August 9, 2026

First Congregational UCC

Pastor Nick Hatch

1 Kings 19:9-18; Running and Trusting

Let us pray: God of those who are running and struggle to hold hope, bless us in storm and stillness. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable to you, oh our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

As I walked into the dark night, the air was thick, and I felt as though I was swimming in summer's eve. There was no wind, the sun had fallen, the forest was pitch black. Overhead I heard a whisper; like a pillowcase falling from the sky. I gazed up to see the treetops creating a ragged black ring. The inky blue of space hung lazily with twinkling stars and milky way spread out. It was so clear and close I wanted to reach into that diamond-filled pool and stir it like a heavenly kettle, maybe cool my arms cooled by its majesty. And then again came the whispering; which were the sounds of little brown bats feasting in the glade. As if suspended by a child's pole and string they danced to a frow, unbounded by earthly gravity, their wings swishing and slicing July heat. And then they turned and began dancing together; and because of the deep silence, I heard them talking. Infinitesimally small squeaks and chirps accompanied their midnight ballet when they locked wings under the stage lights of a thousand galaxies. A divinely inspired and choregraphed moment eons in the making. I was so deeply amused by their display, I found myself unbounded by my preoccupations - and just drifted in silent space with them, completely present. Then, as if on cue, they both turned and disappeared stage left and stage right. In silence I reveled in the delightfully intimate display of the diversity and loving-tenderness of our Living God.

Thich Nhat Hanh, (or *Tik · N'yat · Hawn*), a Buddhist monk, peace activist, prolific author and teacher writes:

When I was a young Monk in Vietnam, each village temple had a big bell, like those in Christian churches in Europe and America. Whenever the bell was invited to sound (In Buddhist circles we never say "hit" or "strike" a bell), all the villagers would stop what they were doing and pause for a few moments to breathe in and out in mindfulness. At Plum village, every time we hear the bell, we do the same. We go back to ourselves and enjoy our breathing. Breathing in, we say, silently, "Listen, listen" and breathing out we say, "This wonderful sound brings me back to my true home." – Thich Nhat Hanh, *Living Buddha, Living Christ*

I invite you to plant your feet firmly on the ground, sit, and lay your hands on your thighs. Leave your palm's open and face up to receive the presence of God as one of our beloved handbells invites us to be wholly present in this moment.

(Nathan will ring a handbell slowly three times in a row. Nick leaves about 10 seconds of silence.)

Through sound and then deep silence; the presence of our living God is revealed, and we are being invited into our true home.

First Kings is a book that tells of Israel's demise and God's efforts to bring them back to their true home. This book would be read later by an audience of exiled and dispersed Jews. This was the local scoop; full of recent, scandalous history. And who else would it feature but our prophet Elijah, a celebratory, one of the most revered and bold prophets of the Old Testament. He courageously called out idolatry and was a player in teaching Israel fidelity to God. God performed wonders through him like the resurrection of a boy, the calling down of fire, and making or ceasing the rain, to name only a few.

Yet like his humbled readers, in our scripture, Elijah is running. He is running, fearing for his life after having killed Queen Jezebels false prophets of Baal. The Queen sends him a message saying she was going to have revenge and kill him. Overcome with fear by being the target of a nation state, he lay down in despair and prayed for his own death. Then a messenger of God came to him, told him to eat and drink, to strengthen himself and then led him to Horeb, to Mount Sinia. There he found a cave there and went to sleep.

Even the most powerful, a seer-seated next to kings and queens, was now on the lamb. Running, running and trusting against all odds; in the Lord.

“What are you doing here?” Asks God. And God listens. Then says, “Go out and stand on the mountain before the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by.”

All kinds of powerful, natural, biblical symbols pass by Elijah at the mouth of the cave: fire, wind, earthquakes. Elijah was re-living a true Moses moment: this was the same location where God delivered the Ten Commandments to the wandering, exiled Israel through another singularly righteous person. For Moses, Mount Sinai was covered in a thick cloud, with thunder and fire, whence the mountain trembled, and divine trumpets sounded their blasts. Then God spoke to Moses, in words, at length.

But for Elijah, after the exposition of created power, there were no words, no lengthy diatribe. For Elijah then came silence, an immersive Holy Silence. It was a powerful moment in which our prophet swam the presence of the Lord. When it enveloped Elijah, he wrapped his face in his mantle. Elijah hid from the silence; and from the Lord, both were too close, too personal, too complete- a bone-cutting moment leaving him utterly defenseless.

Silence, deep silence, the kind that opens the stuck windows of our spiritual selves, can be a Holy Blessed Gift and wholly terrifying.

Thich Nhat Hanh continues: (or *Tik · N'yat · Hawn*).

Our true home is in the present moment. The miracle isn't to walk on water. The miracle is to walk on the green earth in the present moment. Peace is all around us - in the world and in nature - and within us - in our bodies and our spirits. Once we learn to touch this peace, we will be healed and transformed. It is not a matter of faith; it's a matter of practice. We need only to bring our body into the present moment and we will touch what is refreshing, healing, and wondrous. – Thich Nhat Hanh, *Living Buddha, Living Christ*

Have you been intentional to find the silence of the living presence God? How can you carve out the room needed to listen, to breath, to wonder and receive God's refreshing and healing touch?

Many of us have run; run from something or someone we fear. Some of us are running today. Perhaps it's the deep divide of our national political discourse has left many of us feeling alienated and betrayed. For others, like those in the LGBTQ communities, women serving in the Armed Forces, or non-white immigrant citizens, they rightfully fear people in power who have targeted them to enact what they call justice, but to others appear as vengeance. Perhaps it's our friends and relatives and fellow brothers and sisters in Christ in Menasha whose hearts are running on adrenaline after having their homes and futures swept away in a terrible, thunderous wind. Truthfully, we are all running from something. No matter how powerful we once were, the palatial places we once found ourselves, or how faithful to God we have been in word and deed: this world provides more than its fair share of calamity, desperation, and quiet ego-checking heart ache.

But in Elijah's present moment and in our lives today, here, God's presence is very real. We need to remember that the earth shaking, house toppling, fire-filled moments of human existence can be supremely disorienting and may leave us divinely

disenchanted. We also need to remember that God's displays of power do not always take the form of power that we can recognize. God's power is not the coercive machinations of a manipulative Creator treating us like pawns in a game of salvation. God's power is that of the Creator, gathering up all things in due time through the Resurrection of Jesus Christ, Gods beloved Son. And in Jesus, we learn power in weakness, power alongside, the power of fidelity and the loving, covenantal promises that God made to us.

And this is the way First Kings ends: with God's renewing God's covenant with Israel and promising a new king, a new way of life and a new commitment to the faithful few, and God's covenant with us.

Blessings upon you, for:

Gods still small voice is very much alive and moving through those attentive and courageous enough to follow, despite the overwhelming odds against the movement.

Blessings upon you, for:

God has not abandoned you, despite your current tragic situation.

Blessings upon you, for:

God will ultimately prevail.

- *David Maxwell*

"What are you doing here?" asks your God. How will you respond?

No matter our fears, our sleepless nights hiding out, May we listen and come back to our true home. May we run, run and trust in our Holy God.

Amen.