

I used to meet with the preschoolers once a week in the small chapel at St. Paul's. Some Wednesdays there were 24 preschoolers. Yikes! For the first few weeks they were in awe of my fancy robes. And the beautiful space of the little chapel. That soon wore off. I lost their attention pretty easily, but I knew I could ALWAYS get their attention with this little device. I asked them to close their eyes, as I ask you to do now. And listen. Listen to the sound, and then follow that sound as long as you can.

The kids had an easy time listening when the chime was first sounded. As the chime's noise lessened, it became more difficult and the kids got restless as they worked really hard to hold on to that sound. With their eyes closed, their faces would scrunch up, and I could see their little brains work really hard to hang on, to follow the sound until it disappeared into silence.

The struggle to hang on to the sound of that chime reminded me of the story of Elijah's struggle to hang on to God's purpose when things got difficult. Unlike the sound of this chime, God's presence isn't limited by a beginning or an ending. But our abilities or our interest in paying attention to God's presence and purpose is limited.

In the story just previous to today's lesson, Elijah had pulled off, with God's help, a spectacular show of God's power. He had shown the prophets of Ba'al, the weather god, that God alone was to be trusted and followed. They'd set up two altars, and the prophets of each God had called upon their deity to rain down fire and destruction so that everyone could see, once and for all, who REALLY was god. Elijah's God won, the other prophets' god was destroyed. Elijah was thrilled. (It's always good to be right, isn't it?) It was a huge victory.

The queen of the nation, Jezebel, a notoriously evil queen, was NOT thrilled however, and she let Elijah know she was after him. So, after this monumental triumph, Elijah, fled into the desert, not a hero but a fugitive. He'd gotten far away from his enemy Jezebel, but not far enough away from his real trouble: his feeling that all that was for nothing. He was weary of the whole prophet job he'd been called to.

He was completely out of purpose and energy. He found some shade under a tree and after having complained to God about how tired he was of it all, how worthless he was, and the miserable support he was receiving from the supposed people of God -- he laid down to sleep. (BTW Laying down to sleep in the Bible is as good as giving up completely, ready to die.) In fact, Elijah tells God he has had enough and suggests that God just take him now.

Whether Elijah is aware of God or not, or even whether Elijah wants God around or not, the God who was behind the spectacular victory is still with Elijah under that tree. God sends a messenger to provide food and water and companionship. Twice Elijah is offered food. By an angel no less! The second time the angel tells Elijah he'd better eat if he wants strength enough for the journey ahead of him.

Poor Elijah. He must have thought he was done. God is patient until Elijah can once again hear God's voice. When Elijah is rested and ready, he journeys through the desert to Mt Horeb --- also known as Mt Sinai --- where Moses met God. It's not just any mountain. This mountain is the foundation of faith of God's people in Israel.

It is there on that mountain that he hears a voice – Elijah, what are you doing here? Elijah replied with the exact same complaint:” I'm the only one doing anything around here. I've worked harder than anyone could expect me to. It's these people you've given me to work with!” Clearly he's not ready yet for the next stage of his life. So God stages a demonstration for Elijah.

On that mountain, the usual Old Testament signs of God's presence are manifest: earthquake, wind, fire. But the text says that's not where God was. God wanted to teach Elijah a different way of sensing God's presence. God wanted Elijah not to be dependent on the drama; not the power of the earthquakes, or wind or fire. God wanted Elijah to know that God had also created and was present in the still small voice or a better translation of the Hebrew, the sound of fine silence. It put things into perspective for Elijah. Seems to reorient him and God sends him back into the wilderness. With that still small voice echoing in his soul, Elijah reconnected with his life's mission.

Elijah is a perfect example of burn out. Elijah was coming down from one big moment, and not only did he find himself hunted, but without emotional resources to get to the next big moment. When we can no longer feel God's presence, our emotions droop with weariness. That is when we rely on our faith to remind us that although we do not feel it, God does not abandon us to our despair, but comes to us in another way. Perhaps another voice. Perhaps with an angel to accompany and support us.

It is our tendency to move from one big thing to the next in this culture. One dramatic moment to another we feel good about ourselves and the direction and God's presence is undeniable. It is easy to stick with God. And yet we can find our souls empty, longing for the living God, athirst for the living God as the psalmist says.

God is not attached to our emotional highs, contained in our calendar of big events, or limited by our list of ministry goals. God wants us to know God's presence in the lows *and* highs, the flashy *and* the unassuming, deeply, in our souls. Not just in our feelings. It is in the community of faithful people that we find the support to hang on between the sound of the chime, so clear and present, and even when our sense can barely perceive it any longer. Sometimes it requires that we get distance from our tasks, our busy-ness to renew and strengthen our connection with God. To stop and listen for fine silence.

Elijah needed the distance from his ministry to widen his perspective beyond himself. When he got on that mountain he was finally able to hear God say to him, "I've heard your complaint. But you know that's not true. You are NOT the only faithful one out there --- there are 7000 faithful people. Get up, move on. I've got things for you yet to accomplish.

Elijah's journey from victory to despair to eagerness for his job again took time. He comes around, with the help of some life lessons, some unexpected angelic support along the way providing cake and water. The life which he ends up leading may not be the one he had planned. But it's the one God has provided him with. He spent the rest of his days *not* being the hero of the story, but in mentoring a new prophet – Elisha. And preparing and passing along his wisdom to those who will follow him.

Although our ministries are often accompanied by satisfaction, by confirmation that we indeed did the right thing, and that people's lives were changed for the better, we can't depend on our feelings to be a good measurement of that. It's natural to get discouraged when *hopes* for the world are overwhelmed by the *needs* of the world. There is so much to do. It is really tempting to think, like Elijah did, that we're the only ones who care, the only ones who should the burden. But that's not true.

In order to not only hang on to our call to ministry, but to *embrace* our call to ministry, we need to reflect on the question posed to Elijah – WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE? We need to regularly take the time to recollect ourselves, allow God to nourish us, pay attention to the sound of fine silence – the collective sacred memory which carries the stories of God's patient and gentle care of us.

Summer time is a great gift to busy people with a heart for God. Use it well, But be patient and gentle with yourselves. Gain new perspectives on our ministry together. Challenge our hearts and ears to hear God in the sound of fine silence. Attend to God's calling beneath the schedules of meetings and events and doing. Listen for the answer to this question: what are you doing here? Let's nourish ourselves on God's word and feed our longing for the living God. Together, we can not just hold on, but thrive, with strength enough for our journey ahead.