

## Calm and Quiet: Whispers from God

1 Kings 19:4-13

September 3, 2023

I have a few very important questions for you all this morning. In fact, I need to take a poll really. But, before we begin our official polling, we need to define our terms—really, just one term.

Is everyone here familiar with the term *hangry*? For those of you who may not know this word, here's the equation: Hungry + Angry = Hangry. To be hangry means to be in "a state of emotional distress caused by dramatic hunger; a lack of food resulting in a bad temper and temper tantrums." And for those of you who like your sources cited, my source of this official definition was discovered on sign in a window of a restaurant in St. Joe, Michigan this summer.

So, we've got our term officially and clearly defined. So, it's time to take our poll.

My first question: (and yes, my fellow Presbyterians, I know this makes us a bit nervous, but I do expect audience participation) By a show of hands, who here suffers from getting hangry?

Second question: (this might be the more important question, for me at least) Who has someone in their life—could be a friend, a relative, a partner, maybe even a pet—who suffers from getting hangry but thinks that they don't?

Raise those hands!

So, as someone who gets particularly grouchy when I'm hungry and who may or may not share life with someone who gets hangry but doesn't think she does, my initial ascent into today's text had me pretty convinced that I knew what the issue at hand was for poor old Elijah.

Elijah, the great and storied prophet, was simply hangry and a little tired. He needed a snack! So, let's cue those customary animal crackers and a cup of water, grab a pillow, take a nap, and all will be well. Much like those old Snickers commercials, God and God's messenger are simply saying to Elijah, "You're not you when you're hungry. Have a Snickers!"

So, there's our message for today. Take a nap. Eat a snack. And then repeat. Children's Circle Preschool is just downstairs. We can all grab a graham cracker or two, pull out a cot, and take a nap.

Sermon done. We can all go home early on this holiday weekend.

Now, while I am certainly a huge proponent of napping and letting our bodies rest and being sure that we provide our bodies with the necessary sustenance for life's journey, there is a depth beyond the surface that we must begin to traverse together. You see, the prophet Elijah shows up rather abruptly in 1 Kings. He arrives on the scene in the seventeenth chapter, and here's how he starts his prophetic ministry: "As the Lord the God of Israel lives, before whom I stand, there shall be neither dew nor rain these years, except by my word."

Sheesh. What an entrance!

Elijah is dramatic and passionate. He is, as he accurately describes himself in our reading for today, "very, very zealous for the Lord." He's confident. He's bold. He revives the son of a grieving widow. He challenges 450 prophets to a duel of prophetic proportions. He announces the very end to the drought he had originally pronounced.

But not all of his prophetic antics were well received, especially when some of his zeal led to the death of others. So, the powers-that-be got word to Elijah that he, too, would meet a similar fate—death by the sword. Instantly, the bold and the bravado disappears. The swag of the prophet swiftly shifts to a sense of fear and desperation. *"He was afraid; he got up and fled for his life."*

And so there he is, alone, afraid, dejected, and deeply depressed. First in the wilderness under a broom tree, then on a journey of 40 days and 40 nights, and then in a cave.

As many of you know, youth ministries at Second has been in a season of deep change and transition. As a part of this season of change and transition, youth ministries has been partnering with a consultant group called Ministry Architects. In this time of massive change and transition, Ministry Architects has been our faithful and wise guide as we navigate both the joys and the challenges of this particular season.

An important part of our work with Ministry Architects was engaging in what they called "Listening Sessions." These listening sessions took place almost exactly a year ago. Youth, parents, volunteers, and staff were invited to sign-up and attend a listening session where they could share their reflections about their experiences with youth ministries at Second.

While we certainly received some wonderful, positive feedback, it was the reflections that spoke to and about the ways we had failed and were continuing to fail that shook me to my core. In a year where we were focusing our church-wide attention on "Speaking the Truth in Love," folks were certainly doing just that in these listening sessions.

Here is a bit of what we heard:

- We lost connection during the 2 years of the pandemic with other parents. Those bonds are lost.

- In some ways it's like attending a brand-new church.
- There's not much interest in hearing feedback from parents.
- This is the first time I've ever been asked for feedback about the youth ministry as a parent.
- This is the first time I have ever been in the youth suite.
- I have never really felt as a parent welcomed around the youth group.
- [The youth suite] is a tough room to walk into.
- As parents, I don't know the staff and I don't know the kids or parents in youth ministry. Honestly, I could not name or recognize some people if my life depended on it, and I'm expected to trust my kids to it. There needs to be a time to learn and relearn each other.
- After being away, my daughter, who loved it, didn't want to come any more.
- I would love to be an advocate for the youth ministry to my kids. But I don't know what they are doing.
- We need to face the fact that the church has missed 2 years of our kids' lives. They left as freshmen and came back as seniors. They left as 4th graders and now are 7th graders. The transition over that gap was lost, and we need to adjust for that.

In the same way, during this time we were also receiving real-time feedback from parents about the ways in which these same issues were continuing to be perpetuated in our programming and events. Youth were continuing to feel lost, left out, and left behind.

And perhaps most painfully, we also heard from former youth who shared painful stories and devastating experiences of how their trust had been completely broken and their well-being had been compromised, leaving their faith in the church fragile at best and, more often than not, completely shattered.

