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1 Kings 19:11-13
Greenland Hills United Methodist Church

Backpack Impact

1 Kings 19:11-13 New Revised Standard Version

God said, "Go out and stand on the mountain before the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by." Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire 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. Then there came a voice to him that said, "What are you doing here, Elijah?"

Some of our students have already gone back to school, and some start this week or very soon. Today, I have brought my backpack with me with some things in it that help me remember the impact that I can make in this new beginning. Things that help me remember who I am and whose I am. Things that help me remember that I am God's beloved child and that I am loved by God. Last week I brought my journal that has quotations and Bible verses that inspire me and keep me focused on God and on God's call on my life to love God and love my neighbor.

This week, in my backpack, is something that I always have with me. It has a Bible and a meditation app. I use it to stay connected to God throughout my day by reading my Bible whenever I have a free minute and also to help me slow down and pray in my meditation app. It is my cell phone. My cell phone feels like another limb to my body. I always have it, and I can use it for good or for evil.

Today, our world seems so much bigger. With our cell phones, information can be accessed so easily and we know so much more. We have this unprecedented level of communication and entertainment right at our fingertips. Despite this marvelous technology, I wonder how many of us are starving for the true connection that only happens through face to face interaction. Have you heard of the still face experiment? It was performed in 1975 by Dr. Edward Tronick and was a groundbreaking study of child development. Moms and infants would have a normal interaction. The mom would point and the baby would laugh. The baby would point and the mom would laugh. Then, the mom would turn away and would have a completely expressionless face. Within seconds, the baby would try to elicit some sort of response from the mother. The baby would laugh, reach out, point, but there would be no response from the mom. Within two minutes, the baby would begin to show fear, anxiety, anger, and cry out. Then the baby would begin to withdraw and turn away.

Today, we all have cell phones. But, do we have true connections? We look at screens that do not give us an emotional response, and many of us struggle with expressing our emotions. We don't know what to do so we withdraw and turn away. We need face to face interaction and emotional response. Digital media interaction used to begin at 4 years old. Now it begins at 4 months old. Studies show that our dependence on technology undermines self-awareness, weakens self-regulation and causes us to have more impulsive behavior. It diminishes social skills because we have less face to face time. It undermines empathy, and stunts motivation. We play a game or surf social media, or make a tik tok when we want to tune out the world. We don't want to acknowledge our feelings so we avoid our feelings by connecting only with our phones.

I was a chaplain at Children's Medical Center for a summer while I was studying to be a pastor. There was a group of us who were summer interns and there was this one guy I did not like. He was studying to be a priest and I thought he was useless. He was always in the cafeteria reading a book. Sure, it was a book about God, but he wasn't talking with the patients, he wasn't

on the hospital floor, he wasn't doing what he should have been doing. One day all the summer interns were meeting with the supervisor. And he called out this guy for what a great job he was doing. I was flabbergasted. The supervisor talked about walking by a room where a child was dying and the family was gathered around the hospital bed. And this other intern was standing by the family with both of his hands on people's backs. He wasn't saying anything wise, he wasn't praying, he was standing there with his hands on people's backs.

The supervisor talked about how wonderful that was because he wasn't trying to fix it, he wasn't trying to say the right thing, he was fully present in the midst of the pain and showing with his hands on the family's backs that he was with them and that God was with them. And it was such a clear image to me that it made me reconsider my opinion of the man. I could see him there. I could feel what that was like. He might have wanted to run back to the cafeteria and to his books and maybe even his phone. He might have wanted to walk right on by that hospital room where there was such pain. But he didn't. He entered the pain. He entered the hurt. And he knew what to do. He knew that he was going to stay there, and to be a presence for that family, and to show with his hands that he was with them. He was going to be a reminder for that family that God was with them, that God was with them in the silence. With his presence and his silence, this intern was useful.

In our scripture today Elijah is hiding out. He is on the run. Elijah had just finished the contest with the prophets of Baal. Do you remember that one? Elijah and the 450 prophets of Baal have a contest to see whose god is the real deal. They set up two altars, one for the prophets of Baal and one for Elijah, the prophet of God. Elijah and a Baal prophet each kill a bull and put it on the altar. The contest will be to see which god can light the fire. The prophets of Baal dance and shout, but no fire.

Now it is Elijah's turn and he tells the people watching to come close. He digs a big trench around the altar and fills it with water and pours water all over the bull and the wood. Then Elijah prays and a fire comes down, burns up the offering, the wood, the stones, the dust, and even licks up the water in the trench. Then comes the part we mostly skip over in the children's version, Elijah has the prophets of Baal seized and Elijah kills all 450 of them. Since the prophets of Baal were Jezebel's prophets, she is not pleased and vows to kill Elijah. So, Elijah runs and after a day he is exhausted and hopeless. He says that he wants to die because he is no better than his ancestors.

Elijah had been this person of strength and determination, but now he is hungry, exhausted, dejected, and even suicidal. He goes to sleep and an angel wakes him up. There is a freshly baked cake and a jar of water on a hot stone beside Elijah. The angel tells him to eat and Elijah does and then he goes back to sleep. Later the angel wakes him with more food and water and the angel tells him he will need his strength.

With that food to nourish him, Elijah walks for forty days and forty nights and makes his way to Mount Horeb where Moses is said to have received the Ten Commandments. Elijah finds a cave and spends the night. God comes to him and asks, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" Elijah says, "I have been very passionate for God, the god of hosts; because the Israelites have abandoned your covenant. They have torn down your altars, and they have murdered your prophets with the sword. I'm the only one left, and now they want to take my life too!" (1 Kings 19:10 CEB).

God tells Elijah to go out and stand on the mountain because God is about to pass by. And earth, wind and fire show up. Not the band, but the elemental forces. And then the sound of sheer silence. The Common English Bible says there is a gentle, whispering voice. And

Elijah wraps his face in his mantle and goes out and stands at the entrance of the cave.

Let's stop and think about "sheer silence." As I consider the impact that I can make in this new beginning of the new school year, I want to focus on that sheer silence. I don't want to fill my silence with clutter. I want to fill it with something more meaningful. My daughter, Madeleine, has been working on her Girl Scout Gold Award application. The mission for Girl Scouts is to build girls of courage, confidence and character, who make the world a better place. Here at Greenland Hills we can make an impact with courage, compassion, and connection. When we realize that something in our life is taking us away from God, we need courage to have the discipline to stop. Courage to choose a different way when necessary. We need compassion to be kind to all. To be kind and empathetic. How do the students feel who are all alone on their first day at a new school? I want to teach empathy to our kids. To show them the characteristics that God has and that God wants us to share. How we treat other people teaches our kids how they can treat other people. This week I have felt compassion for teachers. To make an impact we also need to make a connection to other people, to our community, and to God. Connection is about being intentional to be present with people in our world.

Yesterday I rode twenty miles on a bike on purpose. My son Everett is in Boy Scouts and his troop is preparing for a 50 mile bike ride. For this journey, I do something I usually don't do. I leave my cell phone in the car because I have to pay attention to what I am doing. I have to focus on that bike ride or I will put myself in danger. I have to focus on the path ahead, and just that path. I can't worry about what is happening behind me or above me. I can only pull my cloak to my face and stand at the mouth of the cave as I listen to God telling me to slow down, to pay attention, to be present, to have courage, to have compassion, and to connect with other people. As our children begin a new school year, may we all pause for a new beginning – a beginning that makes more room for the sheer silence of God. Let's all pause for a moment of silence. Thanks be to God, Amen.