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 1st Kings 19:1-18 (from Narrative Lectionary)
 Delivered on November 5th, 2017 (All Saints Day)
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Prayer for Illumination

God of generations past and generations to come, you have shown your faithfulness to all those who have called upon your name and put their trust in you. As we turn to the witness of your saint Elijah, help us hear your Word with him, and to follow you in the still, small way of love. Speak, Lord, for your servants listen. In Christ's name and for Christ's name we pray, Amen.

Reading

1st Kings 19:1-18

Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done, and how he had killed all the prophets 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 life of one of them by this time tomorrow.' 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.

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.' Then he lay down under the broom tree and fell asleep. Suddenly an angel touched him and said to him, 'Get up and eat.' 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. The angel of the Lord came a second time, touched him, and said, 'Get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you.' He got up, and ate and drank; then he went in the strength of that food for forty days and forty nights to Horeb the mount of God. At that place he came to a cave, and spent the night there.

Then the word of the Lord came to him, saying, 'What are you doing here, Elijah?' He 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 prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away.'

He said, '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?' He 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 prophets with the sword. I alone am left,

and they are seeking my life, to take it away.’ Then the Lord said to him, ‘Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus; when you arrive, you shall anoint Hazael as king over Aram. Also you shall anoint Jehu son of Nimshi as king over Israel; and you shall anoint Elisha son of Shaphat of Abel-meholah as prophet in your place. Whoever escapes from the sword of Hazael, Jehu shall kill; and whoever escapes from the sword of Jehu, Elisha shall kill. Yet I will leave seven thousand in Israel, all the knees that have not bowed to Baal, and every mouth that has not kissed him.’

Sermon

Have you ever reached a point in time when the smallness of your life became painfully, unignorably clear?

A point when you looked at yourself, at your future and your past, and thought, “I guess this is it”?

A point when your vision of yourself and your dreams for this world slowly faded, and you had to let go of your hope that things would be different?

That’s the point where Elijah is. He’s confronted with the small contours of his life, and he’s depressed. I mean really, actually depressed: he’s sleeping excessively, he has to be told to eat, he’s accusing others, and he feels totally, absolutely, isolated-in-darkness alone.¹ He had bright and hopeful visions of his life, but we find him now lamenting, “Enough of all this! Lord, take away my life, for *I am no better than my ancestors.*” If *this* is his life, Elijah would prefer to be dead.

Elijah had good reason to think that his life would be different, even spectacular. Right before our text today, Elijah squared off against the prophets of Baal...and won. He declared by the Word of the Lord that weeks and weeks of drought were finally coming to an end...and he was right. Everything was lining up for Elijah. God was paving the way for a new day in Israel, with a renewed covenant and renewed faithfulness, and Elijah was at the head of the action. The life he had always wanted, the world he had always dreamed of, was almost a reality.

But as quickly as the Israelites turned from the false god Baal, they then abandoned Elijah. King Ahab watched Elijah’s spectacular victory, but at home, Ahab didn’t dare cross

¹ Cf. Choon-Leong Seow, “1 and 2 Kings,” (*NIB III*: Nashville: Abingdon, 1999), 145.

his wife. Queen Jezebel, a fierce enemy of the LORD and all the LORD's servants, continued to call the shots, and she was calling for Elijah's head. Everything turned out to remain the same. Elijah is stuck with this broken world, stuck with his broken life, stuck with himself.

Today, we might call this a mid-life crisis. As the dreams of his youth fade and the limitations of age set in, Elijah struggles to come to grips with reality.

But this is a "mid-faith" crisis. Elijah had committed his life to the LORD and given himself to the LORD's purposes. He had witnessed the LORD's power vividly, and he set all his hopes on the LORD's promises. And right when Elijah that the LORD would show up and make all the difference, the LORD is absent. The heavens are silent. Elijah believes he is alone.

It's the same mid-faith crisis the disciples experienced when the one who had calmed the waves and raised the dead descended into the silence of death.

It's the same mid-faith crisis new believers experience when the coming crown in heaven is overshadowed by the present call to the cross.

It's the same mid-faith crisis we experience whenever the new thing God might be doing is wiped out by the old, insistent powers of this world.

In this mid-faith crisis, God reveals something crucial to Elijah about God's way in this world. Elijah is told to prepare himself, for the LORD is about to be revealed before Elijah. Then, there's all sorts of spectacular displays of power: bulldozing wind, demolishing earthquake, consuming fire. Yes, Elijah must think! This is just what anyone would want to see! More power, more authority, more signs that God is in control! There's still hope that God has something spectacular in store!

