

Eleventh Weekend After Pentecost (RCL/A): “Do I Have Your Attention Now??”

1 Kings 19:9-18; Matthew 14:22-23

August 12-13, 2023

Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

All over the news: last week’s devastating wildfires on Maui, fanned not by gentle Hawaiian trade winds, but by Hurricane Dora’s ferocity 700 miles south. I called my cousins who are currently on Maui and learned there were 80 mph winds on top of beautiful Haleakala, so strong that firefighters were unable to deploy helicopters to drop giant bucketsful of water on the blaze. At lower altitudes Blue Hawaii tourist choppers were requisitioned to do just that. I know that some of you have enjoyed various Hawaiian Islands from the vantage point of those helicopters. I remember a bird’s eye view of Kauai from one of them, to background music of Enya.

Fire. Wind. The only piece of this weekend’s first lesson **missing** from reports about Maui is earthquake. Fire and wind. Do they bring any other Scripture story to mind?

Right. **Pentecost**: a **wind** whirling around the Upper Room and a lick of **flame** over each disciple’s head. Also, how about Mt. Sinai when Moses went up alone and received the Ten Commandments? Check out Exodus 19 (verses 16-19). The LORD’s arrival was heralded not just by trumpet blasts from some heavenly brass player, but by thunder, lightning, thick clouds, smoke, visible fire. These are called **theophanies**, God-displays, the showing forth of divine Presence and Power. Theophanies are **holy attention-getters**.

The story of Elijah’s visit to Mt. Horeb, though, reminds us that God doesn’t **always** show up like that. In this lesson from 1 Kings, God **isn’t** in wind, earthquake **or** fire. It’s not fireworks or ear-splitting crashes that demand Elijah’s attention. It’s “*a sound of sheer silence*” (1 Kings 19:13). Maybe it’s like a noisy classroom. Yelling over the din doesn’t do much to quiet the students. But if the kids notice the teacher standing there saying nothing, the room tends to quiet down. Sometimes God **shouts** to get our attention. But sometimes God **whispers**. We’ll only notice the whisper if we’re still enough, if we change our prayer setting from “Send” to “Receive.” Once God gets Elijah’s attention, God has a message to

transmit, and it's not "*Come to Me, all you who are heavy laden, and I will give you rest*" (Matthew 11:28).

It's "STOP WHINING." "You have a job to do."

More than anything, Elijah just wants to quit. He's been through the mill. Evil Queen Jezebel has gotten his attention by killing the **other** prophets of Israel and basically putting a hit out on him. She doesn't appreciate Elijah winning a contest with the prophets of Baal, "her" guys, and then slaughtering them all. He's so frightened, so depressed, that he flees into no-man's land and lays down to die. "Take me now!" But God's not having it. God sends a Door Dash angel to deliver bread and water, to tap Elijah on the shoulder and command him, "*Get up and eat*" (1 Kings 19: 5). Elijah does, and falls asleep again on a full tummy, probably hoping **this** time he **won't** wake up. A little later the angel prods him again (maybe a little less gently?) and advises him to eat more, because otherwise he'll faint on the way where he's going: Horeb, the mount of God. The LORD's getting his attention, bit by bit. Then, in today's lesson, we hear how God speaks with Elijah, but only after an anxiety-provoking lead-in: a ringside seat to mammoth wind that shatters rock, fire everywhere, earthquake shaking the ground beneath his feet. Finally, by the time the tumult turns to silence, the LORD has Elijah's full attention. God gives the perfect antidote to Elijah's depression: re-focusing him on someone other than himself, giving him a new purpose, assigning a holy job to do. "You're not allowed to quit! You're an essential worker!" If God can get **our** attention when **we're** tempted to throw in the towel, God will tell us the same thing: "You're not allowed to quit! You're an essential worker – in the Kingdom of God!"

Sometimes we hear God in the stillness and sometimes we hear God speaking to us in the cries of our neighbors. This Sunday, August 13, our church calendar reminds us to remember two women whose attention God **definitely** got: Florence Nightingale and Clara Maass. Florence heard God's voice directly, like Elijah. Clara heard it in the voices of those in need around her. There just so happens to be a Lutheran connection to both of them: Florence Nightingale trained with and was inspired by the devotion of the Lutheran deaconesses at Kaiserwerth, a deaconess formation center founded by Pastor Theodor

Fliedner whom we remember in October. Clara Maas was herself a Lutheran. She was also a Jersey Girl, born right up the Parkway in East Orange. Their backgrounds were very different.

