1 Kings 19:1-18
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Something Real in All the Noise[1]

For decades immediately following the glorious Temple dedication in last week's text, the kingdom thrives, and Solomon is known throughout the region for his wisdom. He goes on to marry hundreds of wives, including a daughter of Pharaoh, and scripture tells us that those "wives turned away his heart after other gods, and his heart was not true to the Lord his God."[2] Solomon builds shrines for those other gods and worships them alongside his wives. And God is not pleased, to put it mildly. Consequently, under the rule of Solomon's son, Rehoboam, the kingdom splits in two, with Israel to the north and Judah to the south. The rulers of the two kingdoms do not learn from Solomon's missteps, so God raises up prophets in the north and in the south to speak God's word to them, to call them and their people back to the covenant and back to God. Among the most well-known of these prophets is Elijah. We do not get a call story for Elijah. We simply meet him at the beginning of chapter 17 of 1 Kings when he confronts King Ahab of Israel and declares that a drought is coming if Ahab does not change his ways. Ahab is married to Jezebel, a Sidonian princess who worships Baal and expects her husband to do the same. And he does, although scripture wants us to know that he did evil in God's sight while he was single, too. In chapter 18, Elijah has an epic throwdown with Jezebel's prophets where he taunts them and their god and then slaughters them, metaphorically and literally. [Read 1 Kings 19:1-18]

It's a dramatic pivot. Moments before our text begins, Elijah is triumphant. He has made a public mockery of Jezebel's prophets, and the drought has come to an end. No one should doubt God's power; the grand show should have proven that to everyone. And yet Elijah flees in fear mixed with despair. He heads away from Israel to Judah, convinced that he is no better than those who came before him. While we're not told exactly what or who he is comparing himself to, it seems that he is devastated that he could not turn the

[1] With thanks to Bruce Springsteen in *Deliver Me from Nowhere*.
[2] 1 Kings 11:4, NRSVue

tide, that he has been unsuccessful in getting idolatrous leaders to see the light and repent. He collapses under a broom tree and is met by an angel who touches him and tells him to eat and drink.

Elijah then heads to Mount Horeb, also known as Mount Sinai, where God met Moses in a burning bush and where God made covenant with the Israelites in the giving of the Ten Commandments. There in a cave, Elijah is summoned outside to witness the Lord passing by. God then puts on a show of his own in a powerful wind followed by an earthquake followed by fire, and yet, we are told that God is not in any of these noisy spectacles. Finally, Elijah is met by a "sheer silence." "Thin. Quiet," as the Common English Bible reads. And God, it seems is there. Twice God asks Elijah, "What are you doing here?" And Elijah responds, "I alone am left." *I alone am left.*

I'm guessing Elijah's response is a familiar one. When the world seems too daunting, when there are parents to be tended and worried about, when there are children to be tended and worried about, when there are deadlines to be met, when vulnerable neighbors are being terrorized, when there are bills to be paid, when there are diagnoses to be faced, or when there are ruptured relationships to be mended or grieved, it is quite expected that we might believe that we alone are left, that we have been left to shoulder it all, all by ourselves.

My husband Dave and I recently saw the Bruce Springsteen biopic, *Deliver Me from Nowhere*. As you may know the movie is based on a moment in Springsteen's early career when he insists on recording a darker, brooding album on his own in a rental house outside his hometown of Long Branch, New Jersey. The movie sensitively and honestly deals with depression and with Springsteen's wrestling with the ghosts of his childhood. But that's only part of what I carried with me from those two hours. At one point in the movie, Springsteen turns to his manager Jon Landau and says, "I'm trying to find something real in all the noise." And Landau says something like, "Ok. You make the music, and I'll handle the noise." And when I left the theater, I found myself in awe of the other characters who come alongside Springsteen in quiet, supportive, steadfast ways to do just that. They bring him food; they listen to his dreams and help him talk about his nightmares; they encourage him to rest; they draw him out for moments of joy and laughter; and they eventually lovingly confront him about his need to seek professional help to face the demons of mental illness that threaten to

undo him entirely. These friends help him find what is real in all the noise. In fact, I would argue that their love, friendship, and faithfulness are the real in all the noise.