I had failed. We had failed. I was failing. We were failing.

So, not unlike Elijah, I found myself struck with fear, sadness, grief, and anger, and I metaphorically ran for the mountains in search of a cave to hide in. I wanted to be alone. I wanted to give up. In fact, in my mind, I had decided that the best option was to step away as fast as I could. I just wanted a big bag of Cheetos, some Hawaiian Punch, and a long nap.

Notice what happens while Elijah is in the cave. Twice, *twice*, God asks, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" You see, so often our focus goes directly to verses 11 and 12. We get caught up in the overwhelming power and beauty of it all—wind and earthquakes and fire and sheer silence. It is like an action movie under divine direction. But as one commentator aptly notes, "This is a serious misreading of the narrative. The story is really about Elijah's attempt to relinquish his prophetic office and God's insistence that he continue. Elijah and his mission are the focus, not God's presence or absence."<sup>1</sup>

So that brings us back to that piercing question offered by God: "*What are we doing here?*" Both times that God asks that question (maybe even whispers that question in the silence), Elijah's response is the same: "I have been very zealous for the Lord, the God of hosts, for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away."

You see, it is all too easy, all too tempting, for us all to respond to God's questioning and God's challenging, God's wondering and whispers, with the same answers, the same solutions, the same programs and classes, the same defensive posture, the same arguments, and to make the same theological threats. It is so easy to hold so tightly to what was that we cannot see what is and what could be. I know I most certainly fell into that pattern.

As I took shelter in my metaphoric cave—which is really just a sneaky room behind the library—I found myself in conversation with my dear friend and beloved ministry coach, Betsy. I was bemoaning and groaning, sad and scared, angry and frustrated, overwhelmed by it all and certain that the right choice was to leave Second as fast as I could. I had failed too many youth and too many families.

Yet, much like God with Elijah, Betsy would not let me simply wither away in my cave. "Tom, what are you doing here? What is youth ministries doing here? What is Second Presbyterian Church doing here?"

And, predictably, I did much of what Elijah did. I just kept offering the same answers, the same reasoning, the same excuses, and kept maintaining that same defensive and dismissive posture. So, we sat with that for a moment. She didn't combat it, and she didn't pushback. She left space for the whispers and wonderings of God to infiltrate the space.

And that's when Betsy offered me a piece of sustaining wisdom that will forever guide and shape my life in ministry. Drawing from the wisdom of Father Gregory Boyle, she said to me, "Tom, you have a choice. You can either try to *save* the world or you can *savor* it."

Or, in other words, "*What are you doing here?*"

At the completion of our listening sessions, a 27-page report was produced and presented to us. In this report was an image of a small church that needed a new foundation underneath its building. So, instead of taking apart the church building, they raised the church building up off the ground, using layers and layers of what looked like cinderblock, exposing the ground so a new foundation could be laid. The idea, of course, would be that new foundations, new traditions, and new ministries could be established, while also evaluating current ministries that are taking place.

What an appropriate image that is for us today. You see, getting underneath the church allows us to see where all the bugs and the rodents have made a home. It allows us to see where the mold, the mildew, and the mess have manifested. It gives us the opportunity to examine all the cracks and the creaks and to discover where there might even be dangerous and destructive holes. Getting underneath it all gives us the space to speak and to hear the truth in love. And then, as our sign out front says, begin to faithfully *rebuild*. It offers us the savoring opportunity to sit with the calm and the quiet whispers from God which are boldly asking us, "*Second Church, what are you doing here?*"

I went back and found a text message that Betsy sent to me after our phone conversation that day, and here's what she said: "When I heard you talking about feeling burned out on a Saturday night it made my heart heavy. My prayer for you this week comes from Jesuit Father Gregory Boyle: 'Ministry focused on saving the world leads to burnout and depletion. Our choice is always the same: save the world or savor it.' I hope you savor the ministry you get to do, despite its feeling of neverendingness right now...hang in there. You've got this."

So, in the face of the neverendingness of it all, this particular Sunday feels like such a vital and ripe time to be asking that question, "What are you doing here?" "What am I doing here?" And most importantly, "*What are we doing here?*"

Well, I hope we'll start with savoring it all. I hope we'll savor the opportunity knowing that the saving isn't up to us. Friends, that has already been done. I hope we'll savor the opportunity to let go of former models and modes of doing ministry, making room for creative, innovative, and transformative ministries and ways of being and doing church. I hope we'll savor the opportunity to be the Church—to be Second Presbyterian Church—messy and fleshy as it is,

frustrating and fumbling as we can be. God is calling us. God is whispering to us. "*Second Church, what are you doing here?*"

In a world that is experiencing so much pain, so much division and disdain, I hope we'll savor the opportunity to lead with tenderness and joy, meeting each other and the world with the kind of care, compassion, love, and grace that acknowledges and embraces the individual wounds and collective grief that we all carry.

And finally, and perhaps most importantly, as we savor the opportunity to begin to rebuild, I hope we'll savor the opportunity to acknowledge when we've failed, when we've caused harm, hurt, and pain and then relish in the opportunity to genuinely and faithfully apologize.

So, to those youth who I failed, who were left out, harmed, or hurt, to those families and parents who were excluded, and to volunteers and staff who were let down—I am so sorry.

Beloved friends, let us savor it all.

May it be so. Amen.