

August 13, 2023
Lectionary 19, Year A
The 11th Sunday after Pentecost
1 Kings 19:9-18
Matthew 14:22-33
Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Norwood, MA
Pastor Amanda L. Warner

The Silence and the Storm

While we were in Hawaii, Britton, Abigail, Julia, and I did something that was very out of character for us. When we went to bed on Sunday night, we set our alarms to wake us up at 3:00 a.m. the next morning. We were spending the night at Kahului port on Maui, so our plan was to get off of our cruise ship at around 3:30 so that we could drive up a mountain and see the sunrise.

It was dark when we got off the ship, and when we started the drive up the mountain, but as we drove, we started to see the red glow of the first light of the sunrise on the horizon.

The mountain that we were driving up is called Haleakala, which is 10,000 feet at its summit. Like many other people we were heading there to see the sunrise over the ancient and inactive volcanic landscape, high above the clouds. We reached the viewing point at around 5:30 in the morning, in plenty of time to watch the sun break over the horizon.

It was a sight worth the early morning wake up and the harrowing drive up the dark mountain, where there were many moments when I just had to close my eyes to avoid sharing my fears about the hairpin turns of the road with Britton, who was driving and who did not need to add my worries to his own white knuckled drive up the mountain.

In spite of the early morning that's involved, seeing the sunrise on Haleakala is a very popular activity on Maui, and for good reason, so, as I said, there were a

lot people with us at the sunrise overlook, people who had come on tour buses or who had done the same drive that we had just done.

The sun rose around 5:50 in the morning, and, at around 6:10, almost everyone else was gone from the overlook. People had seen the sun rise and then had gotten back onto their tour buses or into their rental cars and driven away. They had seen what they had come to see.

We stuck around though. We walked around, took pictures from every angle, and reveled in the changing light and the changing colors of the rocks around us as the sun rose higher and higher into the sky. We were practically alone as we enjoyed the sights at the overlook at 9,740 feet.

We thought about hiking to the 10,000-foot summit, but Julia started to feel a little nauseous and light headed, possibly from a touch of elevation sickness, as we walked up the trail to the summit, so instead, we got back in our car to head back down the mountain.

On our way down we decided to stop at the other overlooks on the mountain so that we could see more of this otherworldly landscape.

There were quite a few people at the first overlook we stopped at but we were still able to get very good views and pictures of some of the volcanic cones on the mountain.

Possibly because we stayed for a long time at every place we stopped, by the time we got to the second overlook on we were one of only two cars in the little parking lot. This overlook involved a half mile hike and the girls decided to stay in the car for that one, so, Britton and I went alone.

There was one other couple who had started the short hike ahead of us, and we went slowly taking in the interesting landscape around us. It wasn't long before I couldn't hear the voices or even the footsteps of the people ahead of us and when I realized that I couldn't hear them anymore, I decided to run the experiment that is the point of me telling you this story in a sermon at all.

I asked Britton to go ahead of me and told him that I would catch up with him at the overlook. And then I just stood there, looking out over the mountain. For a while I could hear his footsteps, but it wasn't long before I couldn't hear the sound of his walking anymore.

And then it happened. Then I heard it. Or maybe, more accurately, didn't hear it. Because what I heard, or didn't hear, was nothing. Once the sound of Britton's footsteps was gone, it was completely silent. It was so silent that the pressure of the silence pressed on my ears, it almost hurt. In that moment I experienced the absence of sound physically, as though it touched me.

And then it hit me. I was having an Elijah moment. For the first and perhaps only time in my life, in this noisy world, I was hearing or perhaps I should say, feeling, the sound of sheer silence.

Other, older translations of the Bible say that after the wind and the earthquake and the fire what Elijah heard was a still small voice, and that, until July 17th, was my preferred translation of this verse. I liked it better because of what comes next. The text says that "When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in a mantel and he went out to the entrance of the cave." (1 Kings 19: 13a) That made sense to me, the idea that Elijah heard something, heard a still small voice, and he went out to hear more, to hear what the Lord was saying.

But our translation says that what got Elijah moving was the much sung about sound of silence. Until recently, that never made sense to me. Why would the sound of silence get his attention, get him out of his hiding place in the cave?

Now, I know. Now I understand the power of that sheer silence, the sense that in that silence you are in the presence of something holy, the sense that silence should and does make you should sit up, stand up, take notice.

I saw so many beautiful, wonderful things on our trip to Hawaii. I saw things that literally made me spontaneously start singing hymns, I saw so many of the beauties of creation that were at times overwhelming, and always awe-inspiring.

