

Elijah

Other than when the Cubs won the World Series in 2016, this might have been one of the best World Series I've seen in my life. It's been flat out good baseball. I'm writing this after the 6th game, which the Dodgers won. That game tied up the series. Good baseball fans...at least those whose team is not in the series...really just want good baseball in the World Series. And we've gotten that.

By the time I preach this, we'll know who won. Some of you probably already know. Others of you are thinking, OK I thought baseball was over. I mean haven't we moved on to football...and for heavens sake basketball and hockey.

And some of you are just thinking, Oh, is there a sport thing going on now? And all of you might be wondering how I could somehow work baseball into a sermon on Elijah. For you who are wondering, the Dodgers won.

But let's go back to that Friday night game. It was very exciting. Metaphorically, the first six games were like the wind, and the earthquake, and the fire in today's reading.

There has been unbelievably good pitching, some stunning defensive plays, some great hitting, and a record tying 18 inning game won by the Dodgers in a walk-off home run in game 3.

But then, after Friday's game, there was silence. There was not yet a winner. There was a pause in the stream of baseball. A pause where we baseball fans all had no idea what would come next.

There was a pause....and that's where we connect to Elijah. In the sheer silence, Elijah was between what he'd been before and what he'd be next.

In the silence after the wind, and the fire, and the earthquake, Elijah had no idea what came next. All he knew was that as far as he was concerned, he was done. He'd given it his all and he was fried. After the raging of the natural world and the raging in Elijah's heart, there was silence...a pause.

Before we talk more about that, we need to do a little recap to see why Elijah is where he is. Last week you heard about Solomon and his Temple. Solomon's reign, while prosperous and peaceful, was also oppressive and idolatrous. Solomon had roughly 1000 wives and concubines. He made strategic alliances by marrying the daughters of other rulers and by the worship of the gods of those other nations.

He treated his own people harshly.

And then, Solomon's son, Rehoboam, was even worse. Under Rehoboam's reign, the kingdom of Israel split into the Northern Kingdom, and the Southern Kingdom, Judah. And both spiraled into a cesspool of immorality, idolatry, and injustice.

Ahab is about 8 kings into Israel's history. He's awful. And so is his wife Jezebel. Jezebel is a worshipper of the god Baal. We could do a whole sermon on who Baal was to his followers, but suffice it to say, he simply wasn't God. He wasn't the God of the covenant that Israel signed on to. He wasn't a god who set people free and taught them how to live as a people committed to community...to justice...to relationship with that God.

Elijah challenged the priests of Baal. He said, show me what your god has got. He built two altars with a bull on each one. He said, let your god come down with fire and consume this bull. And if your god can't, let's see what mine can do.

Jezebel's priests of Baal prayed and chanted and did whatever their rituals demanded. Nothing happened.

Elijah stepped in. He called on the God of Israel to bring down fire to consume the bull. A fire from God came down and consumed not only the bull but the whole altar. God won.

And then Elijah killed all of Jezebel's prophets.

So you can see why Jezebel wanted to kill him. And she and Ahab have a lot of power behind them. So Elijah runs away. A day's journey into the wilderness, he tells God he just wants to die. He feels all alone. The people he has tried so hard to shape into people of the covenant have largely turned their back on that covenant and turned against him. He believes he's a failure.

God sends angels to care for him. But then God does even more. God actually shows up. This scene echoes an almost identical one centuries earlier...when God showed up to Moses on Mt. Sinai...aka Mt. Horeb...this very same mountain. Only then God was in the fire and in thunder and lightning and an earth quake.

That might be kind of what we expect. If God is going to show up we think it's going to be a big event. Trumpets will sound. The earth will shake. Fire and smoke and a great wind will rage.

There are plenty of times in scripture where that does happen. Even now, people sometimes experience God in the big, grand shows of power.

But that's not Elijah's experience. All those big, grand shows are just that...shows. God isn't in them.

Then, there's sheer silence. A pause.

Elijah doesn't know what's going to happen.

Much of our lives are marked by the sounds of life and love and joyful laughter. Some of our lives are marked by the sounds of our sobs and cries of pain.

But most lives somewhere along the line have had a pause. A time between the sounds of what went before...and the sounds of an unknown future. A time when silence is the only thing we hear. Times when we might even feel alone and defeated, just like Elijah.

This weekend marks a between time in many cultures. The Celts celebrated Samhain, from which we get Halloween. For the Celts it was a thin space and time...a time when earth and heaven came closer and the boundaries between the living and the dead became thin.

El Dia de los Muertos is a similar time for the Latin cultures, especially Mexico.

On this All Saints Sunday, we as Christians remember loved ones who have died. All Saints Day was coopted from the Celtic Samhain tradition and is also a time when we remember that those who have died are not as far away as it seems.

The process of dying is a pause. It's a sound of sheer silence between the sounds of life...and the sound of the trumpets in heaven.

Grief is a pause...a pause that creates a sharp pause between life before and life after our loved one dies.

That pause can seem like such a final thing. A time when we can feel utterly alone, like Elijah in the wilderness. A time when we don't know what to expect or how really to be.

But this story reminds us that God isn't just in the noisy parts of our lives. God is also in the silence...God is in the pause between what was and what will be. This All Saints weekend is a thin space. Silence is the sound of that thin space.

But in that thin space...where God seems silent...we can trust that God truly is present.

Elijah's time as a prophet was indeed coming to an end. But God told him there was still work to be done...a succession plan needed to be put in place. Elijah's new direction was to plan for that future. To anoint kings and a prophet to lead in that future.

Israel may have been largely unfaithful. But there was still a remnant – enough for God to keep hanging in with them. After the silence, there would be a future.

Sometimes when we are at the end of our rope, God's intervention doesn't get us back on our feet and ready to carry on. Sometimes it is time to let go.

God's intervention also doesn't always mean that a desperately ill loved one will be cured.

In our own lives...in the church...in or families and communities...in our broken world we may long for a grand display of God's power...power that is flashy and even noisy!

Sometimes, what we get instead is the sound of sheer silence. But we can trust that in that silent pause God is powerfully present. God assures us, It's not over. What was will be no more, but there is something new yet to come.