Yet, somehow, Elijah knows that God is not in the wind, the quake, the fire, the spectacular. After all of that, Elijah experiences the simple "sound of sheer silence." And in that moment, in that absence of anything miraculous, mysterious, or even interesting, the

LORD encounters Elijah with such ferocity that Elijah must cover his face. We learn with Elijah that at the very moment where God seems to have departed and gone elsewhere, God is in fact most powerfully and gloriously present.

In the silence Elijah experiences, we encounter the “this-worldly” nature of God. We look above for miracles, or we look within for mystery, but God is with us within our struggles. We and the disciples looked for Christ to bring in a new day, to make everything different in spectacular fashion; but Christ was found on the cross. As onlookers cried for other-worldly power—“Save yourself!”—the Son of God gave himself completely to this world, in silence.

And so, on this All Saints Day, we are called to “live completely in this world,”² for it is here that Christ meets us. There’s no other place where we learn to be faithful but in this world. It’s through the responsibilities we complain about, through the relationships we wish we were free from, through the chores that weigh us down, that we learn what it is to be a saint. By responding to the demands of love in this world, we learn how to enjoy being a part of the communion of saints.

Each day, we’re tempted each day to live outside of this world and to seek true life elsewhere. There are commercials for beer, ice cream, jewelry, cars, even online degrees, that show people being transported to some far off, heavenly place as soon as they take a sip or hop in the seat. These ads tell us, “There’s something better for you just beyond; don’t settle for the life you have; we can offer you more.” Every moment, we can reach into our pockets and find a portal that offers escape. Headlines of breaking news give us drama; emails give us professional action; posted pictures seduce us with the possibility of perfection. I was at a child development conference several years ago, and I learned that experts are seeing changes in the ways babies’ brains develop, because babies are not getting as much eye contact as they used to. While parents and caregivers hold and feed babies,

² I take this expression from Dietrich Bonhoeffer in his letter to Eberhard Bethge on July 21, 1944, as printed in *Letters & Papers From Prison* (New York: Touchstone, 1997), 369. “I discovered later, and I’m still discovering right up to this moment, that it is only by living completely in this world that one learns to have faith.

they're peering beyond into handheld screens. We're all drawn to look for life elsewhere, beyond what's right before us.

And of course we are! It's been said that everyone wants a revolution, but no one wants to do the dishes. It's tedious and boring and exhausting to live completely in this world, with far less drama than we'd like and far more dirty dishes. Living in this world is full of disappointment and loss. If I find my comfort in *Low & Order* reruns, those characters will always be there for me. If I find my comfort in my neighbor, I will eventually experience loss. Yesterday, I told my two-year-old daughter Naomi, in a routine way, that I loved her, and then I caught myself and paused. "Naomi, do you know what it means that I love you?" She thought for a second and responded, "Yes. It means, 'I miss you.'" To live and love in this world is to know pain. It's to inevitably miss those we learn to depend on and delight in.

But Elijah points to our ordinary lives, and our ordinary relationships and all their demands, as the place in this world where God's redemptive presence shines through. We can give up the illusion that to be a saint, we must be less anxious, more put-together, more spiritual, less fearful. All Saints Day celebrates how God's presence is manifest among ordinary people such as you and me, occupying the silent blank spaces in history books. We are saints by God's love, not by our achievements.

Dorothy Day, the Catholic leader who gave her life to feeding the poor and advocating for justice, once quipped, "Don't call me a saint. I don't want to be dismissed." Our popular notions of saints put them on a spiritual pedestal. They are extraordinary in their devotion, superhuman in their faithfulness. We think saints are those super-Christians that make the rest of us look bad.

Elijah had the same idea. He thought he was most saintly, most close to the LORD, through his prophetic victory, through fire from heaven, through spectacular displays of personal devotion and God's power. The Church makes the same error when it trumpets itself as God's chosen servant through its world-altering outreach, its soul-shaking spirituality, and its spirit-transporting worship. Elijah discovers God present and at work in

hidden, quiet ways. This means we are free to follow the Apostle's Paul's words, "to live quiet lives in the Lord" (1 Thess 4:11). We are free to quietly work with others on life's problems and celebrate with others over life's joys. It's for this world of human life that God so loved that he sent his only Son. It's for your beautiful, quiet life, and for all those quiet, ordinary saints in heaven and on earth, that the Son died, to make our shared life eternal.

So where in this world are you turning away from?

What in your life are you trying to get past?

Could God be present to you there?

If you listen closely enough, you will hear the song of the saints, singing to the humble Christ of this world, ringing in that silence. We are not alone. Amen.