But it was only there, on that mountain, in that silence that I truly felt the immediate presence of God.

And then, something else happened. Out of the silence came a wind, a breeze, just enough to move the grass and gently ruffle my hair and that breeze, breaking into that silence, had a tone and depth, that I have never heard in the wind anywhere else. It was like the wind was singing, like it was speaking to me.

Unlike Elijah I didn't hear any words. I didn't hear any questions or receive any marching orders. I won't be anointing any kings or arming myself against any idolaters after my time on the mountain, as Elijah was told to do.

But I know that in that extraordinary silence and in the singing breeze, I was in the presence of God, and even if it never happens again, those experiences have come with me, down the mountain and across an ocean and across a continent to where my real life is lived.

Like many of you, I heard with horror this week about the terrible fires on Maui, that have decimated parts of western Maui, including the town of Lahaina, where we also visited, and where Julia and my mom spent an afternoon shopping while the rest of us went to the beach.

There has been so much loss for the people of Maui this week, loss of life; people, animals, vegetation, loss of buildings; homes and businesses, loss of historic sites, loss of a sense of safety, loss of communities as people have been displaced, and even the loss of the future that they had pictured, that they had imagined for themselves as they face all of that loss and so many unknowns about what will happen next.

Haleakala, which is a national park, is closed right now and it has been since the fires began, although I don't think that the park itself burned. It is pretty far from where the fires were, but, I'm sure that, to the people who live on the unburned parts of Maui, it doesn't seem very far away at all.

It's heartbreaking to think that a place where I experienced such amazing peace, is now suffering and struggling in the aftermath of a natural disaster of such violence, the heat, the smoke, the noise of the devouring flames.

Perhaps in the light of what happened on Maui this week, and in the light of the natural disasters, fires, floods, tornadoes, and so on that happen with increasing frequency all over the world, to find God today, we need to look, not to the silence, but to the storm. Perhaps, you, like I, like our battered world have far less experience with silence than with the storm.

And yet, still, into the storms that rage in our lives, our gospel reading tells us, Jesus comes.

To the disciples, in their boat, battered by wind and waves, feeling themselves to be alone, without Jesus, and at the mercy of the natural world that seemed to be arrayed against them, Jesus came.

Across the waters, Jesus came to them, walking on the water, scaring the daylights out of his friends, but speaking words of peace to them, "Take heart, it is I, do not be afraid." (Matthew 14: 27)

That is the kind of God moment that I'm more familiar with. God present to me in the silence was new to me, but God's voice speaking to me through the storm, while the winds and waves rage around me, that feels familiar.

Of course, I have no idea what it's like to live through a major natural disaster, a fire, a flood, that leaves nothing but destruction in its wake, but you and I all sadly, know what it's like to live through the storm of a pandemic. We know **what's** it's like to live through the storm of health crises and the death of loved ones.

We know what it's like to live through the day to day storms of challenging schedules, of bills coming due, of laundry that is never, ever going to be finished, metaphorical storms that rise up and threaten to overwhelm us, that come even with the blessings of life.

And I know, that, even when we think that the wind and the waves are too much for us, even when we think that we're drowning, Jesus is there for us, catching us when we fall.

Here's one more thing about the Elijah story and the gospel reading for today. Both of those stories are about people who believed that God had failed them.

Elijah had been faithful and zealous for the Lord and the outcome was the king wanted him dead, his fellow prophets had been murdered, and he had had to run into the wilderness to survive.

Peter had been told by Jesus to come into the water, to walk to him, to step out of the comparable safety of the boat out onto the restless sea, but when he noticed the strong winds, the wild waves, he became frightened. Perhaps he had thought that because Jesus had invited him to come to him, had called him to come, Jesus would make it easy for him.

But as he began to sink, he called out to Jesus, "Lord, save me!" (Matthew 14:30)

Did he, like Elijah, think that God would abandon him in his moment of fear, in his moment of need?

But, in spite of Elijah's doubts and anger at the God who he believed abandoned him, God spoke to him, not in the violence of wind, earthquake or fire, but out of the peace of sheer silence, and prepared and equipped him for a new prophetic ministry, a new mission.

And in spite of Peter's fear and doubt, when the wind blew and the waves rose high, Jesus reached out and caught him by the hand, took him into the boat, and calmed the storm. Peter was never rejected from among the disciples in spite of his doubts and his bombastic faith, and ultimately, he became the one who was called to tend, to feed, and to love in Jesus' name.

Our stories for today tell us that whether we walk by faith or live in doubt and fear, Jesus comes. In the silence or in the storm, Jesus comes. We are not alone. Do not be afraid. Amen.