

## **BUT THE LORD WAS NOT IN THE WIND, EARTHQUAKE, OR FIRE**

Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost

August 9, 2026

As Jesus approached them, the disciples didn't recognize him and were terrified. So, he comforted them, saying: "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid." You and I are often like those disciples; uncertain, confused, feeling lost and alone; not knowing which way to turn; hopeless; afraid. In those times of our lives, we lose sight of the Lord; times when our present internal or external condition hinders us from a clearer vision of God.

The prophet Elijah was in a similar state; depressed, alone, unable to see the Lord; finally, giving up and lying down under a shrub hoping he would die. How did he end up in such a desperate condition, considering that he had begun the day so gloriously. At the beginning of that day he had been the only prophet of God standing on Mount Carmel. The only one, facing down 450 prophets of Baal. And by the end of the day those false prophets were all lying dead on the hillside. But here was the problem; all those prophets had a powerful patroness, Queen Jezebel of Israel. And she was so furious at what Elijah had done that she sent this message to him: "May the gods judge me severely if by this time tomorrow I do not take your life as you did theirs!" Her words were no idle threat. She had an entire army backing her up.

In response to her letter, Elijah, the mighty prophet of God, fled in terror, eventually landing under a shrub in the desert, exhausted and depleted in body and spirit. He who had seen the glory of the Lord, and God's power so clearly earlier that day, had already lost sight of God; feeling utterly alone as he lay down, waiting and longing to die. Saint Ignatius of Loyola would call this a quick shift from spiritual consolation to spiritual desolation; from

being bathed in the consoling fire of God's love one moment, and in the next, feeling desolate and bereft of that consoling presence.

So, how do we strive to maintain faith and belief and a deep inner heart knowing of our Lord, even when things turn desperately south for us? Elijah's story holds a key. We are told that after hiding under that shrub, he headed south on a forty-day journey through the dry rocky wilderness of Sinai to the mountain of God.

Elijah's journey did not literally take forty days; just as Jesus' temptation by Satan in the wilderness did not literally last forty days. The authors at the time chose the number forty on purpose; not 38, or 27, or some other number, but forty. The number forty symbolized a period of testing, trial, or purification. It referred to a time of profound hardship or waiting that preceded a major transition, divine revelation, or a fresh new start. All of this was about to happen for Elijah as he journeyed south through the barrenness of Sinai, feeling the barrenness of spiritual desolation within his heart and soul.

He finally arrived at Mount Horeb, the mountain of God, and began to climb while scouting out a place to rest that would shelter him from the weather. He finally found a cave, entered, laid down, and immediately fell asleep, exhausted.

The scripture tells us that sometime during the night a fierce, gale force wind began to blow, so strong that it shook the mountain; breaking rocks in pieces before the Lord. Despite this miraculous meteorological event, we are told that the Lord's presence was not in the wind. Now, fully awake and scared, the prophet sat against the back wall in the darkness trying to catch his breath. Soon, the wind stopped, to be replaced by a violent earthquake

that rattled Elijah down to his bones. But we are again told that the Lord was not in the earthquake. Once the ground finally stopped shaking, a fierce firestorm broke out; lighting up every corner of the cave and the sky outside. But again, we are told that the Lord was not in the fire. Elijah had braced himself through the onslaught of one mighty event after another. And when the fire finally ceased, he sat there blind and shaken in the darkness; breathing heavily, trying to calm himself. In that moment he must have felt like he had gone from the frying pan of depression to the furnace of hell on earth.

But slowly, everything around him, and within him, became completely still and quiet. So still, that he could hear his heart, now slowly beating in his chest. No sounds in the cave; no sounds from outside. No cricket, no bug, no noise at all. Moments passed. Then the scripture says this: “and after the fire [came] a sound of sheer silence. When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave.”

Three times we are told where the Lord was not. The Lord was not in the wind, or the earthquake, or the fire. As impressive as those natural events were, God was not there in all the blowing and shaking and heat. COULD the Lord have been there in the shaking and blowing and heat? Absolutely. God can reveal God’s—self in any number of limitless ways.

But there is a profound mystery revealed here. After the blowing and shaking and heat, there came the sound of sheer silence. Sheer silence makes no noise. But it says here that there was a SOUND of sheer silence. What does that mean? What came to Elijah in that utter silence was a sound. Oh, not an audible sound. But the inner heart sound of a presence within him.

What is presented in this passage are two ways that God may come to us; loud and disruptive or soft and almost imperceptible. It reminds me of what Saint Ignatius wrote in his Spiritual Exercises about good angels and evil spirits. He wrote: *“In those who are making progress in the spiritual life, from good to better, the good angel touches the soul gently, tenderly, and sweetly, as a drop of water entering a sponge, but the evil spirit touches it sharply, with noise and agitation, like a drop of water hitting upon a rock.*

In The Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius of Loyola, the metaphor of a drop of water entering a sponge or hitting a stone, describes how spiritual forces interact within a person's soul. A gentle drop entering a sponge represents the quiet, peaceful work of a good spirit; like the sound of Elijah's utter silence. While a drop hitting a stone with noise represents the harsh, disruptive prod of an evil spirit, or, one might say, a mighty wind and earthquake and fire.

For a person trying to grow closer to God ("going from good to better"), a good angel or the Holy Spirit touches the heart softly, quietly, and sweetly—like water being silently absorbed by a dry sponge, or the sound of utter silence. Conversely, the evil spirit disrupts and agitates a receptive soul, landing with a sharp, noisy, and jarring impact—like water splattering hard against a rock, or a wind and earthquake and fire.

For Elijah, who had been a faithful prophet of God, it was in the sound of sheer silence within him where he heard the voice of God: God spoke these words within him: “What are you doing here, Elijah?” Elijah answered, “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.” Then the Lord said to him... I still have left in Israel seven thousand

followers who have not bowed their knees to Baal or kissed the images of him.”

In these comforting words from the Lord, great spiritual consolation returned to the Elijah. Hope had returned; God’s presence had returned. God’s words to the prophet Jeremiah are true for Elijah here as well: “For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope. Then when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you. When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart.” You and I may not face a literal tornado or earthquake or fire, but we do experience many disrupting distracting noises in this world of ours; noises that hinder us from hearing the voice of God in the sound of sheer silence; noises that subtly shift us off center; noises and distractions that move us imperceptibly further from our divine center. May we take time to be still, as Elijah was; still to listen to our hearts; to the sound of sheer silence.