



Listen Through the Fear

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Sermon Delivered at *The Garden Church* in San Pedro, CA on June 19, 2016

Scripture Reading: 1 Kings 19:1-15

“God’s love goes forth not only to good people, but to evil people. God loves not only those who are in heaven, but also those who choose hell, for God is everywhere and forever the same.”

–Emanuel Swedenborg, *True Christianity* §43¹

When I was a child, I was very afraid of wind, and earthquakes, and fire. My fear of fire was probably primary—growing up in a house with a wood stove and attention to fire safety, it was ingrained in my psyche at a very young age that fire was something to be careful with and that if it was out of control it could be very harmful. I remember having a reoccurring nightmare that people were marching around our house with gigantic rhubarb leaves, which were on fire. Strangely it wasn’t that there were people marching around our home, or the oversized produce that scared me, it was the fire.

These fears subsided some over the years, though bits of them still remain. One can say, “Don’t be afraid” and work to not respond out of fear. But there is also some reality to these things. I learned that some of these of the fears were legitimized, when a friend’s house burned to the ground, when the windstorm blew a tree onto a neighbor’s house, and seeing San Francisco after soon after the large earthquake in the late ‘80s. These things I was afraid of were real.

I have been struggling with feeling afraid this week, and walking with others who are afraid. Afraid for our communities, afraid for our nation, afraid of the ramifications of seemingly greater and greater divides between people and groups, afraid of guns, and violence. I’ve been feeling afraid for the children and teens I know who have come out or might. I’ve been hearing from my queer friends and people of color about their fears, and the fears that they live with day in and day out being confirmed. There are things to be afraid of.

¹ Swedenborg, Emanuel. *True Christianity*. New Century Edition ed. Vol. I. West Chester: Swedenborg Foundation, 2008.

The prophet Elijah in our scripture today was afraid. And he had good reason. After having a showdown with the prophets of Bael and winning, Queen Jezebel is not happy and is after him, and he's on the run. He's so afraid of being caught and killed that he runs out into the desert, prepared to die.

It was out there in the desert, in his place of utter despair, that an angel of the Lord comes to him. God meets him out there in the desert—fear and all—and provides for him. An angel brings him water and a cake baked on hot stones, and nourishes him and provides for the next leg of the journey.

And then the Lord asked, “What are you doing here Elijah?”

I kind of picture Elijah rolling his eyes and getting a little impatient, like, “*Haven't you been paying attention, Lord, to all that's going on?*”

And so 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.”

He's been through this big and difficult encounter and been faithful, and people are after him. He's feeling desperate and afraid, and the Lord has the audacity to ask him “What are you doing?” “I've been very zealous!” is the prophet's reply. *Do something* about this; I have been doing what you told me, but now I'm going to die. He's afraid.

From an evolutionary perspective, the emotion of fear protected humans from predators and other threats to the survival of the species. So it is no wonder that certain dangers evoke that emotion, since fear helps protect us and is therefore adaptive, functional, and necessary. However, there is another important aspect of emotions to consider that, in the case of fear, may be important to decision making as well as survival. That is, when an emotion is triggered, it has an impact on our judgments and choices in situations.

What do you do when you're afraid?

Close off?

Run away?

Push people away?

Go into a cave?

Try to fix it?

In the wake of the Orlando shootings early last Sunday morning, and witnessing the national grief and trauma this week, I've felt sadness and frustration and fear. And my response is that I want to fix it. Make it all better and make sure no one ever gets hurt again.

Maybe if I could rally enough signatures on gun control, or if I could have enough conversations about the need to be inclusive of all people in religious communities, or if I could change the mind of that person in my life who's political views terrify me, or if I could craft the perfect Facebook post, maybe, just maybe then I could escape some of the fear and heartbreak that I am feeling.

On Wednesday I was talking to a dear friend and fellow preacher and we were sharing our fears and sharing our wrestling with our response. She was my water and fresh bread in the wilderness. She reminded me that, "our trust in God and our willingness to open our heart up to the heartbreak is the only thing you have to give your people."

We are not always safe and there are things to fear. There is pain, there is suffering, there are things that need to change—and we are not alone. God meets us in the fear, God is present with us in the pain, God is the force of love that takes the heartbreak and despair and transforms it into defiant love that does not run away from the fear, but stays with it and audaciously claims God's love is stronger.

Yes, like Elijah I'm so tempted to run away and hide in a cave. Or busy myself with things so I don't have to really meet the fear or listen and feel the heartbreak.

But here's the thing—even in the cave, God shows up.

God shows up to Elijah in the cave and asks, "What are you doing here Elijah?" And when Elijah gives his long list, God invites him to the entrance to the cave, because "the Lord is going to pass by."

And then comes all the chaos, the wind, the earthquakes, the fire. And Elijah didn't hear God in any of it, there was too much noise. And then, then there was a sheer silence.

We talk each week at the Garden Church about the difference between quiet and silence. Quiet is devoid of any noise or chaos, set apart and separate from the world, safe from all that might interrupt it, which is never the case in our outdoor sanctuary, with the wind, and the traffic, the birds and the helicopters. Silence on the other hand is something much deeper, much more profound. Silence is about listening, silence is about intention; silence invites us, even in the middle of the noise of the city, even in the chaos of the world, even within the chatter of our own fears clattering around in our heads, to listen for God. Listen for, watch for how God is always passing by. It was after that sheer silence that God's question came again: "What are you doing here Elijah?"

