April 13, 2014 Norwalk

6th in a Lenten series on *Take Time to be Holy*

1 Kings 19:11-15

***Taking the time…for stillness***

(“be calm in thy soul”)

I wonder if ever, in the history of human pulses, there has been a parent who hasn't sooner or later said to a fidgeting child, “Would you please sit still?” And I wonder if there has ever, within the same span of human history, been a fidgeting child who didn't take such words under careful, albeit momentary consideration, before willfully – or perhaps even helplessly – fidgeting on?

The truth is, I'm not sure many of us have ever gotten very adept at this notion of stillness. For one thing, our culture doesn't value stillness. “Don't just sit there,” we are scolded, “DO something.” We are an active people, sub-dividing our daily planner pages into smaller and smaller increments, so we can schedule more and more things in, and – presumably – get more and more things ***done***. I'm embarrassed to admit how little time ago it was that I stopped feeling guilty when someone caught me in my study *merely* reading – as though that were somehow “goofing off.”

And we aren't merely busy; we are “multi-tasking” -- doing several things at once. Even watching TV – there is the show you turned on the set to see, and there is the tickertape streaming across the bottom of the screen, and you are inevitably doing something else at the same time – checking emails on your handheld; folding laundry or knitting or paying bills or something. Our computers are similarly configured – Microsoft years ago catching on to what Apple had already made possible – the ability to do several things at once, with all kinds of “windows” open simultaneously.

But is all this activity serving us? It might interest you to hear that some recent research is suggesting that multi-tasking actually destroys brain cells – more severely than smoking marijuana. Interesting, indeed.

Whether or not he was multi-tasking, the prophet Elijah was always, at the very least, tasking. Elijah served God in the 9th century B.C., routinely pushing back against the religious encroachments of Queen Jezebel who had her own ideas about the character of faithfulness. Their conflict reached a flashpoint, so to speak, in a contest atop Mt. Carmel where Elijah faced off against the prophets of the foreign God Baal whom the Queen had introduced from her homeland. The result of the contest was religiously satisfying, but politically suicidal. The Queen, understandably humiliated by the triumph of God and Elijah, set out to put an end to the prophet who had bested her. Elijah, recognizing his jeopardy...

...runs...

...as fast as he can...

...as far away as he can...

...40-days-and-40-nights away.

And when he grows too tired to run any more, he holes up in a mountain cave and goes to sleep. Whereupon God promptly wakes him up and asks, “Elijah, what are you doing here?”

That weighty question sort of landed on Elijah's last nerve. “What do you mean, 'what am I doing here?' I've worked my spirit to the bone for you, and what do I get for all my efforts? The Israelites have ignored me – and you, for that matter. Your altars have been torn down, your prophets have been killed. And now I, the only one left, am running for my life because the Queen is trying to kill me. And so *what I am doing* is trying to save my neck and catch up on my sleep – no thanks to you.”

“Do something for me,” God replied. I can only imagine the “you've got to be kidding” look that must have clouded Elijah's face. “Go out and stand on the mountain and watch for me to go by.” You heard the rest of the story. All kinds of pyrotechnics ensued – wind that tore the stones apart; an earthquake that ripped new canyons; fire and rain. But as hard as he looked, Elijah never caught a glimpse of God.

And then, according to the story, everything got still – even, apparently, Elijah. Stillness permeated the valley and the mountain air and the cave and ultimately reached all the way into Elijah's soul. And it was only then, held and centered in the stillness, that Elijah picked God out.

I think that's instructive. And it's not the way I have typically heard this story. Seduced by the poetic language, itself, I heard the narrator one by one name the noisy events and observe that “God was not in the wind, nor the earthquake nor the fire.” And I took the statement at face value: that God was not there. But what kind of a declaration is that? What happened to the Psalmist's observation that there is no place he could go where God would not already be?

*If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there. If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast.* (Psalm 139)

I don't think it is too much a flight of fancy to think he could just as easily have said, “if I get caught up in the earthquake or the fire, you are there.” And surely he would be correct.

The problem for Elijah, peering out through the opening of the cave, was not that God was absent from those particular spectacles, but that Elijah was too internally and externally distracted to find God. It wasn't until Elijah got quiet, and cleared away the emotional and psychological and circumstantial noise that he could make connections with the God who is, indeed, always present.

***Take time to be holy,*** the hymnwriter urges us; ***be calm in thy soul,***

***Each thought and each motive beneath God's control.***

***Thus led by His Spirit to fountains of love,***

***Thou soon shalt be fitted for service above.***

Be Calm in your soul. Reach out and clothe yourself in the confidence that, as the Psalmist put it, *God is our protection and our strength.*

*A constant helper in times of trouble.*

*We need not be afraid even if the earth shakes,*

*or the mountains fall into the sea,*

*even if the oceans roar and foam,*

*or the mountains shake at the raging sea.*

*"Be still and know that I am God.* (Psalm 46)

Be calm in your soul. Be still

It wasn't until Elijah was able to – to be still, calm, centered and quiet – that he was able to adequately finish that sentence: to ***know*** that God is God.

But my experience is that it rarely – if ever – simply gets quiet. Oh, the sounds outside might stop, or we can step into a room with good enough insulation to block out the noise, but that still leaves all the internal chatter that is the stuff of insomnia and general distraction. Stillness – a particular dimension of holiness that takes some practice; or, as the hymn suggests, takes some time.

Jesus, according to the gospel writers, routinely stepped aside to a “quiet” or “deserted” place. Even on that last night – which was to end so tumultuously with gruff voices and betrayal and rough handling and fear – was anchored in the garden where Jesus had taken them for stillness and prayer. For songwriters Gerry Goffin and Carole King stillness is “up on the roof” --

*I climb way up to the top of the stairs*

*And all my cares just drift right into space*

*On the roof, it's peaceful as can be*

*And there the world below can't bother me.*

*Up on the roof.*

The point is, it requires a choice. It takes the creation of a habit of stillness. But if that all sounds like work, there is some incentive. If Elijah is any example, we won't merely find peace and quiet; we won't merely see our cares drift into space; we will find ourselves to be in the very presence of God.

And so it is that we reach the end of the hymn's Lenten instruction. Be ***intentional***, it has implored us, about your spiritual life; ***take time*** to be holy. It will not happen simply because you sense it might be desirable, but because you determine it to be essential – and absent from from which life is not really living – and order your being and your doing in such a way as to allow it room.

***Take time, it has counseled us...***

***…for holiness***

***…for learning***

***…for community***

***...for stillness***

***...and you soon shall be fitted for service above.***

May it be so.