

A Sermon on 1 Kings 19:11-12 and Romans 8:22-27
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1 Kings 19:11-12:

[The Angel of the Lord] said to Elijah, “Go out and stand on the mountain before the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by.” Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind, and after the wind an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake, and after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire, and after the fire a sound of sheer silence.

Romans 8:22-27:

We know that the whole creation has been groaning together as it suffers together the pains of labor, and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope, for who hopes for what one already sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness, for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with groanings too deep for words. And God, who searches hearts, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

No Words

Much has happened since we last gathered together in this space. While I have been away at a conference and reunion, you have graciously hosted another pastor and have, I hope, been graciously received by other congregations. You have heard the Word preached rightly, yet by many different interpreters in sanctuaries that occupy real and virtual space. Some of you have even come back to your church “home” this morning to receive the Word once more, seeking a morsel of hope in a moment for which our mortal language fails us.

We – all of us – are again living through a catastrophe shaped by human hands. I wish I could say it was the only catastrophe we’ve experienced in the past two weeks. In fact, it is the third mass shooting our nation has endured since we last worshiped here as a family only two weeks ago. The Uvalde shooting is the 27th in an American school since January 1 of this year. How are we to speak of the unspeakable? What more can possibly be said that has not already been tweeted, emailed or broadcast from the floor of the Senate or the pre-game interview booth?

I am very sure we all know exactly where we were when we received this latest dispatch from a schoolyard that should have been filled with the sounds of laughter and cries of “duck, duck, goose.” Maybe that is where the ghastly news found you, in the throes of watching children at play, learning the most important lessons of life: how to share our toys. How to give others a turn on the swing. How to take care of the friend who tripped over the sidewalk and skinned their knee. How to make sure the child in front of you makes it safely down the slide. How to make it up the rock wall without falling.

If you are lucky, you learned those lessons early on life’s playground. And you were surrounded by a group of friends that helped you learn the fine art of collaboration and cooperation. Friends with whom you developed your creative imagination through play, which Fred Rogers called ‘the work of childhood’ “Play is often talked about as if it were a relief from serious learning. But for children, play *is* serious learning.” So said the man who made a red zippered sweater a coveted fashion item!

I don't know about you, but I would love to have Fred's red sweater to wrap myself in about now. Or even Elijah's mantle. Instead, I have friends: friends who embraced one another like a finely-knit garment when we heard the news from Texas on Wednesday. Friends who were standing on the steps of the seminary chapel – God's holy mountain in Princeton - where so many times God has spoken a word to us. "Get yourself up and come here!" "You passed your ordination exams!" "Just keep on going." "Be patient with yourself." Except this time. This time, all we heard was silence. That absence of sound Elijah hears after the assault of the wind and the earthquake and the fire on Mt Horeb: awesome and powerful displays of nature's dominance through which God chose to speak not one word.

There is a time to be silent. And yet, when there are no words that can possibly meet the abomination of children being slaughtered in school, or lost to war; of church members taken down during worship and shoppers killed because they dared to go to the grocery store, God gives us language. The moaning of our souls when our bodies are curled

up in a fetal position, unable to take in the impossibility of the horrendous. The agonized groan hurled heavenward in search of answers. The keening sigh of the human spirit unleashed before our tears can fall.

God, the author of words, hears us. God, who mixes up our language so we will not understand each other, translates every sound byte. God, whose absolute presence finds us in the sound of sheer silence, knows us. Fashions our inmost being, so that, when we are ready to listen, God will be ready to give us a word.

Right now, there are a whole lot of people who are not yet ready to hear, much less speak. It is simply too soon, and the losses are too great. They do not need to hear one word from the rest of us about God's will, or what is meant to be, or that there is a reason for everything under the sun, or that something good will come out of this. But, when they are ready to speak, they will need to be heard. Which is where we come in.

