The Hebrew word for prophet (navi) suggests not so much the powers of a soothsayer or a fortuneteller, but rather the courage of a leader who speaks out on God’s behalf. Prophets predict not what is inevitable, but what are the likely consequences of wicked misuse of power.

Elijah was a prophet during the reign of King Ahab, who ruled Israel about a hundred years after King Solomon died and the Kingdom divided in two. Ahab is married to Jezebel, who leads him to worship Baal, the storm God, the one who causes rain.

And yet, the Israelites under King Ahab and Queen Jezebel are in the midst of a three-year drought. Ahab considers Elijah, who is critical of the worship of Baal, to be a troublemaker; but Elijah lobbs the same insult back at his king. This leads to a showdown of sorts – a contest – to determine which Deity – Baal or the God of Abraham and Jacob and Isaac – is the true God.

After all the people of Israel have been assembled as witnesses, Elijah asks them to choose between these two gods, saying that they are “limping between two opinions.” As obvious as this choice may seem to us, the people were in a quandary: their king and queen – presumed to be God’s chosen leaders – were pointing them in one direction; Elijah – God’s prophet – called them to a different way. Maybe it is no surprise, then, that when asked, the people say silent.

And so, the terms of the contest are set: the prophets of Baal will get the first chance to make a sacrifice to please Baal and cause it to rain; Elijah will go last. The odds are against him: 450 prophets against one. In the verses we passed over today, the prophets of Baal give it their best shot, pleading and crying out to their god, even cutting themselves and limping around; but at the end of the day, their voices went unheard.

Then, it is Elijah’s turn; he took twelve stones and rebuilt the altar of God, dug a trench, arranged the wood, butchered a bull, asked the people to fill four jars of water to pour over the offering and the wood (in the middle of a prolonged drought, no less) and repeated this two more times so that the altar was soaked and water had filled the trench. He made sure that the people witnessing knew this
sacrifice would be more difficult, and thus more spectacular, than what the prophets of Baal attempted and failed to do. Then, he pleaded for the Lord to answer him; and the fire came: fire that consumed the bull, the wood, the altar and all the water. The people all fell on their knees and confessed that the Lord was in indeed their God.

That’s where our reading today ends. What we don’t hear is that right after this show of God’s strength, Elijah orders the prophets of Baal – all 450 of them – to be killed in what seems like cold-blooded, vindictive murder. And immediately after that, the sound of rushing water is heard, meaning that the long drought has finally ended.

Does Elijah the prophet represent the same God that Jesus called Abba, and that John called Love? Is this the same spirit by which Jesus faced his temper and said, “do not put the Lord your God to the test?” or in which Jesus said, “love your enemies,” or in which the apostle Paul said, “do not repay evil with evil, but repay evil with good?”

Now, you may think that winning this context would make Elijah a hero, but Jezebel wants revenge on him for embarrassing, then slaughtering, her prophets. Elijah gets the message that he is not safe and flees into the wilderness, specifically to Mt. Horeb (also known as Mt. Sinai), the very place where Moses received the Ten Commandments from God. And that is where Elijah – no longer brash and confident as he was during the contest, but now humble and fearful – finally encounters God. Here is how this is described in I Kings 19:11-12:

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 was 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.

There is something about these strange and dynamic stories from the Old Testament that grabs our attention, so that we can’t turn our eyes away. Sometimes, we long for these types of dramatic demonstrations of God’s power. Something is attractive about God coming in a mighty and spectacular way – like fire falling from heaven at the request of the prophet. Why – we may wonder – doesn’t God do this in our world of false gods and growing unbelief? Surely, if fire would fall from heaven as it did in Elijah’s day that would capture people’s attention.

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1 Steve Thomason, “How do you deal with the violence of Elijah?”
And yet, as dramatic as this display of power was, and despite the fact that led to the end of the drought and a confession of faith by the people of Israel, the minds of those in power – Jezebel and Ahab – remained unchanged. The argument could even be made that Elijah, in ordering the death of his rival prophets, failed to understand the point behind God’s miraculous actions. It is only after going on the run, escaping to the wilderness and hiding in a cave on Mt. Horeb, that he came to understand who God was – that God was not in the earth-splitting wind or the earthquake and not even in the fire, but in the sound of sheer silence; what we sometimes call the small, still voice of God.

On this, the annual remembrance of All Saints, we think back to the witness of those who have come before us in faith; not only these sometimes larger-than-life figures of scripture – like the prophet Elijah – but also, and maybe more importantly, those individuals who have shown us what it means to choose God, who have led us to discover and discern our own faith in God. On this day, we proclaim not only that they were chosen, guided, and love by God, but also that – as is the Jewish tradition – their legacy of faithfulness lives on through us.

And like them, most of us have experienced not the unbelievable displays of God’s power, but instead the small, still voice of God. It is this voice that leads us to make the choice that Elijah asked to people of Israel to contemplate: that rather than limping between two opinions, hedging between and hoping in multiple forces, we are called to place our trust in God.

For me, the small, still voice of God comes to me when I remember the faithfulness of my grandparents, who first taught me to appreciate the beauty and complexity of scripture; or people in this congregation like George Weemhoff who showed such complete devotion in his care for Greg. For me, God shows up not so much in wind, earthquake, and fire but instead in the sheer silence of standing atop Lookout Mountain in Montreat, or when walking through the woods with my son at Frohring Meadows. These remembrances, these moments, reassure me that even amid competing demands on time, energy and attention, it is not necessary to limp between multiple gods, but to choose one God; to put trust in the same God that came to live among us as a self-sacrificial servant, a lover of justice, a prophet of peace.

Maybe, then, it should not surprise us that Elijah encounters God at Mt. Horeb, again on the mountain where God spoke to Moses and where the people of Israel were provided with the Commandments that would teach them how to live as God’s people: worshipping God alone, keeping the Sabbath, honoring their parents, abstaining from killing, from bearing false witness, and from coveting what others possess. These Commandments were contained in the Ark.
that David brought to Jerusalem, that Solomon built a Temple to house, and that
Jesus referred to when he said that he came not to abolish the Law, but to fulfill
it.

And so, it is all-too appropriate that on the remembrance of All Saints, we
come to the table that is set before us by Jesus Christ, our Lord. God invites us to
this feast not because we are deserving of it – not because we have always
listened to the small, still voice rather than yearning for the power of spectacle –
but because we are beautifully created and unconditionally loved by God. In the
simplicity of the bread and the cup, we are reminded of the extravagance of God,
a power so great that it is able to fully bless, fully embrace, and fully forgive.

This is our God: not a god who appears in Vegas-style tricks, but One who
sets a table before us and invites us to come as we are, each of us and all of us
and all of each of us, to feast together. And having been fed, we are sent out into
the world to set a table for others, to invite and accept others, to feed and clothe
and heal others, to be the body of Christ in the world. May we receive, and
therefore give, God’s gift of the sound of sheer silence. Amen.