

“Stepping into Silence”
A sermon by the Reverend Joe Genau
for Edgewood Presbyterian Church
Revelation 7:9-17
1 Kings 19: 1-18
November 5, 2017

It has been a tough year for this congregation when it comes to death. It struck me this week that most of my contemporaries did not go to six funerals this year to say goodbye to six incredible women, the youngest of whom was seventy-one. If you live outside of a faith community, you most likely don't interact with that many non-relatives who are several decades older than you. If you stay away from church, you don't watch so many people die.

We choose this. We choose to be with one another when death is near, and to support one another when we grieve. We choose to celebrate the lives of God's beloved, even when they're not technically kin. We choose the sacred mix of laughter and tears. We choose to be hurt by their deaths because we choose to let these people-who-could-be-strangers matter to us. We choose to let these quirky souls into our hearts — and we ask them to let us into theirs — knowing full well that hearts will be broken in the process.

We step into these people's stories, and they step into ours. Our lives intersect and are forever written with new characters. And, together, all of us are stepping into the big ancient story of the church. The church was here before us. The church will go on after us. We step onto the stage of a play that's been going on for millennia, and we tell in our time the church's major stories: the stories of the people of God struggling to comprehend God's unrelenting love, and of Jesus coming to seal that love once and for all. And we tell the smaller stories: of congregations being born and the everyday miracles of putting one foot in front of the other and of the time the choir wore blinking Christmas light earrings. And when death is near for us, we pray that when we are gone someone will tell our little part of this big story of grace and tell it well. We pray that the silence we leave behind will be filled by the still small voice of God, a whisper in the thin air. And that someone will hear it and say, “Did you know Dot? Or Dian? Or Barbara? Or Marilyn? Or Lil? Or Millie? Let me tell you about them...”

Dot Murrah had silence thrust upon her by a stroke. Her family talked about “before” and “after.” Before — before I knew her — she was a tough-as-nails mom who worked hard to make a life for her family. She was a devoted grandmother and great-grandmother, a lover of music, and a feisty and faithful woman. After the stroke, Dot had a whole lot to say, but none of it would come out. It was maddening, and when she first got to the nursing home she bawled. But not long after, she was the runner-up in the beauty pageant held there. Edgewood member Frances Waller opened her heart up wide for Dot, visiting her frequently and making sure I went along as often as possible. We brought Christmas carolers to Dot, and she sang along and conducted the music and loved on us like nobody's business. When we were able to get Dot here for Christmas or Easter, she basked in the glory of the choir's voices, smiling with tears streaming down her face.

Dot died on January 10th, a Tuesday.

Dian Bailey would be pretty annoyed with me for talking about her right now. “Ooh, now don’t you start!” Dian lived a life full of the craziest obstacles and struggles and pain that the world could throw at a woman. But she somehow always made it work. She found a way. She pulled her family together and faced down whatever was in her path. And she did all this for almost seventy-two years. She cared for her kids. And her parents. And then her grandkids. And she cared for her church ladies. When I first met her, Dian was juggling a pre-teen, a strong-willed high-schooler, and an even stronger-willed mother. Dian would hang out in my office on Tuesday evenings, while the Birmingham Girls Choir rehearsed, and she’d tell me stories of the old days at Edgewood, and the wild times of Dian the teenager, and about the time — before Sid Burgess was here — when the preacher showed up at her house for a visit and ended up asking if he could take a nap. Dian got a kick out of the people here — even when she and they drove each other bananas. And she got the biggest kick of all out of the gifts from God she saw in Tabitha and Sabrina. Dian’s was a life of sacrifice and resilience. And when the joy came, she reveled in it.

Dian died on April 7th. It was a Friday.

Barbara Murphy and her husband, John, joined Edgewood the same day my wife Amber did. I remember Barbara standing next to John in his wheelchair, smiling broadly. Barbara lived the life of a servant. She gave money and hours to more worthy organizations than you can count. She valued her family, and making the world a more open and diverse place. She loved her son, Jim, and her granddaughter Norah with all her heart. She loved her cat, and she loved the Beatles. She did everything within the power she had in her hands to bring about the kingdom of God, loving, and working and giving in the most active forms of prayer she could muster. Barbara died with a peace I haven’t seen often. She had no fears, no earthly concerns. She knew her family was well and that her God loved her and that she had run a good race.

Barbara died on May 31st, a Wednesday.