We have no say in how or where the worst possible news greets those we love, or even ourselves. And it will never, ever find us at a

convenient time. But it will ask us to stop. Stop running to the store; stop riding the Peloton with Ally; stop bingeing on the Cheetohs and the Snickers bars. Stop. Lay it all down and listen to the silence. Be the one who is willing to sit and wait. To take whatever the childless parent or the comfortless widow or the orphaned child has to dish out. To receive their wordless keening, the language of the heart that needs no translation. Bring the very presence of God into that space. Then do it again.

Do you know how powerful your presence is to someone who has just lost everything? It is a power no earthly ruler can possibly hold. It is a power not given to governments or business magnates or tweeters or influencers or billionaires. Not even to the Elon Musks of the world. Where were they, after all, when God laid the foundation of the earth? When the morning stars sang together and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy?

When we sit with those who cannot fathom that joy or singing or laughter will ever again enter their lives, we come to know something

about the kind of power God has. About the creative play God has mastered so we too can do the work of childhood. About the power of light over darkness and life over death. The power of hope to bring life to those who must endure the unbearable.

Which will, at one time or another, also be us. There is no sweater made, however glorious the shade, that is powerful enough to keep us from being ripped to shreds by the things that happen to us. And we must not submit to the arrogance that claims it can never happen here: “here” is anywhere. Anywhere the work of childhood is thwarted; anywhere anger, rage and depression go unheard and unclaimed; anywhere violence is allowed to flourish and life fails to be valued. Anywhere that finds the still, small voice more threatening than the noise of gunfire.

As I was taking my granddaughter to her preschool class this Friday – and, thankfully, picking her up again when playtime was over – I was assaulted by the same thoughts that confront her parents, and the parents of our other grandchildren, each time they take them to school.

What if today is the last day I see her? What if this is the last time I hug him? Is there a safety plan in place? Who can hope to stop an armed intruder? Have I done enough to keep my child safe?

I can assure you I have all of those thoughts and more every time I am in this space. Where holy ground can be defiled in 10 minutes or less by one person armed with a weapon of mass destruction.

My friends, there are times when the world is too much with us. But it is that world in which we have been created to live. To steward for the sake of every creature with whom we share our moments of terror and celebration, loss and gain, death and life. I do not have words to give you that will make that world easier to live in, or more tolerable for the discomfited. But I know the power of the God we worship, a power that only grows when it is shared. A power that is greater than any force of nature. A power on full display by the members of the Irvine Taiwanese Presbyterian Church, who were attacked in their own worship space on May 15.

You should know that the pastor of the Geneva Presbyterian Church, which hosts the Taiwanese congregation, happened to be with us at Montreat last week. Where he was receiving phone call after phone call about the shooting that had occurred back home, in his own sanctuary. He was stunned. So we just listened.

In an interview with Darla Carter of the Presbyterian News Agency, their pastor, Rev. Albany Lee spoke of the healing power of God. When asked about the perpetrator, Rev. Lee noted that "...hate can build up in the human heart and that it usually takes more than a day. I just hope that God will heal his heart, and no more hatred... We should preach more love, not revenge or anything that (would) make us become part of the evil." He then declared that his church members would not just stay where they are in grief. "I'm going to encourage them (to) continue to move forward, and find the harmony and community in society. We never forget that we are a Christian church."¹

¹ Interview with Darla Carter posted by the Presbyterian Mission Agency on the PCUSA website. [Presbyterian Mission Agency Pastor speaks of God's healing power after California church shooting | Presbyterian Mission Agency](#) Accessed May 27, 2022.

We are a Christian, connected church. A church woven together in the healing power of a God who will always have the last word even when it seems we have lost sight of our children forever. “Let the children come to me.” God speaks into the silent void in our hearts, so we can know beyond all doubt that those we no longer see have indeed been brought into God’s embrace. That every leave-taking in our lives will find its way to God’s dwelling place, where our deepest yearning for reunion will be met. On this seventh Sunday of Easter, let this be God’s restoring, healing word to you. Amen.