

“The Thin Sound of Silence”

Scripture: I Kings 19:1-18; II Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18

Rev. Lewis Galloway



First Presbyterian
CHURCH OF CHARLOTTE

September 13, 2026

“I quit,” she said as she pushed back from the intake table. “I started this because I wanted to help homeless people, but there are just too many rules. All folks seem to care about are the rules. Doesn’t anybody care about our guests?” I had to admit that there were a lot of rules at the winter homeless shelter in the city where I served on the shelter board. There were rules that needed to be followed to ensure safety, respect privacy, prevent violence, check substance abuse, and require participation in the programs. It was frustrating for this intake volunteer to lay out the rules as the guests came in from the cold. Sometimes the rules seemed more important to her than the needs of the people. She got up; she put on her coat and left. It was the last time I saw her.

Sooner or later, each one of us may come to the point when our resources are depleted, our energy gone, our passion spent, and our hopes crushed.

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We find ourselves exhausted. What caring physician, what loving parent, what faithful spouse, what dedicated teacher, what tireless volunteer has not come to the point of profound weariness of body and spirit? We know what it is to run on empty with nothing left to give to those who need us most. We can become overwhelmed by all the forces that push against us. We become terrified by our own insignificance; all our best efforts don't amount to anything. We end up punching the clock, counting the days, crying in the night, or falling into cynicism. Such weariness of soul is one of the reasons people find themselves in desperate places.

To say that the prophet Elijah is exhausted is an understatement. He had his moment of dramatic triumph to be sure – defeating the 450 prophets of Baal on Mt. Carmel. Yet, all it takes is one life threatening word from Queen Jezebel to wash the adrenaline from his body. She promised to destroy him

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just as he destroyed the prophets of Baal. Her very real threat leaves him running into the wilderness scared, alone, and exhausted. He has done everything that the Lord asked of him. Look where it has left him. Now he cries out to God, “It is enough! Take away my life.”

I have known faithful Christians who become weary when their efforts to teach middle school youth, mentor a struggling family, support an immigrant family whose papers have been taken away, or care for an aging friend with dementia don’t seem to lead anywhere. Trying to do the faithful, right thing can be an exhausting and sometimes lonely enterprise. It is easy to fall into the trap of thinking, “I am the only one who cares,” or “I have to carry the whole load.” They may conclude, “If no one else cares, why should I care?” Or like Elijah, “I have had enough!” They end up in the wilderness. They are ready to give up. When good people burn out, they give up on the

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gospel. They fall away. God becomes little more than an object to be discussed like the weather, the economy, or a philosophical problem.

When we can no longer grasp anyone or anything, we are grasped by the Living God. The One who is the source of all things speaks to us, “What are you doing here?” Elijah pours out his lament. In spite of everything I have done that you told me to do, look at the mess. They “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.”

It is more than a lament. It is an accusation against the honor, power, and justice of God. I have known many faithful Christians who have given their all to a cause or supported a family member through a devastating illness. In spite of all the prayers and the herculean effort, things do not turn out

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well. When they cannot take the stress or criticism any longer, they demand to know how the Lord can let things be like this. Why am I so discouraged, worn out, and alone? Why are things worse than before? Why has God not answered my prayers? It is a cry of deception, desolation, and despair.

In the midst of all this – our battle fatigue, our wilderness wandering, our times of self-doubt, our emptiness – God speaks to us. It may be on a special weekend retreat. It may be when you turn the lock on the door, everyone else has gone to bed, the last light is out, and you face the darkness alone. It may be in the clamor of the street, or when a dorm party gets out of hand, or in a moment in worship when the choir lifts our souls to heaven. When we have nothing more to give or say or do, God addresses us.

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We know Elijah’s story. God is not in the wind, earthquake or the fire. God is not found in all the places you expect to find a pagan god; God is not discovered in the usual ways you expect to discover some other god. God is found in the thin sound of silence or the sound of a slight whisper. That is, God is found in the empty, ruined, and burned-out places where there is nothing left and nothing to be found but God. God is there when the party has gone badly, when school is a failure, when the marriage is crumbling, or when the church is worn-out and threadbare.

