

The Still, Small Voice

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1 Kings 19:1-15a

A couple of weeks ago, Marvin Schrock shared with us about his time at a conference on dreams, and he expressed his wish that we might talk more about our dreams in this Circle. So I'd like to share one of mine tonight. It might sound familiar to some of you, because it came to me several years ago, and I think I've used it in a sermon before.

I'm standing alone in a large room. Light streams in from all angles, flooding every pocket of space with a dancing radiance and embracing warmth. On three sides, the walls are nothing but glass. I'm in the center, feeling serene in the caress of this luminous, soothing splendor.

From a corner a man and woman approach. He holds a large burlap bag, of the sort that contains seeds or grain. "Will you carry this sack across the river for us?" he asks, smiling. I hesitate. I don't know where to find the river, how far the journey, how wide the water... He drapes the sack across my arms. I turn and walk through the door that opens before me in the glass. As I step through the doorway, I discover that the room I am leaving is perched against a sheer rock face. Far below is the river, rushing through a deep gorge. But the only path, a narrow ledge, leads up. Slowly, painstakingly, I edge my way higher, and higher.

Near the top, I see that it leads to a waterfall that plummets into the gorge. Just above the waterfall, spaced far apart and surrounded by churning water, are stepping stones that lead to the other side. I breathe deeply and step out precariously. The stones wobble, and I have to drop the sack to avoid losing my balance and plunging over the waterfall. I watch the sack fall far below me and disappear. I inch my way back to the house, rehearsing my apology as I go, relieved when once again I am enveloped by the warmth and security of the sun-flooded room. I open my mouth to speak, but the man tenderly motions for me to keep silent. The woman steps toward me. She holds a large bowl. It is handmade pottery, rich in glazes and colors—deep shades of blue and burgundy with veins of turquoise and accents of gold—an exquisite work of art.

"Will you carry this bowl across the river for us?" she asks. Before I can refuse, she places it in my arms, and I am back at the top of the waterfall. Once more I falter, and I watch with horror as the bowl smashes apart on the rocks and falls in pieces down to the river and out of sight. I feel shame, and then anger at having been asked to repeat my failure.

Back in the room, the man and woman once again gently deflect my apologies. They walk together toward me. The man is cradling something small, wrapped in a blanket. "Will you carry our baby across the river for us?" he asks. From somewhere deep within me a whisper of protest begins to build to a plea, but before I can voice it, the woman tenderly speaks my name—and then, "Take the baby." The man, smiling warmly, places the baby into my outstretched arms.

It has been said that dreams are the language of God. And in my case, it's often true that the only time I slow down enough for God to get my attention is when I'm sleeping.

It's not surprising to me that this dream came to me the night I left a frenzied, fifteen-year existence in inner-city Washington, DC. That morning, feeling overwhelming grief and failure, I had packed everything I owned in my little Chevy Nova—with a Latina neighbor reminding me just before I drove off that in Spanish "No va" means "It doesn't go." I headed to the Blue Ridge Parkway, where my car promptly dropped its muffler. But I did make it to western North Carolina and a new life here in the mountains, for which I'm extremely grateful.

In our scripture tonight, Elijah is on his own long journey. We're first introduced to the prophet two chapters earlier, when Ahab, the king of Israel, marries notorious Jezebel, and immediately builds an altar to worship the god Baal, bringing on the wrath of God, who has a thing against idolatry.

God tells Elijah that, as a result of the people's unfaithfulness, a drought is coming. God sends Elijah into the wilderness, where ravens sustain him by bringing him bread and meat. And then God sends him to the town of Zarephath, where a widow feeds him, through God's miraculous provision in a time of extreme famine.

In the third year of the drought, Ahab and Jezebel begin murdering the prophets of God, in a classic case of killing the messengers. When Ahab meets Elijah, the king says to the prophet, "Is it you,

you troubler of Israel?" And Elijah throws it right back at him: "You're the troubler of Israel." And then there's this showdown involving a lot of bull.

The followers of Baal cut up a bull and lay it on an altar, appealing to their god to come and set it on fire. They plead all morning, then dance, then cut themselves with swords and lances, but Baal does not respond. Elijah mocks them, saying of Baal, "Either he is meditating, or he has wandered away"—likely a euphemism meaning that the god is off relieving himself—"or he is on a journey, or perhaps he is asleep and must be awakened." The people "rave on," scripture says, but not a thing happens. No sign comes from Baal.

Then Elijah gathers in the people, builds an altar, makes a trench around it, cuts up a bull, and places the animal on the altar over wood. Just to make a point, he tells the people to fill four jars with water and pour it on the bull and the wood. "Do it a second time," he commands. "Do it a third time." And by now the water is running down and filling the trench.

