

## “Going Home”

(Elijah)

This week I returned to the Twin Cities for the sequel to my seminary education, hereafter to be affectionately called, why furthering your education always sounds so good for everyone else. Actually, it was a really good week. The Twin Cities have a special, sacred place in my life because it was where I met Gina. So there are countless memories that are awoken anytime I find myself there. For example as I sat in the indescribable joy of rush hour traffic staring at the red brake lights of the person in front of me and thought of how many times I drove from the northern part of the city where United Seminary is to the southern part where Gina lived when we first started dating and how I would anxiously anticipate going out to a movie or dinner. I drove past the jewelry store where I purchased Gina’s wedding ring and I remembered how my hands literally shook on the steering wheel and my mouth felt like I had swallowed a bag of cotton balls the night I drove to propose to Gina. I drove past the apartment where Gina and I lived during my last year of seminary and could still hear echoes of the laughter and all those “firsts” that come during the twelve months after your wedding. Yet, you know for all the memories that were awoken and smiles that crossed my face, there was something that was different, or perhaps more accurately **someone** who was different. Going back, returning to a place that holds significance, special or sacred significance, can help us recall but never fully recapture the past.

There are many different reasons to return to a place that we might call holy ground. We might go back for reasons of nostalgia, think here about going to a class reunion. We might go back because that place has such a profound, even indescribable feeling that we only sense in that place, think here about how people talk of Pilgrim Center or camps of their youth. Or you might go back in order to re-live, reconnect with a part of ourselves that we feel like we’ve lost or has become clouded over the years. Think about walking into your childhood home after being gone for ten, twenty, thirty years. Or to pick up the scripture passage today, think here of Elijah running through the wilderness to Mount Horeb. Or you might know it better by the name it is called in Exodus, Mount Sinai, the very place where Moses received the Ten Commandments. This is a holy site for Elijah, this is the place his ancestors encountered the very presence of God, who scared the bejesus of them, but nevertheless claimed Israel and called them into relationship.

The deeper truth is many of us return to places of our past because of something going on in our present, so too Elijah goes to this known sacred place because he is running for his life. Just one chapter earlier Elijah had a sacred show down on another mountain with the priests of the god Baal. Not just a handful few priests, but 450 priests of the god Baal. This is not some quaint religious debate, where ultimately the two sides, ‘agree to disagree’. The scene on the mountain is contentious, think about standing in-front of 450 people who think very differently than you, talk about peer pressure. There are echoes of David verses Goliath; this is reminiscent of Moses standing in front of the Pharaoh stammering but demanding to let God’s people go; this is Rocky Balboa in every Rocky movie ever made. The odds are against Elijah, 450 to one, he is outnumbered, but not outwitted. In fact, he prevails, the priests are defeated swiftly. And when the smoke settles, and Queen Jezebel who worshiped at the altar of Baal, hears that she is not on the winning side, she puts a price on Elijah’s head. So, Elijah runs as fast as his feet will carry him.

Elijah does not go to just any place he goes to the very location where God formed a special relationship with his ancestors. He goes to the very ground he knows is sacred. And there he sits under a broom tree. Actually he pouts under that tree, I have a 6 and 4 year old, I know pouting when I hear it. **You can hear it in** Elijah's response, not once but twice. When asked what he is doing there on the mountain of God, he offers this rehearsed speech, how he has been so **zealous**, done **everything** God has asked, and how he is no better off than any other prophet who came before him. The most telling part is near the end when Elijah says, 'I alone am left, and they are seeking my life.' He went to the mountain because he was afraid and wanted to be in a place he could be certain he would encounter God. Where is that place you go, where you are certain to encounter God?

But the interesting truth about going to a place holds that sacred significance is that the sacred does not always stir in the same way. God does not conform or perform to our expectations. God is not bound by the past. We hear about these natural phenomena that happened in between Elijah's two speeches. The wind and fire had been visible, tangible ways of encountering God up to this point in scripture. The wind think here of the spirit surfing over creation. The fire in a bush that is not consumed as God's voice called out to Moses or the pillar of fire that leads the Israelites in the wilderness. These were supposed to be the default and dependable ways to encounter God. I imagine Elijah's spirit surging each time, think **finally** God is going to come and hear me out. But it is only when Elijah encountered the exact opposite of the norm, the sheer silence or the still small voice, that Elijah knows God is drawing near. Notice, the silence does not contain God either, but is a prelude to God's arrival.

And God listened to Elijah and promptly sent him back to his ministry, back to the place from which he ran. The sacred may not always conform to our expectations, but God will often sing a new note or melody our hearts recognize. The past does not dictate our future, but it can offer some direction. The past becomes powerful not because it tells us or predicts what is to come, but it can sometimes grant us the confidence to venture into the unknown of tomorrow.

Part of the lived truth of the month of June is to live at the intersection of the past and future. A short survey here, raise your hand if you have been to a graduation service or party already this month? Or are planning to? Or raise your hand if you have been to a wedding? Part of the power of these moments that happen traditionally at this time is they connect together the past, present and future. We look at a baby picture at graduation parties, well because they are cute, but they also hold a powerful way of seeing how the past, present and future is embodied in the graduate. We re-tell or remember our first date the night of the rehearsal dinner because we realize that the past, present and future are embodied within us and our very soon to be spouse. We realize the moment is fleeting, sacred, holy, and fleeting. Yet, just because we cannot capture the moment in a jar and store it away for our control nevertheless the significance of that moment will forever be etched on our hearts. Just because we grow and change, does not mean it is futile to go back to the place where those holy moments took place. We roam around our college campus, or the church where we were married, or city where you met your wife who is your best friend, and while we might have changed and it might not be exactly the same, God still can stir and God's presence still comes to us. Perhaps not in the same way, like for Elijah who might have thought the wind or earthquake or fire were going to be God's calling card, but Elijah still encounters God. Like

for me, as I drove around the Twin Cities this week, I still sensed God, not as I did almost ten years ago, but in a way that brought a smile to my face.

In the end, one question is whether we are able to listen, to listen for God to sing out with a melody that strangely warms our hearts in a familiar way, even while the harmony sounds different to our ears. Elijah received a lesson in listening on the mountain and he heard. And this week, as the memories came flooding my imagination, there was an invitation to listen in a new way that felt familiar. I heard the song of a seminary but this time the wisdom and tenor of Lutheran voices. I heard God's song as Ethan or Olivia excitedly told me about their day over thin fiber optic lines. How might God be singing in a new way in your family, in your job, or among us as a church? How is God singing out to you as you travel to camp or graduations or weddings or reunions and especially when you come to church in a way that is at once both recognizable and sounds new? Friends, the lesson of listening for God cannot be reduced to formulas, but neither can we stop all together trying to hear. Like Elijah, when we sense God might be drawing near can we venture out of our caves and into the very presence of God. We, like Elijah, when we sense God is singing in a new way that is not confined by the past, can help each other have the courage to hear. We, like Elijah are called to listen this week. May our ears be clear to hear? May our hearts be open to the song? And may our lives be guided by a presence that sometimes shouts and sometimes comes after the silence.

Thanks be to God. And let all God's people say, "Amen!"