Diogenes Allen wrote in his book, *Traces of God*, that God comes and plants a seed in the emptiness of the soul. This is the God of the cross who comes to us in the negation of life to give us life and who transforms defeat into victory. This God tears down our ways of thinking and doing and creates in us a new way of being and living.

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We, like Elijah, think it all depends on us – on our striving and achieving. It doesn't. In his letters to his young friend, protégé, and fellow missionary, Timothy, Paul gives all manner of advice. What undergirds his words of encouragement, is the confident faith that the Holy Spirit will give Timothy the wisdom, strength and courage to proclaim the gospel in the face of the challenges of his ministry. This is why Paul, in the face of his own troubles says, “But the Lord stood by me and gave me strength, so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed, and all the Gentiles might hear it” (II Timothy 4:17).

Relying upon our strength and resolve only leads to confusion and exhaustion. Relying upon the Lord can lead to fresh beginnings. God's way in the world comes through trusting in the work of God in Jesus. Without the gospel, we seek our own way of achieving value and meaning through

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ceaseless striving and incessant activity. No wonder we are so devastated when all our efforts fail. We cannot gain for ourselves what only God can give. Only God can raise Jesus from the dead; only God can raise us from a living death; only God can resurrect the church; only God can bring in the kingdom.

In this divine-human encounter in the silent and empty places of life, we are set free from our illusions and take hold of a new beginning. God not only speaks to Elijah to comfort him; God gives Elijah a new call. God commands the worn-out prophet to take hold of a new mission. Elijah will anoint kings; Elijah will even anoint a prophet to come after him. It is not about Elijah; it is not about what we think we may want; it is about the gospel of Christ. We are not the only ones. Our perspective on history, church, and the kingdom is only our limited perspective. When we think it is all about our successes

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and our failures, God reminds us that there are still seven thousand who have not bowed the knee to Baal.

Get up, Elijah! Get, up people of God! Let go and take hold. Let go of what is past and take hold of the new thing that God is causing to be. On our new journey, God is here to bring to completion the work God has begun in us.

The church is always facing challenges; the church knows the pain of failure, disappointment, and opposition. Yet, the voice of God heard in the thin sound of silence tells us that this is another day filled with fresh opportunities to witness to Jesus. Just as God stood with Elijah, God stands with us to give us the strength we need to complete the tasks God calls us to do. For fifty years, Crisis Assistance Ministry has reached out into the community to provide assistance for people in crisis and to advocate for the needs of the most vulnerable our community. Its work is not ending; it is only

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beginning. With the support of faithful people like you and gifts of our congregation and other founding congregations, we will in this shared ministry listen for the voice of God as it moves forward to serve another 50 years.

Whenever we fall into thinking that life is over, the best is past, our purpose is finished, we hear the voice of God that says, “I have something yet for you to do.” Our encounter with God reveals an unfolding mystery in which God is continuously creating something new out of the successes and the failures of the past. The past, our past, is not something thrown away but the very soil in which something new is being born, shaped, and formed. Listening for the voice of God in the silent places in our lives, we realize that our work can never be mistaken for, or confused with, the whole of God’s work. At a time when people have lost their certainty, their sure foundation, and find

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themselves in the wilderness, it is the voice we hear in the silence that tells us that God is the only foundation, the only certainty, and the only goal.

Trusting in God, we move forward in this time and place to accomplish the work God has for us to do.

We give so much of our lives to our callings to raise our children, to our work outside the home, to our service in the body of Christ, and to our volunteer efforts in the community. When the children are grown, when we retire from our jobs or when we complete our commitments to community organizations, we wonder, “What next?” Sometimes there is a letdown, a sense of loss, an emptiness, or a questioning of purpose. This is the time for each one of us and for this congregation to listen for the voice of God calling us to a greater purpose and a new kind of service. When some of you have

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told me that you “flunked retirement”, I know that you have listened to that still small voice of God.

The Lord asks, “What are you doing here, Elijah?”

The Lord asks us, “What are we doing here?”

The Holy One speaks to us. Hear the voice speaking to you in the thin sound of silence. Then get up and go and do as the Lord commands.