Elijah prays to God to give the people a sign of God's power and an affirmation that Elijah is God's prophet. And, lo and behold, the fire falls on the altar and consumes the bull, the altar, "and the dust," we're told—"and even licked up the water that was in the trench." So the people bowed down and worshiped God once more, and Elijah seized all the prophets of Baal and killed them. And immediately there's a sound of rushing rain, and the long drought is over.

Well, let's just say that Ahab was not happy with this turn of events, and he went and told Jezebel all about it. And so we have the queen's death threat against Elijah at the opening of tonight's passage; she's promising to kill him before the next day. So Elijah "got up and fled for his life."

But in the next scene, we have a very depressed Elijah sitting under a broom tree, praying to die. Peace activist Liz McAlister calls this the first example of PTSD—Post Traumatic Stress Disorder—in the Bible. Surely with all that blood on his hands, Elijah is sobered and troubled. Once again, God provides for him, this time through angels and cakes baked on hot stones.

For forty days and forty nights, Elijah stayed in that wilderness, reminiscent of the Israelites' forty years of wandering and Moses' span of time alone before receiving the Ten Commandments, and foreshadowing Jesus' time of temptation. Like Moses, Elijah didn't feel up to the task of being a prophet, and he lamented his lot. Twice he gives in to some exaggerated melodrama: "I have been zealous for you, O God, while all the others have turned away. I alone am left, and they're out to kill me. So just go ahead and take me."

Elijah is a man used to drama; to a God who manifests as fire on an altar drenched in water and provides sustenance through miracles. So when God tells him to go stand on a mountain and wait for God to pass by, Elijah is expecting something truly spectacular.

And there is indeed some drama. A wind so strong it split mountains and broke rock in pieces. An earthquake. A fire. But God was not in those. And then there was this "sound of sheer silence." It was that silence that beckoned Elijah out of his cave. He wrapped his face in his mantle and went to the entrance, and then came this voice—what has traditionally been called "the still, small voice."

"What are you doing here, Elijah?"

For the second time, the prophet gives his self-pitying speech about being the only faithful one left, with his life under threat. And the voice of God says simply, "Go back." Get over it, Elijah. "Go and do what I have called you to do." Turns out there are about seven thousand faithful others, according to God.

Now, I'm not sure that Elijah got it right with that massacre of the prophets of Baal. There's an awful lot of violence attributed to God in scripture that we have to wrestle with. But I do relate to Elijah's woe-is-me rendering of his life, and the feeling of not being up to the task at hand. That's certainly what I felt when I left my decade and a half of life with Sojourners Community and landed in these mountains to start a new life. I was leaving a lot of drama, and facing a lot of uncertainty. But on my first night here, God came to me in that still, small voice, in the form of a dream.

In the midst of whatever drama or trauma surrounds us, a still, small voice offers the reassurance that grace and guidance are available and abundant.

Over time I came to understand that the dream was about grace. It doesn't matter how often we fall or fail, God continues to love and sustain us. In the dream, I was entrusted with ever more valuable treasures. And the greatest treasure of all was the precious gift of life, being handed back to me in a new form and place.

I didn't speak of the dream publicly until more than two years later, when I was teaching a week-long course on social witness in San Francisco. I began my first talk by sharing the dream, reminding the participants that whatever we do in the world must be solidly rooted in our reliance on God's grace. At the end of the week, as we all gathered at the door of the chapel for a service of commissioning, one of the event's planners took me by the hand and led me wordlessly away from the others to a corner bathed in candlelight. "It's here," she whispered, her eyes wide with awe. Before us was a large bowl filled with anointing water for our commissioning. It was a piece of exquisite pottery, made of deep shades of blue and burgundy with veins of turquoise and accents of gold. I experienced a healing moment when she placed my hands into the clear, soothing water.

This afternoon I was feeling a bit of awe as I was preparing this sermon and thought back to that moment. I remembered that that rite of commissioning in San Francisco almost two decades ago included not only an anointing with water but also each of us being prayed over as we were wrapped in a red cloth, symbolic of Elijah's mantle.

Five chapters after tonight's passage, we find the story of elderly Elijah, coming to the close of his ministry and his life, and young Elisha walking to the Jordan River. The older prophet says to the younger, "Tell me what I may do for you, before I am taken from you." Elisha replies, "Please let me inherit a double portion of your spirit." Moments later a chariot of fire drawn by horses of fire comes down and swoops Elijah up in a whirlwind to heaven. More drama.

Elisha picks up Elijah's mantle, which had fallen to the ground, and at the same time picks up the calling and work of the prophet. In the same spirit, the new prophet speaks truth to power and urges the people to faithfulness and trust in God. That mantle has been symbolically passed through many generations and centuries, and we are all inheritors of its spirit.

The way is not always clear; the work is not always easy. But in the midst of whatever drama or trauma surrounds us, a still, small voice asks us, as it did of Elijah, "What are you doing here?" And it offers the reassurance that grace and guidance are available and abundant. We only need to slow down and open ourselves to see and hear the promise.

Amen.