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## **Finding Your Cave: Listening Spaces**

This morning we start our Lenten journey of Listening, with an invitation to go deep, to quiet the noise that is seemingly always present in our lives and be intentional about connecting with God, focusing each week on the how or where or what of listening for God's voice, and discerning our own. We'll explore different spiritual practices in and outside of worship, and try new things, different ways of praying and reading scripture. You're welcome to give as much or as little of yourself to this series and its exercises... but know that you will only get out in proportion to what you are willing to put in.

It is my hope and prayer that through this season, your heart will be opened to connecting with God on a deeper level – not that you would learn in your head more about God, but that you will feel more in your heart the presence and moving of God's spirit, as we listen for the still small voice of God and maybe even find our own true selves along the way.

So, let us come and rest, come and listen.

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### Psalm 5

Give ear to my words, O Lord; give heed to my sighing.

Listen to the sound of my cry, my King and my God, for to you I pray.

O Lord, in the morning you hear my voice; in the morning I plead my case to you, and watch.

For you are not a God who delights in wickedness; evil will not sojourn with you.

The boastful will not stand before your eyes; you hate all evildoers.

You destroy those who speak lies; the Lord abhors the bloodthirsty and deceitful.

But I, through the abundance of your steadfast love, will enter your house, I will bow down toward your holy temple in awe of you.

Lead me, O Lord, in your righteousness because of my enemies; make your way straight before me.

*The second scripture in this series will be read in an abridged "lectio divina" format—which means "divine reading." We will hear the scripture read once and then we will let that resonate for a bit with some music for the inward journey. What words or phrases popped*

out for you in the reading? Feel free to scribble in your bulletin with that word or phrase if you wish. When the music is over, we will hear the scripture read again before the sermon.

### 1 Kings 19:8-16

<sup>8</sup> Elijah got up and went forty days and forty nights to Horeb the mount of God.

<sup>9</sup>At that place he came to a cave, and spent the night there. Then the word of the Lord came to him, saying, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" <sup>10</sup>He 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." <sup>11</sup>He 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; <sup>12</sup>and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence. <sup>13</sup>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?" <sup>14</sup>He 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." <sup>15</sup>Then the Lord said to him, "Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus; when you arrive, you shall anoint Hazael as king over Aram. <sup>16</sup>Also you shall anoint Jehu son of Nimshi as king over Israel; and you shall anoint Elisha son of Shaphat of Abel-meholah as prophet in your place.

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Prayer is a funny thing... for some, a time of silent prayer is the most (*pause*) © **awkward** moment within a worship service, while for others, it's as basic and refreshing as breathing. There are some who think prayer should be reserved for pastors, and other "holy" people trained in the art, or maybe who just have more practice at it. Others who were raised in a tradition of vocal prayer, might feel very comfortable praying, not only by themselves, but also aloud in front of a group – some even slip into a "a prayer language" if you will. There was a woman from my previous church who's prayers sounded like she had swallowed the King James version of the Bible, the thou's and thy's, whilst, and waiteth rolled off her tongue as if that was the way she always spoke.

Prayer is, at its heart a conversation with God, however elegant or simple, rehearsed or off the cuff, packed with words or silent... when we pray, we are connecting our heart with the great divine presence and power – pouring out our struggles and joys, and hopefully, letting God into the quiet center of our soul as we listen for God's leading and gentle guidance.

So often, in worship or in private, prayer becomes an exercise of talking at God... pouring **ourselves** out, our complaints, our heartbreaks, our desires, and our needs... Don't get me wrong, there is NOTHING wrong with that... it's good to bring all of that to God... the question is, *what follows that baring of the soul?* If prayer has become an exercise in leaving a voicemail message for God... when our message is over, do we simply hang up, done with prayer and go about our business, waiting for God to respond... IF so, I believe we're missing

a critical step... LISTENING. Listening for the still small voice of God – God's response to our struggles and questions of life.

But listening, deep and open hearted listening is HARD! In our over programed lives and over stimulated society, we struggle with quiet. Once the silence begins, our minds start racing, running wild with our thoughts and our to-do lists, and as our mind wanders, we wonder if this prayer thing is a waste of time. We don't really know what to do in the silence, we don't know what we're listening for, or how to listen for God. Our Bible – especially the Old Testament – is full of people talking with God, having full out conversations with the Divine Spirit... so let's start there and see what we can learn and apply to our own experience of prayer.