Springsteen, Boss though he may be, is not Elijah. I am struck however by the way God also surrounds Elijah with a faithful cast of others who show up and demonstrate that Elijah is not alone. Up to this point, Elijah has been all about the noise. His confrontation with Jezebel's prophets had to have been an incredibly noisy spectacle. When he is surrounded by the relative quiet of the wilderness, others begin to show up. No one brings back the noise; no one argues with Elijah or tells him he's being overly dramatic or insists that he's just wrong about being alone. At God's leading, they show up and show him. God sends an angel who nudges Elijah with a gentle touch and a freshly baked cake and a jar of water. Even creation plays a part in helping Elijah see what is real and what is simply noise. And then God assures Elijah that he is not the only one standing firm in the faith. God names Hazael, Jehu, and Elijah's successor, Elisha and tells Elijah that there are still 7000 who have not bowed to worship Baal or stooped to kiss Jezebel's ring.

At the beginning of worship we were invited to catch our breath and pray and watch and listen as the bell banner was carried in. I hope you were able to hear the gentle ringing of the bells. As you know these bells were lovingly tied on by many of you in memory of dear ones who have gone before us, ones who have helped us find and remember what is real in the face of so much noise. Each year around this time we celebrate All Saints Sunday, giving thanks to God for the "cloud of witnesses" who have walked before us and alongside us in the life of faith. We lift up the names of church members who have died in the past year, and in a very real way we remember how God promises never to leave us on our own. The bells are not loud, so we may have to strain to hear them in the thick of the noise. And yet they still ring, offering us gentle yet persistent reminders of what is real and good and true.

If I am honest, there are days when I think I would love for God to show up in some spectacularly brash and noisy way to set things right. There are also days when those who have kissed the ring of noise, idolatry, bluster, meanness, and ugliness seem to far outnumber those who have not. I can easily convince myself that I alone am left. And then by the grace of God, I am nudged back into the quiet and steady lives of the saints, the

ones who have gone before me and the ones who nudge me even now in the way I should go. I see saints serving in the food pantry at CCM, saints filling and delivering overflowing grocery bags for families at Coltrane-Webb. I see saints driving friends to doctors appointments, radiation treatments, and worship. I see saints teaching children that Jesus loves them no matter what and how to sing praises to God with their whole hearts. I see saints holding leaders accountable and thinking creatively about what it means to partner with and learn from others who pray, dress, speak, or love differently than we do. And I see this table carefully laden with juice and lovingly baked bread. This meal points us back to our Lord Jesus Christ who loved us enough to become one of us and stare down all the noise and ugliness the empire could throw at him, including death itself. This meal reminds us of the meal the resurrected Christ shared with baffled disciples, who recognized him only after he broke bread with scarred and tender hands. This meal nourishes us and nudges us out to live and sacrifice and serve and give with courage and joy in Christ's name here and now. And this meal invites us to look forward with joyful anticipation to the time when we will be gathered with all God's beloved ones beyond the noise to sit and rest and feast and savor what is good and what is real with the Lord of all. This meal is not offered only to the powerful or to the perfect but to everyone who is hungry for life and hope and love and forgiveness. It is a gift freely given and lovingly offered by the Lord of all who knows that the journey often seems too much for us. And when we share this gift with one another by serving each other and passing trays in this chancel and in the pews, this meal serves as one more reminder that we are not alone amid the noise. For, dear ones, we are even now surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses, fellow travelers on the way, those who love us and listen to us and pray for us and urge us on and nurture us and stick with us and show us what is good and right and real even as we do our faithful best to do the same for them. By the grace of God, the noise cannot outlast what is real, what is good and right and just. By the grace of God, the noise will not drown out the bells.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.