

“What Are You Doing Here?” / I Kings 19:1-4, 8-15a / 23 June 2013

“What are you doing here, Elijah?” Twice in this familiar story from First Kings the Spirit's voice whispers in the prophet's ear—perhaps his spiritual ear—asking the same question both times. I imagine a surprised tone the first time around: What are *you* doing here, Elijah? Like when your child is a toddler, and he or she wanders down the stairs in the dark to find you in the kitchen at midnight. “What are *you* doing here?” The second time, I imagine a weary but patient tone: What are you *doing* here, Elijah? And on both occasions, Elijah's self-righteous reply is the same. Elijah's the hero; everyone else is to blame. But God's only meaningful response to all of Elijah's noise and fury is...silence. “The sound of sheer silence.” For sometimes silence is the only answer. But I prefer to dwell today not on the answer, but on the question: What are you doing here?

Michelle has an old college friend in Virginia, and it's fast becoming our summer tradition to meet up with this friend and her family on a camping trip somewhere midway between their home and Pittsburgh. This inevitably means camping in the mountains of West Virginia, which suits me just fine. In fact, we're leaving for the mountains just after church today. We're tent campers. I like camping...as long as the campground isn't crowded, and I don't have to deal with other people's dogs, and the neighbors don't play their radios (especially no classic rock, and definitely no Leonard Skynyrd). I like camping as long as other campers don't watch their TVs, or talk too loudly, or laugh too loudly when they play Yahtzee. I like camping if it's quiet, but if you go on a weekend, inevitably you come across those unquiet souls who come out to the mountains with all the noise and the drama that some of us have come there to escape.

What I don't like about camping is sharing woodland space with noisy people. I'll take the bugs and the mud; they awaken some old ancestral memory in me. But noisy people keep me from escaping, well, the noise of life. When I was a kid, our family of seven were noisy campers. In fact, we were noisy at whatever we did, and that's probably why I've been seeking silence ever since. The only way we ever vacationed was to go camping, but the goal of those camping trips was not to experience the great outdoors, or to sleep under the stars, or to commune with nature. No, for us, camping had more to do with dragging all the noise and comforts of home to some remote location. ‘Camping’ for us entailed one single deprivation: going from full cable TV to basic network TV. We always had a big 28-foot long RV, and it had all the comforts of home. No cooking over a fire for us; this thing had a full kitchen with electric stove, oven, hot water, and a microwave. You could actually cook a Thanksgiving dinner there. The RV had a full bathroom with a flushing toilet, a steamy hot shower, a sink, full-length mirrors. The bathroom even had fans and a vent so the mirrors didn't get steamed. My family's idea of ‘camping’ included electric lights, a blaring radio, usually tuned in to political talk shows, a TV that didn't even have an ‘off’ switch, and the chilliest of air conditioners. And to top it off, it was all powered by a very, very loud gasoline generator.

Lest anyone should come to the forest with any funny ideas about softly strumming an acoustic guitar by their campfire in the evening or listening to the songbirds in the morning, let's just get one thing straight: my family will be running their generator from 7am, when it's time to make the coffee, until about 10pm when the campground host comes and tells them that it's past “quiet time,” and they have to turn the thing off. My father can't live two consecutive days without air-conditioning and television. And you couldn't expect my mother to show her face—even in the forest—without first spending twenty minutes with her blow dryer and her Aqua Net.

Looking back on those long-ago days, I must admit that I'm probably a little hard on my family for their love of noise and luxury. But that's okay. My parents will be avenged, for I'm pretty sure that my own children are already composing songs and writing essays about all of my misplaced priorities. But putting all of that aside just for a moment: I really did wonder—as a child—why we went to a quiet place and refused its silence. I guess I asked the same question that the Spirit asked Elijah: What are

we doing here? We brought our tempest, and our turmoil; we brought our cassette tapes and our Yahtzee, our earthquake, and wind, and fire, but we failed to embrace the one new thing that that place offered: the sound of sheer silence.

But this is the beauty of our story from the book of First Kings: into every life, a silence will eventually come. Into every life, a quiet moment at last arrives, no matter how hard we struggle to prevent it. And in that moment of dread silence, the same ancient question whispers itself to the ears of our spirit: What are you doing here? At this juncture in your life, this unexpected place, this place of transition? It might come with a surprised tone or a weary but patient tone. Depending on where we find ourselves in the landscape of our living, that old, old question might sound shocked, or despairing, or joyous, or matter of fact. But every once in a while, each of us will hear the question the Prophet Elijah heard deep in the wilderness where he didn't belong: What are you doing here? And we may not have a good answer. But take heart: God is close to those who aren't really sure what they're doing here. God is near to those who've lost their way.