Our scripture this morning is a favorite of many, where we hear about Elijah going to the mountaintop to encounter God. Elijah was used to speaking with God in prayer... he was a Hebrew prophet who would relay to the people God's messages for them... which made him a bit unpopular among the people (since he would often tell them they were doing things wrong and needed to change their ways), and it made him a political target (as God's messages were sometimes bad news for those in power). By the 9<sup>th</sup> century BCE, Elijah's ministry had gotten him into a great deal of trouble with King Ahab and Queen Jezebel, who had sworn an oath to kill him.

Fearing for his life, he cries out to God in prayer and is instructed to go to the cave on the mountaintop, for God is about to pass by. Now this cave on Mt. Horeb, also known as Mt. Sinai isn't just any old cave. It's the same cave that, tradition has it, Moses had his encounter with God in Exodus chapter 33. This cave would have been known as a holy place, a "thin space" if you will, a place where you can almost touch the divine – and it is there that Elijah is directed to seek God's council. Elijah goes to the mountain and a storm comes, but God is not in the wind, the mountain quakes, but God is not in the earthquake, a fire rages, but God is not in the fire. And then, from the sound of sheer silence, God speaks. The story is trying to tell us that God's voice does not necessarily come with the ancient equivalent of flashing neon signs. Sometimes it comes in the still small voice, and if we don't quiet the chatter long enough to listen, we might miss it altogether.

Bishop Yvette Flunder, senior pastor of the City of Refuge UCC, an inner-city church in Oakland, California is not only passionate about justice and leading her church to be open and affirming, but she is a woman of deep faith and passionate spirituality. When asked how to listen for God and discern God's voice, she responded that in our walk with God, there is always mystery, and within that mystery, God speaks to us deeper than WORDS. Bishop Flunder said that listening for God is more about listening deeply within yourself – it's less of a "hearing" and more of a "knowing" – a deep sense of assurance, a resonance of the Spirit of God in us with our own spirit. In order to connect with this deep sense of knowing God, she recognizes a need for private time, personal time, a time to get away from the everyday clamor and pressures of the world – to find a cave of our own --- but, she warns, that even in a cave, we still can't escape from our own demons, guilt, and shame. But it is in an authentic space of prayer where we can embrace and manage our own fear and doubt, wrestle with

our own “stuff”, and ask God the real questions of meaning and purpose that we’re struggling with.

Do you know where your cave is? Have you found that place where you can go to escape, remove yourself from the hustle and bustle, and just be you, present with yourself, listening for the still small voice of God? This week, I invite you to find your cave and spend some time there each day. Maybe it’s at your kitchen table, or in a den or living room, or while you’re out walking. You’re welcome to come and pray in the Sanctuary or chapel if you like... the church is open weekdays 8am to 9:30pm! Some people have found their cave enough times that they are even able to “steal away to Jesus” as Bishop Flunder calls it, while in a room full of people, able to shut out the noise and distractions and quiet the soul.

No matter where that cave space is for you, once you’re there, just take a few breaths, do your best to silence the racing thoughts, and settle into yourself. If you need a prompt or prayer to center you, try a meditative favorite from Psalm 46, “Be still and know that I am God.” Once you’ve found your quiet center, I invite you to ask God one question... one question that you are wrestling most with in your life... something that you need God’s help moving forward with... something like, “What do you want me to let go of?” If you want, write your question down in a prayer journal, that way you can come back to it later.

Finally—and this is the hard part—be willing to hear an answer. Be so willing that you will literally be open to “hearing” God in whatever form God chooses to address you, even if it’s entirely unexpected or unconventional. Be so willing that you will remain watchful throughout the day for a response.

You don’t need to spend hours in prayer; just find that cave and stay there long enough to be open, feeling in your gut that you are truly willing to receive a response. Bring your question to God, and then, just go about your day. Pay attention to life as it unfolds around you... to the music you’re listening to; to the conversations you’re having; to the inner voices running through your head. Be attentive and listen for God’s response. It may not be what you expect, or even what you want... but it will reflect the very nature and heart of the God we know and love.

As you discover your cave this week, your space of quiet listening, I pray that you may come to walk more closely and trust more deeply, the God who knows you from the inside out, maybe even better than you know yourself. Amen.