

Someone sent me the following story just recently – as you will hear it is set in a movie theater but it could actually be a church story .... When the usher noticed a man stretched across three seats in the movie theater, he walked over and whispered "Sorry sir, but you are allowed only one seat." The man moaned but didn't budge. "Sir," the usher said more loudly, "if you don't move, I'll have to call the manager." The man moaned again but stayed where he was. The usher left and returned with the manager, who, after several attempts at dislodging the fellow, called the police. The cop looked at the reclining man and said, "All right, what's your name, joker?" "Joe", he mumbled. "And where are you from, Joe?" Joe responded painfully, "The balcony!" So be careful up there in the balcony... I say this but actually I don't think any of us will be dozing off as we take in today's episode in the action packed story that is the life of the prophet, Elijah.

It was good to engage last week with the story of Naboth and the terrible injustice he faced from his king. I noted then that the origin of the name, Naboth comes from the word for vineyard. Well we have somewhat the same in regards to the name Elijah. Elijah's entire life and ministry is an expression of his name, Elijah means "Yahweh is my God" and at all times, sometimes despite himself, Elijah is God's person, God's prophet. His entire career is confronting and critiquing King Ahab, the most powerful man in Israel. God uses Elijah to usher in a three-year drought upon the land. The prophet subsists in the wilderness, like a contestant on "Holy Land Survivor". He battles and trash-talks 450 prophets of Baal plus the 400 priests of Asherah on Mt. Carmel in a cosmic showdown between Yahweh, and these "so-called" gods, that makes "shock and awe", combined with the devastation of 2012 and the attack on the Death Star look like a cake walk. He not only enrages the king, but also Queen Jezebel — the enforcer in the family — and she it is who vows a death sentence upon him – promising that Elijah will die within the next 24 hours.

Taking Jezebel's threat to heart, Elijah flees the scene. He travels south – big time! He travels to Beersheba, a city that the biblical text correctly tells us is in Judah. In fact, Beersheba is on the very northern edge of the Negev desert between Israel and Egypt, and represents the traditional southernmost boundary of the land of Judah.

Thinking to himself, "Run, Elijah, run!", he puts on Forrest Gump running shoes and runs straight south, right out of the Northern Kingdom, into Judah; in Judah he keeps a good pace until he clears the southern border of the Southern Kingdom. There, he journeys, one more day, beyond civilization into the wilderness where exhaustion ended his flight. There he believes that he is beyond the reach of his enemies. Running from Maine, arriving in Miami, Elijah imagines that he is safe at last!

It is clear that in this first leg of his journey that Elijah is on the run! But from whom or what is Elijah running?

Is he running from Jezebel, fearing that she will make good on her promise to kill him – even though her husband and her prophets had been no match for Elijah and Elijah's God at Mount Carmel?

Or is Elijah running from God, afraid that God will ask him to step up to the plate one more time with the bases loaded and the game on the line? Hoping that God has drafted a new star onto God's team?

Or is Elijah on the run from himself, thinking that he has no more to offer, nothing left worth saying or doing? Tired or over-tired he is ready to hide or retire or quit!

Can you recall a time when you were on the run?

Or maybe you are, even today, on the run?

On the run to avoid making a choice or a decision?

On the run from your past, either because you were embarrassed by it or needed to be free of it if you were to find a fuller, better way for your future?

On the run from some mistake you had made or thought you might have made?

On the run from some success you had enjoyed, fearful that you would be asked to repeat that success, when the truth is you didn't know what you did to be successful in the first place?

On the run from someone out to get you or who would smother you or who knows something about you with which they could crush you if it was ever made public?

On the run, because that was all you have ever known in life?

The good news for all of you runners, practiced or desperate, slower or faster, is that you are on God's radar. No matter what you have been or are running from, God sees you. No matter which direction you are headed, what route you are taking, no matter where you have reached, God knows exactly where you are, and exactly why you are running. God knows under which broom tree you are hiding, where you are hoping to go unnoticed. God has you plotted on the radar and longs and aches to be your running partner. It is God's desire to help you, just as God helped Elijah.

God longs to help you to stop running, just long enough, so that you can instead begin the second leg of your journey, in which you will run towards what it is that can help you and complete you and transform you and inspire you.

The second leg of Elijah's journey saw him stop running from something or someone and begin running to someone. Elijah runs until he hears for himself the unmistakable sound of God in the still, small voice, in the sound of sheer silence. This second phase in Elijah's journey is made possible by the intervention of God, by the nourishment shared by God with Elijah. Before setting out for the final destination Elijah enjoyed his soul food or his comfort food. Today when we get in a bind we long for apple pie, or cheddar-smothered baked potatoes, French fries or mom's meatloaf, mac and cheese or double-fudge brownies. Worldwide, comfort foods are as diverse as the tastes of those who choose them, but research show that comfort foods are high in carbohydrates, such as sugars, rice and wheat products – giving energy. It is also thought that soul food or comfort food is eaten because the brain responds to the consumption of such foods by releasing the natural tranquilizer tryptophan. Soul food energizes and calms.

