

2022 06 19 – A Gentle Whisper

I Kings 19:1-15a (The Inclusive Bible)

Elijah was terrified. He was terrified because he knew that King Ahab and his wife Jezebel wanted him dead. He knew they wanted him dead because he had killed all the prophets of their idol, Ba-al. There had been a contest to see whose deity was the true God and Elijah's God, YHWH, had won. Once the people knew that YHWH was their true God, then Elijah took his opportunity and got them to help him kill all 450 prophets of Ba-al.

Now Elijah was on the run. In the desert he allowed his fear to overtake him and he asked God to take his life right then and there. But God, YHWH, had other plans for Elijah. YHWH sent angels to take care of him, to give him food and water. Strengthened by the food, Elijah continued on his journey until he reached the mountain of Horeb, the place where Moses had received the Ten Commandments. It was there that Elijah found a cave and slept the night.

Elijah was on the run. Afraid of what Ahab and Jezebel would do to him if they found him. When God asked why he was there at Horeb, Elijah told YHWH his sad story. God said, "Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of YHWH, for YHWH is about to pass by." But Elijah was too afraid. He remained cowering in the cave as a powerful wind, an earthquake and a fire all passed by.

Think of times in your life when you have been scared, terrified, pushed beyond your resources, placed in a difficult situation, ready to give up. How did you

react? Was there something that kept you moving forward? Where did you go for support and guidance? Where did your help come from?

Today, I want to share with you a little bit of the history of The United Church of Canada. It is a story about a woman named Alberta Billy. Alberta was an elder of the We Wai Kai First Nation in British Columbia. Her people were dealing with the devastating impact of residential schools, so she knew first hand the pain and suffering that they had caused. And so she decided to do something about it. Alberta Billy is famous in The United Church of Canada because she was the person who asked the church to apologize for our role in residential schools.

Alberta Billy made her request for an apology at a General Council Executive meeting in 1985. One year later, in 1986 [the first apology](#) was spoken at a meeting of the General Council in Sudbury, Ontario. That apology was given by the Moderator, the Rt. Rev. Robert F Smith.

In 2016, 30 years later, a gathering was held to remember that apology and at that gathering Alberta Billy and Robert (or Bob) Smith were interviewed. I want to share with you the first 8 minutes of [that interview](#). In this video clip Alberta Billy describes what took place just before and during that infamous General Council Executive Meeting. Then. Bob Smith describes what it was like for him to hear her request.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=brQjxEg-p1A>

It's obvious from Alberta Billy's words that she was scared and intimidated as she gathered with Stan MacKay and Thelma Davis to discuss what they were going to say at the meeting of the General Council Executive. But somehow Alberta knew what she needed to do and she found the courage to do it. Where did that knowing and that courage come from? It came from her grandfather's words so many years before. It came from the smile and encouragement shared by Stan MacKay, another former Moderator of The United Church. And it is obvious that came from within her own being. It came from that still small voice, that sacred place within each one of us. I believe her knowing and her courage came from the God of love, the God of grace, the God of reconciliation.

Her single voice at that meeting of the General Council Executive was the catalyst for the writing and the speaking of that first apology. Her wisdom and courage started a movement in the church that is still going. Last Monday, on June 13th, Alberta Billy died. In a [recent blog](#), our current Moderator, Richard Bott wrote "the whole of the church is deeply indebted to Alberta Billy for what she demanded of us and called us to do. We could not be the church we strive to be without her." <https://united-church.ca/news/mourning-and-honouring-alberta-billy>

Alberta Billy was a prophet sent by God to the leadership of our church. Just as Elijah was a prophet sent by God to the people of Israel. Elijah also heard the voice of God. It didn't come in the wind or the earthquake or the fire. Elijah heard God's voice as a gentle whisper in the silence that followed. It was that gentle whisper that brought Elijah to the mouth of his cave. He was still terrified

but in the silence he was able to hear that voice telling him to go back and finish his work. And so he did.

Sometimes that gentle whisper comes when we are least expecting it. When things are not going well we tend to seek it out. But sometimes it slaps us in the face even when we think we're doing OK. Bob Smith had that experience in 1985 while sitting beside Alberta Billy at that fateful meeting. He was shocked and surprised by her request. But he was able to hear God's voice in her words.

One year later, Bob Smith heard God's call again in the weeping and the silence at General Council. When Art Solomon, another First Nations elder said, "Now what in the hell are they doing to do about it?" Bob Smith took those words as his call and lived them out for the rest of his life. As part of The United Church of Canada, we too are living out that call.

May we all hear God's still small voice, that gentle whisper in our own hearts and may we hear God's voice in the words of the oppressed. And when we hear God's call, may we find the strength and the courage to follow whether it may lead us. Amen.