

## The Fifth Sunday After Pentecost: 1 Kings 19.1-15

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Leonard Cohen once said that his ordinary state of mind is like the waiting room at the DMV. And I know exactly what he means.

I know what he means because I know about DMVs. In the early years of our marriage, Ardelle and I tended to buy vehicles that were near the end of their useful life. Mind you, I now drive a 1996 Chevy S10 pickup that was given to us by a friend who couldn't even manage to donate it to NPR. So when I say we *used to* buy cars near the end of their lives, we do know what the end looks like. The point here is that turnover was fairly high in our driveway, so I spent a lot of time at the DMV.

I can still see the dirty blonde paneling, the posters listing the 75 or 80 items required for the registration process. Rows of metal chairs were arranged courtroom style, facing two desks where a couple of somber clerks sat all day long, shuffling through the paperwork of the inept. People who hadn't brought proof of insurance, or a signed bill of sale, or an inspection sticker. Remember those sensible days, when we thought a licensed car actually had to be roadworthy?

Each of us held the plastic number we'd taken from a hook by the door. But with the anticipation that our number might eventually be called, dread would build as well. We knew that when our moment finally came, we would probably be sent empty away. Again. Maybe to fetch a note from the doctor or pay a fine for an overdue library book. You really needed to have your life in order to license a car back then.

So, yeah. My ordinary state of mind is a lot like that. Like the waiting room at the DMV. Thoughts, worries, wishes, regrets line up all day long, impatiently waiting their turn for some attention. My computer flashes announcements of urgent emails to be answered, Facebook posts that supposedly involve me, calendar obligations coming my way. There's a lot of restlessness and noise in the waiting room of my mind sometimes. And it can keep me from being present to the moment at hand. Well, what if there is something or someone in the silence beneath all this noise a person could rest in? A silence one might learn to trust?

On some days it's not hard to see why Leonard Cohen, the Sabbath-keeping Jewish songwriter, became a Buddhist monk at the age of 62. But that's probably not in the cards for many of us. Is there a more excellent way that's more doable?

Now, if you're expecting this preacher to be some kind of Zen master who will explain how to mend your life over the course of a sermon, prepare to be disappointed. But I do think there is relevant wisdom, even for us, in the bloody and bizarre story of Elijah and the cave.

Maybe we should place the story in context. The story that just precedes it is one you might remember from Sunday School. It's the one in which Elijah goes head to head with the prophets of Baal and basically comes off looking like LeBron. Remember it?

A drought was underway. Elijah tells King Ahab that he can take care of it. And he challenges the prophets of Baal to a duel. Whoever lights the sacrificial bull with fire from the sky wins. Baal's prophets can't call down even a spark. So Elijah taunts them like a schoolboy, and then pours water all over the bull and the altar and into the trench around it just for kicks. And

when he prays, so much fire falls from the heavens that it burns up not only the bull, but the wood, the stones, and the dust, and then licks up the water in the trench. Good stuff, right?

Well it is this Elijah, who so recently secured the position of bold-prophet-not-to-be-messed-with, who is suddenly running scared from Jezebel and hiding out. He hears the voice of God at the door of his cave. And it says, I love this part, "Um, what are you doing here, Elijah?" Nice welcome, right?

Elijah explains: "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."

God apparently has nothing to say about all that. Nothing at all. God just says, "Go stand on the mountain. I'm about to pass by."

Then came a wind that split rocks and mountains. But God wasn't in it. Then came an earthquake, but God was not in it. Then came a fire. Remember the fire in the big prophet smackdown? God was not in the fire either. And then came the sound of sheer silence.

Elijah covers his face, presumably because God *was* in the silence somehow. But here may be the weirdest part of the story. After all this, nothing changes in Elijah. God asks all over again, "So why are you here, prophet?" And Elijah gives the same explanation, verbatim, about how zealous he's been for God and how lame the people of Israel are. And God says, "Go. Return on your way to Damascus. I've got a few kings I need you to anoint."

The ways of God are so strange. But the mind of Elijah is so familiar in a way.

It's the DMV, isn't it? Elijah is out being as impressive and successful as a prophet can be. He's winning. He's winning so much we're tired of his winning. Sorry. But the thrill of it all empties in no time like so much adrenaline. And the vacuum left in his mind fills with fear and annoyance and explanations to God about how things ought to be.

It's all those thoughts of self justification that sound a lot like the waiting room in my head. They line up and demand their turn for my attention. They claim to have all their paperwork together. The world is supposed to be a morally orderly place. Good prophets win. Bad ones get what's coming to them. That's supposed to be the theology of the Hebrew Scriptures, right? Keep the covenant and all will be well. But if you don't... look out. There will be smiting.

But story after story in the Old Testament seems to begin with these assumptions, and then subverts them. Elijah's stellar prophetic performance is interrupted. It's interrupted by the sound of silence and the notion that God may be all the more present when the activity stops, and we're not so sure we can go on, than when we're calling down fire and apparently at the top of our spiritual game.

It seems all wrong to offer an explanation to this story, since Elijah's explanations are what fall entirely flat. But it does seem that when my mind most wants explanations, God tends to offer silence. Or when my mind shows up with the best things I've done as a dad, as a priest, as a Christian, producing my validating paperwork to God once I finally get to the front of the line, God seems to say, "What are you doing here? Please review the list on the wall. I'm not that interested in your successes. I tend to show up in silences and on crosses."

A few years ago, I visited a friend whose severe schizophrenia sent him into a psychiatric hospital again. I had prayed for years that God would stop the earthquakes and the rock breaking winds in his mind. But God hadn't. Not for good, at least. What do we do with this kind of divine silence? The silence of God in our lives when suffering goes unhealed or injustice continues unchecked?

Well, the story of Elijah and the cave seems to provide one difficult possibility: Sometimes we sit in it. We just wrap our face in our mantles, and we keep still for a time.

We probably won't get answers. But we may get a presence. Look around at a funeral wake or a vigil. Are you ever more certain that life is a sacred, if vulnerable, gift? It's often in such silences, when all the explanations feel like betrayals, that the DMV in our heads finally closes, and we're present to the moment at hand. Hurting, but wide awake. Grieving and somehow grateful at once. Grateful at least for the goodness that's just been lost.

My friend and I sat in the psych ward, looking out the room's big plate glass windows and into the blistering heat of the city outside. Maybe it was the meds, or the air-conditioning, or the grace of God or some just so combination of all three. But Darrell got a break from the noise in his head. He looked down at my feet and said, "Hey, preacher. Did you get some new shoes?"

I hadn't. The shoes were old, but he liked them. The storms inside him calmed enough to enjoy something on the outside, and make it known. "I like those shoes," he said. "Those are good looking shoes," he said. He even laughed.

We got no answers, no explanations in that moment. It was just more silence from God. The violence and suffering of the world went on, as it does. But one person, whose paranoia keeps him mostly cut off from the moment at hand and the reality outside his own head, got a little free. The DMV closed down and the world beyond it opened up just a bit. And it was good.

"I like those shoes" seemed like a hurricane of grace just then.

Somehow, it was grace enough to help me believe all over again that the sheer silence of a loving God really does exist beneath each unfolding moment, holding the strange miracle of our lives in being. And that maybe God's silence isn't something only to be feared, or avoided, or explained away. But something we can learn to just sit still — even if only for one healing moment — within.