And so it was, strengthened by God's soul food, energized and calmed, Elijah begins his new journey. While the prophet traveled in the strength that God supplied, his journey was no downhill glide! He journeyed forty days and forty nights – he journeyed in the wilderness. 40 days in the wilderness, an emblematic amount of time in a scene right out of Israel's history, a reminder of the Israelite's

wilderness wandering, time enough for both faith and doubt, time enough to be ready to look for and to see both human frailty and the faithfulness of God.

After 40 days Elijah arrives at Mount Horeb, a mountain which we know best by another name, Mount Sinai. Yes, this is the very same mountain where in a sense it all began for God and Israel, the mountain on which and at which God made a covenant with Moses and the Hebrew people, where the Law was given and received, where God revealed who God was and is. Clearly, it was the intent of the writer or writers of 1 Kings to demonstrate that Elijah traced in reverse the path that Moses and the Israelites had taken from Egypt towards their Promised Land. On both these journeys a climax is reached at this holy mountain. Elijah will receive all over again God's revelation on the Mountain.

"A sound of sheer silence" is how the NRSV translates the phrase that many of us grew up knowing as the "a still, small voice." Most commentators indicate that this much loved phrase, "a still small voice", does not express the full impact of the oxymoron – the absolute incongruity – that the writer of 1 Kings wants to convey.

Elijah hears God - God speaks to Elijah - in a vocal silence. It is silence, yet in the silence, God speaks and Elijah hears. In this stillness Elijah encountered God and was encountered by God. In response to this encounter in the "sound of sheer silence", Elijah wrapped his face in his mantle, a gesture showing that he was aware of a direct encounter with the divine – with the otherness – the holiness of God.

Elijah experiences not only God, but God communicating with him. A powerful reminder that this God, the God Elijah knew as Yahweh, and whom we know in and through Jesus Christ, is a God who not only wants to impress and overwhelm, but is a God who desires to be understood and accepted, a God who desires friendship and fellowship, who calls us to faith and partnership.

On Mount Sinai the heavy storm – wind, earthquake, fire - was wild and terrifying – it was splitting rocks, but God's silent Word alone, was and is able to break open human hearts of stone. For Elijah the sudden silence was more fearsome than the storm and thunder. The silence of God's pleading Word is disconcerting. It was so very different from all Elijah had previously known, it is so unique as we too are offered a new meeting with God in which God's word can reach into all the hidden corners of our hearts.

My friends, in God's silence, we can stop running, we can stop attempting to make ourselves acceptable to God by our own efforts; in God's silence we can stop hiding from God, thinking or feeling or somehow imagining that we no longer matter to God; in God's silence we can climb out from our hiding places, end our scurrying hither and thither; and discover that we are held and loved in the gentle, healing, loving, renewing, restoring light of Christ.

In God's silence we are invited to embrace all over again the fullness of God's plan for our lives. In the sound of sheer silence there is the promise that our faith, our lives, who we are in our very selves are able to be remade and renewed as we find God's way for us to live and believe. You see the silence tells you that God has things for you to do, tasks to which you are called, work for you to do on God's behalf in the church and through the church in the world.

In God's silence, Elijah heard the call from God, to go from his hoped for hiding place south of his homeland all the way back north to the northern edge of Israel, to the wilderness of Damascus. In the silence of God's speaking, all noise is stilled, God speaks and we hear.

Like Elijah we also receive our call to return to and to continue and to be fully focused and highly motivated in the ministry of sharing God's silence, God's word, God's life with and for the world God loves. The world needs God's silence, we need God's silence. God's silence will change us forever. God's silence will loose us to share and demonstrate the full extent of the love that God has for us and all of creation.

You may feel that you are all over the map, pulled this way and that way, by all manner of demands – for you, God has the sound of sheer silence to call you to a nearer faith, a deeper following.

You may feel that you can't or shouldn't take on some new or additional task– for you, God has the sound of sheer silence that you might enter the call that God has for you at this time in your life.

You may be overly content in what you have been and are doing – for you God has the sound of sheer silence in which you will find the disturbing call to take a new step forward in faith and life.

In this story of running and listening, being known by God, being changed by God there is a picture of the entire ministry of our congregation. Our aim is to be open to all, wide open in welcome. Creating and establishing all sorts of running tracks and routes enabling people to run to, towards and into the life of our church. Here we have available to all these runners, a training track, where they can run with partners, and mentors and trainers, with God, to be more able to follow the pace and direction that God sets for us. In time those who train here will also run back out into the community to share their experience of the love of God inviting and encouraging others, many others, to come into this journey themselves.

You are people loved by God, for all of you, God has the sound of sheer silence, that hearing, paying attention, accepting and acting upon what God is saying we all may grasp everything, everything, everything that God needs us to be and do. Whether today we sit downstairs or in the balcony or in the upper transept or in the Choir loft or on the chancel – God has something for all us Joe's to do and be! Amen.