

## **Finding Your Way: Listening Differently**

### **1 Kings 19:1-13**

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Perhaps this has happened to you. You're in a church meeting, small group, class, or some other gathering, and the facilitator asks, "Would someone be willing to pray?" Then there is this long, awkward silence as people look away or start to study their notes. Sometimes no one ever volunteers, a couple of people laugh nervously, and the facilitator fills in the uncomfortable silence. But, other times, the Spirit moves and another voice is heard from - someone says, "I'll do it" and the rest of the group smiles with relief as that brave soul begins.

Prayer, and spiritual practice in general, I think, is one of the least understood and most anxiety-inducing parts of the spiritual journey for many people. When you talk with people about their prayer life, you'll often hear things like "I don't pray because I don't know how", "I don't pray because I'm not sure why I should", "Only pastors and real Christians know the right words to say", "I don't know if I believe in prayer", or "I tried praying and God didn't answer so I never tried again". And it's not surprising, I guess, because prayer brings us directly into communion with God and we're not always sure what we think about that...or about God...or about whether we are good enough people or Christ-followers to be in communion with God. Maybe only mystics and really religious people can do that.

But, one of the most important reasons behind the Protestant Reformation was the belief that people don't need pastors and priests to mediate their relationship with God. God is anxious and ready to commune with each of us, any time, any day, and in any way.

Today, we begin to celebrate Lent - the season of the church year in which we take the forty days before Easter to examine our lives, let go of old beliefs and fears that interfere with a life-giving relationship with God, and prepare ourselves for the new beginning that comes for each of us on Easter Sunday. As we travel this road together, we are going to explore prayer and some related spiritual practices. Each week in the sermon, I'll not only preach but try to teach - introducing you to different ways of thinking about prayer and different forms of praying. My hope is that this will make for some holy moments in our communal prayer life but also that you will individually try the prayer practices I introduce and find what feels most comfortable and authentic to you. This week, we'll start with some basics - what prayer is and isn't and how might you get started in developing your prayer life. Next week, we'll look at the different parts of the Lord's Prayer and what they mean - and then we'll carry on from there.

I think a lot of us have grown up with an accurate but limited understanding of what prayer is. We've learned that our prayers are the words we say to God. At the most basic level, that is true. As children, we learned to pray at bedtime and before meals - often simple, heartfelt prayers of thanks or request. Of course, it wasn't long before we discovered another familiar kind of prayer - one that usually starts with "help!" These are the prayers we say when we're scared or something feels out of control or we feel like we don't know what we're doing. They are also the prayers we say for others - for people and circumstances in our lives where we hope for God to intervene. Then there is the "Whoa, good job, God" prayer. These are the prayers that fall from

our lips as we see or experience something that astounds or delights us - an especially beautiful sunrise or sunset, two former enemies reconciled, the birth of a child, the miracle of springtime.

All of these are examples of when we talk to God, and they tend to happen pretty spontaneously. Yet, there are other forms of prayer, less familiar than these, in which we invite God to speak to us. Some may include music or art or some other form of creative expression. Some may be physical, involving breathing or yoga or some other form of body prayer. Others may engage scripture or ancient prayers and practices. What they hold in common is creating a way through all that clutters our lives and our souls for God to speak to us.

Which leads us to taking a look at the scripture story about Elijah we heard earlier. Whenever I read this story, I'm reminded of a perfume commercial from my childhood. I don't remember what the perfume was, but I do remember the tag line, "If you want to catch someone's attention, whisper".

That is just what God does in speaking to Elijah on the top of Mt. Horeb. Elijah was one of God's prophets during a time when many of the people of Israel had begun to worship the pagan god, Ba'al. In this passage, we encounter Elijah just after he has, in front of multitudes of the people of Israel, called on God to send fire from the sky to prove that the God of Israel, Yahweh, is the one and only God. God does just that to the awe and amazement of the gathered people. Elijah, haven proven his point, then goes on to kill all the prophets of Ba'al. Well, the evil queen Jezebel of Israel was a big Ba'al fan, and when she learned what Elijah had done, she ordered his execution. Exhausted and depressed, he runs away, ultimately stopping at the foot of a bush and praying that he would die. God sends him nourishment to strengthen him to keep going and, after forty days and forty nights, he makes his way to the top of Mt. Horeb and climbs into a cave to rest.

We assume he is there waiting to hear from God. After all, this is the same place where Moses went to meet God - the place where God appeared in wind and fire and earthquakes. And so Elijah waits, anticipating that God will speak to him in the same way. As he waits, there is wind, but God is not in the wind. And then there are earthquakes, but God is not in the quaking earth. And finally there is fire, but God is not in the fire. God comes, when all is quiet...and whispers.

If we want to commune with God, to not only speak to God but let God speak to us, we have to make space to hear the whispers. To listen differently and, perhaps, to widen our expectations. One way to do this is to create moments of silence in our lives. We're not very used to silence. Our world is full of noise - cars driving by, honking horns, sirens, kids crying, dogs snoring, machines running, phones ringing. There is something comforting, if also sometimes annoying, in all that evidence of life. An assurance that we are not here in this corner of the world alone. There are others doing their best to get through the day, do what they need to do, and love the people God has given them to love. Yet, with all that life noise surrounding us, how can we hear a whisper?

Over the next weeks of Lent, you'll notice that we have built a moment of silence into the worship service each week. We will lengthen it slightly each week as we all become accustomed to sitting as a community in the silence of the holy. I invite those of you at home to do this, as well. In fact, I encourage all of you to practice taking moments of silence in your homes this

week. You will need to be intentional to make it happen. Silence is completely counter-cultural, so it may be hard to remember to do this, even if you have the best intentions. You may need to set an alarm on your phone or schedule it in your calendar.

One thing that can be helpful is to create a prayer space where you go to practice silence or, perhaps, other forms of prayer. I just learned that Shonagh has a prayer room in her house. I have a prayer corner in my family room. Make sure there is a comfortable place to sit - maybe a favorite chair or prayer pillow. Surround yourself with objects that speak to you of the sacred. In my space, I have rocks, candles, a carving from Bethlehem, some shells, a prayer stick given to me by a Native American pastor, a small sculpture given to me by my spiritual mentor, and a fountain. I also have a Bible, a journal, and our Lenten devotional. You'll notice that we have also created a prayer space here in the sanctuary where you can write prayers and put them into the wall much like the wailing wall in Jerusalem.

You can make your space as elaborate or as simple as you like. Protect this space like you protect a moment of the day for silence. Make sure you won't be interrupted. Wait until the kids leave for school, close the door, turn off your phone, whatever you need to do to give yourself just a moment or two of real quiet.

Consider creating a ritual that signifies that you are beginning your moment of silence. It may be something as simple as lighting a candle or ringing a chime.

All of these are wonderful first steps in developing a prayer habit, one that you can build on as we move through the weeks of Lent. For now, whether you are watching from home or here in the sanctuary, I invite you to close your eyes. Take a slow, deep breath and release. Breathe in again, settling your mind, relaxing your shoulders, and may we join together now, as a community of faith, in silence that together we may hear the still, small voice of God.

Amen.