It is in these places of deep listening, of sheer silence, where we meet and face our deepest fears, where we encounter ourselves, where we can encounter God. Not through immediately trying to jump in and fix it, not by running away to hide in our own version of a cave, but through staying present, present to the heartbreak, present to the love, present to the human beings around us and listening.

As a straight ally, it is always, and particularly in a week like this, my most important job to listen. To listen to my LGBTQ friends share and tell me about how they are experiencing this act of violence, not to try to fix it or make it all okay, but to deeply listen to the pain and the suffering. Listen to the stories that are different than mine and hear God in silence, in the words of others. As we practice listening together, I want to share with you the words of my friend and colleague Amy Kumm-Hanson.

On being queer and being safe—by Amy Kumm-Hanson

I came of age in the '90s. I knew I was queer around the same time that Matthew Shepard was brutally murdered in Laramie, Wyoming. And Wyoming is not that far, geographically or ideologically, from where I was raised in Montana. This was before widespread usage of the Internet and way before the age of social media, so this publicized case was the only example I had of being gay.

This was before "It Gets Better." Ellen DeGeneres had come out on network television, but to a teenager in Montana, the idea that you could be accepted and even loved for who you loved, was about as realistic as living on the moon.

(Years later) I have celebrated marriage equality in the capital building of Minnesota. I have marched in pride parades. I've spoken publicly about what it is to be queer, a Christian, and to be human. Just one week ago, I married the love of my life in a ceremony with over 200 of our friends and family present. I have been filled with life.

And yet, just a mere seven days after I professed my love to my wife in front of my nearest and dearest, I was reminded again of death. I am not a child anymore, but that child inside of me who fears for her safety and her life is still there.

*I don't have a solution. I don't really have words right now. I need allies to speak the truth about the events in Orlando. I need allies to attend to my safety and those of my community. I need allies to continue to create safe spaces for all youth to feel loved, but especially queer youth, because the world can be cruel.'*²

Friends, we all need to work together to create spaces for all youth to feel loved, but especially queer youth, because the world can be cruel. We need to create a world where people are not shot, but especially people with colored skin, because the world can be racist.

We need to create a world where all are housed and clothed and fed, but especially those that are suffering from mental illness and addiction, because the world can be apathetic. We need to work together to listen.

Hearing God in each other. Seeing God in each other. Responding to our fears by listening deeply, and as we listen deeply to see the humanity of all people.

² Kumm-Hanson, Amy. "On Being Queer and Being Safe." *Diary of a Contemplative*. June 13, 2016. Accessed September 4, 2016. <http://amychanson.blogspot.com/2016/06/on-being-queer-and-being-safe.html>.

In 1997, the Swedenborgian Church of North America, the denomination this church is a part of, ordained our first openly gay minister. But before that, in 1986, eleven years earlier, some important listening happened that led to a fundamental shift. In 1975, the first woman was ordained. Then in 1986, rather than adding another classification of people on the list that we ordain, men, now women, now gay as well as straight, there was a transformative change to the approach.

In the words of Dr. Jim Lawrence: *“we don’t ordain gay people, nor straight people; we don’t ordain women, and we don’t ordain men, neither do we ordain persons of color or white folks: we ordain **people** who are trained and prepared to offer skilled ministry in the world.”*

This change in the policy of one organization by no means has fixed all the problems or changed all our hearts and minds. But I believe it is an example of the shift that can happen when we begin to really listen, to show up, to see the humanity in everyone and see people first as people. To make this shift, over and over again, in ourselves and in our world, we have to deeply acknowledge and work on the areas where we, individually, and collectively, in our own prejudices and in our systemic systems are oppressing and marginalizing people.

In listening deeply to other people, especially those whose experiences of life and the world vary from our own, we come face to face with the ways that we are all interconnected. We realize that we need to—in the words of Lilla Watson, an Aboriginal woman from Australia—continue to work alongside each other for liberation, *“because your liberation is tangled up in mine.”*

We’re human first, children of God. We belong to God and we belong to each other. In the fear and the chaos we can forget that. Which is why we need to be with the silence. Even if it means coming face to face with our fears.

“What are you doing here Elijah?” God asks again.

Even after the chaos of the wind and earthquake and fire, when God asks him the same question, his answer is the same, “I am very zealous for the Lord.”

Okay, the Lord says, “Go, return on your way.”

It's not necessarily epic or earth-shattering on the other side of silence, when God's voice speaks to us,

“Go on your way.”

“Go on a walk.”

“Forgive.”

“Change your mind.”

“Be gentle.”

“Keep showing up.”

“Hug your children.”

“Slow down enough to see others.”

“Let your heart break.”

“Let your heart be transformed.”

“Go on your way.”

Or in the words of Mary Oliver:

*“It doesn't have to be the blue iris,
it could be weeds in a vacant lot,
or a few small stones; just pay attention,
then patch a few words together and don't try to make them elaborate,*

*this isn't a contest, but the doorway into thanks,
and a silence in which another voice may speak."*

—**Mary Oliver, *Thirst***³

³ Oliver, Mary. *Thirst: Poems*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2006.