

Circle of Mercy Sermon
1 Kings 19:9-18
August 13, 2017

Fire and Fury
by Nancy Hastings Sehested

Friends, I still believe that when history beams its light on these treacherous times, that we will be known less by the battles we won and lost, and more by the stories we loved and lived.

The stories from long ago and the stories from headline breaking news is one of fire and fury. The ancient story gives us the full array of human choices in the midst of struggles.

Both the oppressed and the oppressors have found words to liberate or words to enslave within the biblical story. Rev. Jeffress from Dallas stated this week that “God has endowed our rulers full power to use whatever means necessary—including war---to stop evil.” His words are in a long line of religious leaders who have used religious language to justify violence.

Our presence today is our choosing again the story that liberates with the love of God. We are still followers of Jesus, and his way of justice and love.

The prophet Elijah would have felt right at home in these times of fire and fury. You remember Elijah. He was a chosen one of God. He was fierce, determined, and uncompromising. He was a man of miracles. He fed the hungry, raised the dead and blasted the evil empire of King Ahab and Queen Jezebel. His message was to bring down the mighty and lift the lowly.

Like a superhero, he could suddenly appear in just the right place at just the right time, pouncing on injustice, exposing the hypocrisy and falsehood of the powerful. His most zealous actions were targeted on that relentless rascal of a king, Ahab. The king was a bully. He had wealth, position, and power. Step in his way and he retaliated with ridicule and revenge. With the help of his conniving wife, he contaminated the nation with the poison of fear. Pagan temples were their joy. The palace became home to hundreds of false prophets. Political favors were handed out like candy at Halloween. The people didn't know who to trust.

Military might was the centerpiece for maintaining national power. On the backs of the poorest people, the nation slid into disaster. People were suffering. King Ahab and Queen Jezebel were a disgrace. It seemed like no one could stop them.

After several attempts at halting the horrors, including famine and humiliation techniques, Elijah got word from God that it was time to put the false prophets to death. Now in this part of the story we could wish that God wasn't involved in that kind of showdown. And we could wish that Elijah had the benefit of reading Walter Wink's book about the myth of redemptive violence. Hadn't enough blood been shed to know that? We could wish that Elijah had the example of Jesus meeting violence with his witness of peace and non-violence. But no. There was fire and fury.

Elijah gave a passionate word before the battle, asking God's people a decisive question: "How long will you go limping with two opinions? If God is God, follow God. But if Baal, then follow Baal."

Voices should've shouted out "God, not Baal," but not a word came out of the people. Nothing. They didn't answer. Elijah, like all prophets, was a loner. But he liked applause. It was not forthcoming. Nothing worse than a preacher offering their best line, and the people don't utter a peep. No amens. No nods of the head. No, "Preach on, Prophet!" Nothing.

Elijah, being the sensitive type, took it maturely. "I, even I only, am left." Oh, there is no high like a self-righteous high. The fight was on, with the great Prophet leading the way. The prophets of Baal did the same. The contest was this: the one who called down their god with fire was the winner. The one with the biggest fire power wins. It's such a tiresome game. Couldn't we just limit ourselves to kayak races?

The prophets of Baal danced around the altar all morning long, calling out, "O Baal, answer us." Nothing. By noon they were hoarse from shouting and worn out from walking around in circles. They started limping around the altar.

Elijah pulled out the mocking method of bringing down the enemy. "Keep it up, guys. Oh, I'm sure he is god. He's just taking a little break, meditating, no doubt." The prophets of Baal tried some more. Nothing.

It was Elijah's turn. "Step back everybody." Lightning flashed. Fire ignited the whole thing...the offering, the stones, the wood, and even the water in the trench. The whole kit and kaboodle went up in smoke.

The people shouted, yelled, jumped up and down and applauded. "God is the true God! God is the true God." The false prophets were then slaughtered at the river. It ran blood red that day.

Queen Jezebel got wind of the slaughter of her best spiritual counselors. She was ready to have Elijah's head. He took off for the hills to try to save his life. Once he got far enough away, he took shade under a broom tree. He was worn out. He had won, but he had lost. His victory did not satisfy him. He was a man on the run. Where could he go to hide? He prayed, "God, just go ahead and take me now."

Elijah felt like a total and complete failure. He thought God should've at least shown some appreciation for all he'd done on God's behalf...put a little extra in the Prophet Pension Fund. But no. All he got was a pushy angel shoving him awake and demanding that he stop his whining and moaning. "Get up and eat! You'll need it for the journey." You ever noticed how neither God nor God's messengers have ever been good with empathetic listening skills?

Elijah walked 40 days and 40 nights until he arrived at the mountain of God. He crawled into a cave and collapsed. God showed up and asked, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" Running? Trying to hide? Think you can escape from your life and your calling in there? Think you can have security there?

Elijah responded, "I've been working my tail off trying to get people on your side, God. I made lots of promises to persuade folks. I had a good mission plan. I took up for you. But now it's over. I have nothing to show for all my efforts except my picture on wanted posters. I'm the only one left. There are folks after me!"