The nursery rhyme about Little Miss Muffett is actually an old political poem; Miss Muffett is Mary Queen of Scots, and the spider who sits down beside her and scares poor Miss Muffett away refers to the dour, relentless Presbyterian reformer, John Knox, who essentially chased Mary off the throne and out of Scotland. A similar relationship existed between Queen Jezebel of old and the Prophet Elijah. Elijah was a nasty spider to the queen of Israel. He was her constant, uncompromising critic. In today's reading from the Book of First Kings, we find Elijah deep in the wilderness and all alone. He's not taking a little camping trip; he's actually wandering lost and hiding out from Queen Jezebel, who has promised to murder him. You see, Elijah has taken his religious zeal too far. Like far too many religious zealots down through the ages, Elijah has resorted to murdering his opponents, the prophets of Baal. And now, in the wilderness, left alone with the silence, he knows that he did wrong. There's real remorse in his words when he says, "Now I just want to die. I'm no better than anybody else." And into the despair and the loneliness of that quiet moment, the question comes to him not once but at least twice, and perhaps more: What are you doing here, Elijah? It's a question only silence can ask. Lost in the wilderness, far from where you belong, far from the work that you're supposed to be doing, far from the moral example that you were meant to be. How did you get here, Elijah? What brought you to this point in life? How did you sink so low? What are you doing here? But oh, Elijah, take heart there in the desert, there in the silence of God, the silence of eternity. Oh, Elijah, take heart. God draws near to those who have lost their way. God is close to those who don't know what they're doing here.

Have you ever wakened up in a strange place, and for a short time, perhaps even four or five seconds, you weren't quite sure where you were? That has only happened to me once, years ago, when I fell asleep in a shabby old missionary guesthouse in a strange African city. After an exhausted afternoon nap, I awoke to find myself in a faded Civil War era room with dazzlingly bright sunlight flooding through the old windows. I was lying in one of those high beds with an ornate metal headboard, and I wondered for just a moment where I was and how I got there. Had I died—because this place sure didn't look like my idea of heaven, though fortunately it didn't look like hell either. In that curious moment of near panic, in the silence of that old American house, misplaced in a tropical land, Elijah's question came to haunt me: What am I doing here? And that question comes to haunt each of us now and again. Sometimes we do wake up lost, not knowing how we got to where we are. Sometimes we stray into places where we begin to feel uncertain: a marriage, a career, a commitment. Perhaps you've asked, How did I become the person I see in the mirror? I never pictured myself in a situation like this. This is not what I expected out of life. When did I grow so old, or so tired, or so disillusioned? Where did my plans go? There were so many things I meant to accomplish! What am I doing here?

But here's the lesson of the Prophet Elijah. Yes, he had gone astray. Yes, he had done everything wrong, and he wanted to die. He was lost...but he needed to get lost, for it was only in his lostness that he came up against the silence of God. And in that silence, he remembered himself and his true calling. Sometimes when we think we're lost, we're just exactly where we need to be. When Elijah is sure of himself, he makes a mess of things. But in his lostness, he discovers the humility to return to himself and to his God. It's only when we feel lost that we make ourselves vulnerable enough to listen! It's when we're lost that we're uncertain enough to seek. Our best growth occurs when we don't know what we're doing here.

All the raucous pandemonium that is VBS at Bower Hill is over. We sang, and danced, threw water balloons, and wore pantyhose on our heads. The building will seem awfully quiet in the weeks ahead. But the point of VBS is not all the noise and fun; the point is to plant hope in the hearts of our children, for they too will face their silences someday, perhaps decades from now. But now we've given them a sacred story to live by, and that story will steal up on them, giving them strength, and courage, and vision. And into their silences, joy will speak! Grace will speak. Love will speak.

God draws near to those who feel lost. And it is in the seemingly lost and silent moments of life that we and all the world can be made new. After the tornado, after the earthquake, after the fire, what are you doing here? What is God saying to you in the silence? The question "What are you doing here?" comes to all of us now and again. At retirement, a relocation, an unexpected change in health or life circumstances. But take heart: whenever that old question whispers itself into your life, God is especially near to you...doing something new. Amen.