.” And as expectant Elijah stood on that mountaintop, a new sound came, a sound not usually associated with power and might—not with God then, not with presidents now. For there on that mountain, Elijah was surrounded by the sound of sheer silence. How much more powerful was that silence than all the bombast that had come before? Listening to the sound of that silence, Elijah realizes he’s in the presence of the almighty and goes out to stand face to face with Holy Wisdom herself.

For a second time, God asks “what are you doing here, Elijah?” but the incredulity is gone. In its place is care, and compassion for where Elijah really is. It’s as if in that silence, it wasn’t only Elijah who learned how to listen more carefully, but God did too. Out of the silence, a still small voice emerged, and it brought God and Elijah closer together.

Do you know the sound of freshly fallen snow? Of the sheer silence that occurs when moonlight is reflected in the crystal of snowflakes? Of the crackle that forms atop drifts and banks when the moisture is just right? Do you know the sound of stars in the desert sky? Of the movement of constellations and the long shadows cast by boulders and cliffs? What about the sound of a freshly drawn bath? Of the steam that rises and the smell of salts as you slip your body in? Do you know the sound of children sleeping, or of daffodils blooming? Do you know the sound of a loved one dying? Do you know these sounds of sheer silence?

Writing in *First Matters* this week, Clerk of Session Larry Tallamy writes about the importance of solitude and how he’s learning this practice in retirement. Larry writes of following Thoreau’s advice, and of listening to the moments when there are no planes or boats, of listening to the in-between spaces of forests and life without blackberries and work

cellphones. This is hard work, Larry tells us, work that is important but ongoing and ever evolving.

Jesus too knew the power of solitude. In our gospel this morning, Jesus leaves the disciples and the crowds to go up to the mountain by himself. He went up to pray and, presumably, to rest after a long day of ministry and preaching, to say nothing of the more than 5,000 people he just fed. He went to the mountain alone, this is a point emphasized especially in Matthew's telling of the story—he goes alone, by himself to be with himself in solitude and in silence. He goes to listen. While Jesus is alone on the mountain, the disciples have boarded their boat, and that boat has drifted far away from the shore, battered by the waves and blown by the wind. When Jesus returns early in the morning, he walks across the sea to rejoin his friends on the boat.

Now the miracle of Jesus walking on water comes soon after the miracle of feeding the more than 5,000 and together this miracle double play occurs in three out of the four gospels. You might be asking, "Why not all four, Will?" and that's a story for another day. But in short, let me say that the feeding of the more than 5,000 is indeed included in all four gospels. Luke, however, substitutes the walking on water—an action clearly marking Jesus's identity as God—in favor of a conversation between the disciples and Jesus that reaches the same conclusion. In other words, these miracles of eating and walking on water, or even eating and identity talk, are important. They say something to us about the presence and care of God. As we know, each of the gospel accounts are written with slightly different aims and for very different audiences. Thus, the accounting of the same story often has different details in each of the gospels. For instance, the gospel of Matthew is the only gospel that reports Peter's walking on water. In the earlier Markan account, and in the subsequent Johanne version, Jesus walks across the water to get into the boat with the disciples. It is only here in Matthew that Jesus calls to Peter to get out of the boat and come to him. Like Elijah responding to God's call to come out and see God, Peter responds to Jesus's call to come out and see him. Just as God wasn't in the wind for Elijah, Peter too became frightened when he focused on the strong wind rather than the presence of God before him. And just as Elijah discovered God in an unexpected silence, Peter reunites with Jesus in an unexpected place. Jesus who was elsewhere during the night, is now here with Peter. God who was nowhere in a fire, an earthquake, or a wind, is now here with Elijah, and with us.

My friend and I have talked since our luncheon earlier this week. I spoke to her this morning to get consent for sharing our story with you, and we talked again about how important we are in one another's lives. This week, we both found voices within and we both listened to one another's hearts. What has been always present—namely our love and our commitment to one another—remains true. So does the fact that my own absence was hurtful. It hurts when people are no where to be found when we need them. I know this, I've felt that loss, and I've felt that longing. I know too that I've caused such loss, and that I've let people—people I care deeply about—down in my own mangled attempts to workout the balance between speech and silence, presence and solitude, action and thought. The work of balancing relationships and solitude can be tricky—every couple knows this, and today's scripture gives us two examples.

We hear the story of Elijah wondering about where God is, and how it is that he can feel so alone. We hear the story of a beloved disciple wondering if it is really God he sees out on the water, and if it is, how he can go out to meet Jesus. In these stories we hear about absence and presence, we hear about how hard this balance can be to get right. Now these actions of going away and coming back, these can be big things probably best left to God—death and

resurrection, for instance—or they can be small things we humans can practice—taking retreat to nourish our souls, putting away our phones and stepping away from work, or visiting a friend we haven't seen in too long. Perhaps it's these little moments of going away and coming back, of rupture and repair, sin and forgiveness, absence and return that are what strengthen all of our relationships with each other and with God. Maybe there's a space in the going to and coming from, in the in between, that's a God space. In it, maybe we will hear new sounds calling us to new wonders. Put another way, maybe these are the sort of daily miracles our faith gives us the language to proclaim. Maybe we can be a little more proactive in resurrecting the little things in our own lives—things like listening through difficult conversations, or dusting off a few old dreams, or reconnecting with a friend from the past. When it comes to God and Godly things, maybe the space between nowhere and now here is closer than we think.