There was no answer to Elijah's whine. The voice spoke: "Go, stand and wait at the mountain. God is coming your way." Elijah stayed in the mountain. A hurricane force wind ripped through the mountain. It was so strong that it split open boulders. God had been in wind before. Was this God? No. God was not in the wind. The ground shook beneath his feet. An earthquake happened. God had been in earthquake before. Was this God?

No. God was not in this earthquake. A fire flamed up. God had been in fire before. Was this God? No. God was not in this fire.

Then came the sound of sheer silence. Elijah knew the sound of this Presence. He wrapped his face with his cloak, stepped to the front of the cave, and stood. God asked again, “Elijah, what are you doing here?”

Elijah answered with the same old story. “I gave my heart and soul to this battle, and I have nothing to show for it. I alone am left.”

Elijah failed to interpret the sheer silence of God. What was this silence of God? It was not the silence of calm and peace. It was sheer cliff silence. It was an unbearable silence that verges on a scream. It was the inner scream of God. It was the kind of silence heard through the walls of skin of an exasperated person.

It was the silence when there are no words left to say. It was God’s silence speaking as if to say, “Elijah, didn’t I feed you? Wasn’t the bread shared with those who needed it? Didn’t I give you the strength to stand up to all the lies? Didn’t I give you the courage to resist the royal tyrants and demand justice? Wasn’t I with you always? Elijah, what are you doing here?”

So what are we doing here? Perhaps it is time to listen with Elijah at the doorway of our deepest fears and disillusionments. Can we stand here long enough to see more clearly as a nation, as a people? The earthquake, winds and fires of Charlottesville have been gathering power for a long time. White supremacy and patriarchy are embedded in our national history. Sometimes it flames into fire and fury within public view. But let us not be fooled. Behind the vivid and horrific violence of yesterday are systemic and structural powers that keep privilege in place. The structures and institutions that hold our lives have enormous power over all of us. Most of the major issues we face are decided without our vote and out of our sight...in boardrooms and corporate offices and legislative rooms where a code of ethics for the common good is not in place.

The ancients called such a sin-sick society ensnared by the “powers and principalities.” Hannah Arendt named it “the banality of evil.”

Perhaps it is time to stop and listen, to stop our words long enough to experience the silent cries of God. Perhaps it is time, when hatred runs down

the streets of Charlottesville, and laws allow terrorizing extremists to legally carry weapons...Perhaps it is time, when mothers and dads are taken from their children and deported, and mosques are bombed in our cities, and black and brown-bodied people and LGBTQ people are vulnerable everywhere...Perhaps it is time, when the major institutions that control our lives leave too many without adequate healthcare, wages and housing...Perhaps it is time, when tyrants hold the world hostage with threats of using nuclear weapons...Perhaps it is time for us to stand together, all of us...the wounded alongside the wounding...and listen.

Let us listen to our common fears, fears for ourselves and for our children. The world is much too complicated and confusing for any of us. Let us confess that the fire and fury can envelop us so that we cannot hear God's heartbeat of love for us.

My Old Testament professor, Dr. Terrien, taught us about an Arab gesture made when speaking of a small sound. The thumb and the forefinger come together on both hands, creating a tiny opening. It is the image of a sound, hardly able to see or hear the voice. It was used as a symbol for little possibility.

But even little possibility is possibility for a way, an opening. It can open us to divine encounter, to the Holy Presence of hope.

Maybe in the silence we can hear Jesus once again, who did not conform to this world, but was transformed, and gave himself as an offering to God's way of love. We can find our lives again where Jesus did...on the edges where the fierce winds blow...alongside those who suffer. There we can discover again that there is no promise, save one...we are not alone.

Elijah thought he was running to safety. He was afraid. He had every reason to be afraid. So do we. This world is not safe. Earthquake, wind, and fire still rage around us. Elijah's escape was no escape at all.

God asked Elijah the question: "What are you doing here? I need you. Come on out. Stop believing the lie that you are helpless and life is hopeless. Besides it's not all about you. Go and anoint Hazael as king over Aram. Go and anoint Jehu as king over Israel. And go and anoint Elisha as the prophet who will take your place."

“Take my place as prophet? Really? And isn’t there already a king in place?”

God didn’t explain. “And one more thing, Elijah. You are not the only one who has stayed faithful to me. There are 7,000 others who have not bent their knees and paid homage to Baal. Some of them were walking bravely in a march for love yesterday in Charlottesville. Some of them attended to the wounded. Some of them quelled the riot. There are plenty of others in this struggle. Join them. Draw strength from them. Keep on keeping on with them. I am with you.”

Friends, what are we doing here? Our God is a God who brings hope out of the dark night of despair. We have some anointing to do in God’s name. Anoint the rulers with new visions. Anoint the broken-hearted with comfort. Anoint the shamed with mercy. Anoint the damned of this earth with love...until God’s reign of justice has come, and the Bright Morning Star of Love rises in the hearts of all people.

Let us go and join the others.

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