Clara was the oldest of 9 children, born in 1876 to German immigrants. At the age of 15 she was already working, at a place called the Newark Orphans' Asylum. Two years later, she started nurses training at Newark German Hospital, whose name would change to Clara Maas Memorial Hospital 50 years after her death. She must have had an adventurous as well as a compassionate spirit, and she must have longed to see the world beyond Essex and Hudson Counties, because at the age of 21 she signed up as a contract nurse for the United States Army at the outset of the Spanish-American War. Havana, Cuba was one of her postings, and yellow fever was among the tropical diseases from which her soldier patients suffered. Her contract ended when the war did, but she signed up again half a year later and went to the Philippines, where she treated yellow fever patients once again. She was sent home to the U.S. when she herself became ill with a tropical illness called breakbone. That didn't stop her less than a year later from returning to Havana as a volunteer in a clinical study determining whether mosquitos transmitted yellow fever. As we know, they do. Clara got a mild case of yellow fever from her first bite and recovered quickly. The second bite gave her a fatal case of yellow fever, from which she died 10 days later. She was 25 years old. *"No greater love than this, to lay down one's life...."* (John 15:13)

Florence Nightingale lived till 90. Her birthplace was Florence, Italy. She was born into privilege in 1820, an era when she was expected to marry someone equally as wealthy and live a life of leisure. That was not a role she chose to play. In later years Florence reported that on February 7, 1837, God spoke to her (for the first of five times in her lifetime). She said God called her at age 17 into His service. I don't know if it was before or after this holy call that she prayed, "Give me my work to do." As they say, "Be careful what you ask for." "Give me work to do" is the kind of prayer the Lord will always answer in the affirmative!

Florence's parents were horrified that she wanted to pursue nursing, which in the 19th century was seen as scutwork, the last resort of uneducated women with no other skills to earn a living. Strong-

willed Florence prevailed, however. She did her initial nurses training in England, and then continued to deepen her education and clinical experience with the Lutheran deaconesses in Germany. She became known for her expertise in sanitation, nutrition, public health. When the Crimean War broke out in 1854 she convinced 38 other nurses to head to Turkey with her and serve in the British Army hospitals there. They found deplorable conditions and were received less than enthusiastically by the military officers and doctors. But when the casualties poured in they proved their worth and gained the respect and admiration of the men **with** whom they served and **to** whom they ministered. Florence was blessed by the Holy Spirit with the ability to bring order out of chaos. Her nicknames included “the Angel of the Crimea” as well as “The Lady of the Lamp” because of this piece in *The London Times*:

When all the medical officers have retired for the night and silence and darkness have settled down upon those miles of prostrate sick, she may be observed alone, with a little lamp in her hand, making her solitary rounds.¹

It is said the men would kiss her shadow as it fell across their cots.

Heaven knows there may have been times when she was tempted to quit, during the war and in the decades after as she fought for reform in the workhouses, public health measures for the poor, a higher standard of care for the British military. But she never **did** quit, even when no one would have blamed her for doing so. She developed a condition called chronic brucellosis from her service during the Crimean War, perhaps because of her continual contact with gangrenous wounds. It left her bedridden for much of her life, but didn’t prevent her from lobbying mightily for healthcare reforms, receiving visitors, conducting prolific correspondence, writing her *Notes on Nursing: what it is, and what it is not*. She was blind for the last 9 years of her life, yet continued to fulfill the commitment she made as a teenager when she prayed, “Give me my work to do.” She was a British hero and when she died there was a groundswell of sentiment that she be buried in Westminster Abbey. Once again her will prevailed, though, and she was laid to rest in the family plot in East Wellow, her grave marked with a simple stone, engraved “F.N. Born 1820. Died 1910.”

God got her attention early on, without wind, fire or earthquake, with a call she heard from outside herself, and through the suffering she had eyes to see beyond her privileged circle of family, friends, acquaintances. God kept Florence's attention throughout her lifetime. This is how she summed it up:

If I could give you information of my life it would be to show how a woman of very ordinary ability has been led by God in strange and unaccustomed paths to do in His service what He has done in her. And if I could tell you all, you would see how God has done all, and I nothing. I have worked hard, very hard, that is all; and I have never refused God anything.²

When we become discouraged, either like Elijah, because our faithfulness to God's call has called forth anger from people in power, or like Clara Maass or Florence Nightingale might have become discouraged, because their faithfulness to God's call super-sensitized them to the suffering of others, to the point they put their own lives and well-being at risk, or simply because we've poured ourselves out in a holy effort that seems to have accomplished little or nothing, despite our best efforts: in those times, let us be on the alert for God getting our attention and reminding us, "'You're not allowed to quit! You're an essential worker – in the Kingdom of God!' Amen

¹Edith Deen, *Great Women of the Christian Faith* (NY: Harper and Brothers, 1959), p. 215.

²Gail Ramshaw. *More Days for Praise: Festivals and Commemorations in Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2016), p. 193.

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