At Marilyn Merkle’s funeral, I described her as a modern-day, Alabamian, Queen of the Nile, stretched out on her chaise with a purring kitty-cat with royal purple everywhere. I just can’t shake that image. Marilyn worried her heart until it was wrung out, and then she studied her Bible and prayed hard and let it all go to God with a sense of deep trust. And then she started it all over again. This is a woman who fought polio, and then continued to struggle with her health right up to the end. And life threw her other curveballs too, but she was tough. She survived, and she loved her kids and grandkids right to the ragged edge. From EPC, Pat McLaughlin and Vicky Taylor and Freddie Braswell made themselves dear to Marilyn, sharing hours of friendship and sorrow and care. She gave generously to the Presbyterian Home for Children over the years, including her piano when she moved. Marilyn was slight, but boy could she fill a room. She’d walk into a gathering of ten people and make a dozen new friends and then call to ask me to pray for them. She was a force of nature, undaunted in her pursuit of God’s will.

Marilyn died on August 10th. It was a Thursday.

Lil Warren was the longest-tenured member of this church. She was one of the most hopeful, optimistic people I've ever met. She lived a life of quiet hospitality and service, giving so much of herself to this congregation, to her dear friends, and to her beloved family. She was an Edgewood fixture — it feels very strange each Sunday to not see her arriving a half hour before the service, sitting over on the right side. I think it will feel that way for awhile. Lil was a seamstress, and she made special items for many of the children of this church. And she made the absolute best Christmas fudge in Alabama. Lil loved her brother Fred, and those who know her best are certain that his death was when Lil decided she too was ready to enter life eternal. She also had a very special bond with her mother, whose story in this congregation Lil was determined to keep alive.

Lil died on October 4th, a Wednesday.

At age 99, Millie Albright was driving herself from Calera to church here each week up until mid-September. Millie didn't want you to know about it, but she had a wonderfully giving heart. She quietly took care of her friends. She is a legend at Brookwood hospital, where she accrued over twenty-nine thousand volunteer hours over the years. On some random weekday last year, Millie showed up to help Mary Brooks give all the pews here a thorough cleaning. She brought both me and Mary lunch from Brookwood and we sat in the library and Millie told us jokes that I can't repeat from the pulpit. This past year, Millie pestered me until we installed the water fountain in the main church hallway. She helped us bless it, and then took the first official drink. It will be always be "Millie's fountain" to me. Millie grew up during the Depression, and then worked her tail off to pull herself out of poverty. So when Millie offered you something — a piece of candy, a dish of banana pudding, a witty remark, or the joy of her friendship — she offered it with an appreciation for the preciousness of such simple gifts.

Millie died on, October 24th. It was a Tuesday.

We have encountered the story of the prophet Elijah this morning, and at the start of it, Elijah wants out. He's won a great victory over the prophets of Ba'al in a Religious Royal Rumble — the God of Israel showed up, and Ba'al didn't. But then Elijah went and slaughtered all those prophets and he's on the run and he says "It is enough" and he asks to die. He wants to die, alone, in the wilderness.

But God is not done with Elijah's story. Twice the angel wakes him to give him food and drink and to urge him onward. He makes it to God's holy mountain and sleeps in a cave and then he's asked why he's there. I imagine he's thinking, "I was okay dying in the wilderness. Why don't you tell me why I'm here?!" Instead he explains that he's been a good prophet and that the Israelites have turned away from God. He's the only faithful one left, and now they're coming after him. He is all that remains of the story of Israel. He leaves out the part about the massacre of the prophets of Ba'al.

Elijah has been through much and he's weary and confused and afraid. But he knows that God has led him here and he is told to go stand on the mountain, for the Lord is about to pass by. In the wilderness,

Elijah wanted to die. And now he is being treated like Moses. Elijah witnesses a great wind and an earthquake and a fire, and surely this is what it's like to be a great prophet. But the Lord was not in any of that. We get this phrase, "a sound of sheer silence." Other translations render it "a still small voice" or "a gentle whisper." My favorite might be the CEB, which states: "After the fire, there was a sound. Thin. Quiet." The Hebrew here is a really weird phrase, and *of course* it is. How else would you describe such an experience of God?

Elijah is asked again why he's there and he carefully repeats verbatim what he said before the wind and the earthquake and the fire. And then God gives him marching orders. God tells Elijah that there are more chapters to be written. God wants him to hit the road, even with Jezebel after him, to go anoint a new king over one of Israel's rivals, and to anoint a new king in Israel, overthrowing those who've been worshiping Ba'al, and to anoint Elisha as a new prophet — a prophet to continue the story. And at the very end, God tells Elijah that there are a whole bunch of faithful still in Israel. This is not the end of the story of God's covenant.

We have shed a whole lot of tears since last All Saints' Sunday. Through the tears we are able to make out a vision. In it, those who suffer, including us, will hunger no more, neither will they thirst. The sun will not strike them, for the Lamb of God will be their shepherd and will guide them by still waters — the springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.

Our eyes have seen the glory of God in the six faithful and powerful women we have lost this year, and in the many more we will remember in just a few minutes. In the eternal life of Christ, we know that their stories have not ended. And when all the turmoil of the world settles, we are charged with stepping into silence to listen for God's voice, and to tell our part of this tale of the ages.

Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen.