The reading from 1 Kings today is one of my favorites. I especially enjoy the bit about the sheer silence but I am actually going to take another angle and not focus solely on the sheer silence part. I want to instead look at the part that comes before that. The scene opens with Elijah in a cave and God asking him what he is doing there. He answers saying, “I have been very zealous for the Lord, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away.” On one level you could say that he is complaining and being a little self-pitying saying how he has followed all of the rules and no one else has. But on another level Elijah finds himself in a place where we all have probably found ourselves. He may be complaining but he has some pretty good reasons for his complaints. As best he knows he is the only one left. The crowd has gone crazy and he is the only one who wants to do the right thing. And this can be a very hard place to be. It can be a place of anxiety where we wonder if we are right or if we might be crazy, and if it is all worth it. It can be pretty gloomy, but as Elijah finds out, even in times as dark as these God does not abandon him.

As many people have said, 2020 is not the year that they signed up for. We have pandemics, riots, looting, and an economy that not what it should be. It is easy to look out at this and want to be like Elijah and run away to a cave. To throw our hands up and say we are done with these lunatics. But today God is telling us that he is with us even in this trying times and that he is greater than these trying times. Think about it like this: Let’s say you had just learned that you had won $100 million in the lottery and then moments later you looked outside and saw that your newspaper had been thrown onto your wet lawn, leaving it sopping wet. Would your mood all of a sudden darken and leave you screaming about how the universe is conspiring against you. I am guessing not because winning the lottery would be such a large thing that a small thing like the newspaper would be subsumed in your joy. Now I know this is an extreme example and that our joy and our gloom are often more evenly matched, but I think this is partly because we forget God or at least forget vast parts of God. If God is who he says he is, our life in him should be on the size and scale of winning the lottery. The Psalmist says, “The LORD is at my side, therefore I will not fear; what can anyone do to me?” Yes the world may be crazy, yes there may be bad things going on around us, but God is on our side. How gloomy can we be if that is the case? How can we lament when we hear God in the sheer silence, when we worship a God who died for our sins?

And I know on some level this can sound glib and slogan-y, like the next thing out of my mouth might be to tell you to turn that frown upside down. And maybe so, but when we fail to focus on the transcendent as the place from where true joy comes we are probably going to find ourselves depressed at least part of the time. Like Elijah we live in a world that has found new gods. I know I am rambling a bit here but think for a moment to Paul when in 2nd Corinthians he says, “For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure, because we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal.” We need to look to the things unseen, because strangely and slightly counterintuitively that is where true life is found.

Today Elijah was seeing the immediate – the crowds and the broken altars and God was reminding him where he is. He is in the sheer silence. Seeing God and feeling God’s presence is harder to do than paying attention to the things that are lower, the things that are immediate. But if we do not cultivate our love and understanding of God we will be blown to and fro by the maddening crowd rather than being anchored by that which is lovely beautiful and eternal. May we take the time to focus our hearts and minds on God so that we may be his both now and forevermore.