

WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH



SERMON

November 2, 2025

For Whom the Bell Tolls

Dr. Jo Forrest

For Whom the Bell Tolls

Dr. Jo Forrest

© 2025 by Dr. Jo Forrest and Westminster Presbyterian Church.

All rights reserved.

No part of this sermon may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means including information storage and retrieval systems, without permission in writing from the author.

Printed in the United States of America

First Printing: November 2, 2025

God creates the world. God calls people into relationship through a covenant. God blesses all creation with God's loving presence. And we mess it up.

God spoke to our faith ancestors in thundering earthquakes and supernatural events. God tries to capture our attention with spectacles beyond our intellect to persuade us to trust God and seek the good.

Our readings from the Narrative Lectionary now shift to stories of God speaking through the prophets. Prophets are most typically reluctant men, whom God drags by the shirt collar to speak the truth. Prophets risk everything to do this hard and holy work.

Today's story gives us a glimpse at one of the iconic prophets, Elijah.

To this day, Jewish families set an empty chair at their Seder table and enact the ritual for someone to literally open an exterior door to let Elijah join.

Elijah earned his notoriety from mind-blowing-feats of power. He commanded rain to a drought-stricken land, a consuming fire from heaven, and parted the Jordan River. He engaged single-handedly in contests with King Ahab and his wife Jezebel. It was her army of prophets who lured the Israelites towards a pagan god.

Monarchs do not go quietly into the night. Elijah's actions come with a cost. After destroying all the prophets of the god Baal, Jezebel sends her minions to kill him.

He retreats to a cave questioning if it is worth it?

Dear God,

We know you've always wanted for each of us to thrive within a community. It's hard to believe that at times when the noise of cruelty bangs in our heads and we feel threatened by those who are angry. Like Elijah, we want to retreat. Silence the world around us. Send your spirit among us and startle us with your truth within and beyond these words. Amen.

1 Kings 19:3-4, 9-15a

³Then Elijah was afraid; he got up and fled for his life and came to Beer-sheba, which belongs to Judah; Elijah left his servant there. ⁴But he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness and came and sat down under a solitary broom tree. He asked that he might die, "It is enough; now, O LORD, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors."

⁹At that place he came to a cave and spent the night there. Then the word of the LORD came to him, saying, "What are you doing here, Elijah?"

¹⁰He answered, "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.”

¹¹ God said, “Go out and stand on the mountain before the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by.” 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 an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake,

¹² and after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire, and after the fire a sound of sheer silence.

¹³ When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. Then there came a voice to him that said, “What are you doing here, Elijah?”

¹⁴ He answered, “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.”

¹⁵ Then the LORD said to him, “Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus...”

When a community member dies, today we make worship announcements and include an obituary in our emails.

Throughout my adult life I heard the minister say and now say myself, “We thank God for the gift of life and promise of life eternal.” Those words never seem sufficient: they fail to convey the pathos of death and the promise of God’s divine presence.

In early 1600s England, when someone died, a parish church rang its tower bell. Imagine walking through the village and hearing the church bell cry out. It would stop us in our tracks. The sound would linger in the air with the weight of mortality.

Anglican priest and poet John Donne knew this all too well. Along with the many members of the parish he buried over the years, he and his wife grieved a stillborn child and the death of another three children before they were ten years old. His wife’s final pregnancy proved fatal for her and the child she carried.

For this man of faith, grief and loss permeated his life. When Donne himself was in the throes of grave illness, perhaps typhus, he contemplated his death with even greater urgency.

Once he recovered, he wrote a series of meditations and prayers focused on our human and the divine’s purpose. What are we to believe and do in our walk from the womb to earthly grave? He attempts to name the interconnectedness of all

people – an ode to community, togetherness, and collective potential.

Listen to one of his iconic writings ...

No man is an island, entire of itself;
Every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the
main;
If a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less. .
..
Any man's death diminishes me ...
Therefore, never send to know for whom the bell tolls;
it tolls for thee.

These words have inspired us to examine the content and purpose of our lives. Since we all will share in death then how do we share in this life right now?

Elijah participated in the brutality of death. Our ancient story places him squarely at the events which silenced the false prophets. Fearful of Jezebel's wrath, he runs.

In his solitude Elijah pleads to God, "take my life."

He runs far and hides in what the Hebrew text describes as not *a* cave, but *the* cave, implying the cleft of the rock where Moses encountered God long ago.

He hears “the word of the LORD” – a prophetic formula – but it is not a message to him or for him to deliver. Instead he hears a divine question: “What are you doing here, Elijah?”

To this prophet who is accustomed with nature’s ability to startle, God takes a new path to persuade Elijah to return.

On the same mountain where God etched the stone tablets for Moses, Elijah endures a fierce wind and an earthquake and a fire, “but the Lord was not in the wind...not in the earthquake...not in the fire.”

Not, not and not. The storyteller makes it clear: God will not be found this time in grand spectacles.

Instead, God speaks with clarity in silence: “After the fire a sound of sheer silence,” or as another translator puts it, “the sound of faint silence.” The way God speaks amplifies God’s message. Elijah needs to listen for and to God in a new way.

The emptiness into which God speaks is not empty. In this space between – between God and Elijah, between Elijah and the people, and between people – is the space where God exists.

God needs Elijah to be an agent to heal the wounds between the people and between the people and God. Later the Biblical story tells us that God speaks to Elijah to “turn the hearts of parents to their children and the hearts of children

to their parents, so that I will not come and strike the land with a curse.” (Malachi 4:6)

God needs Elijah to call the people to do what each of them can for the good of all.

Elijah’s story resonates for anyone who feels weak against the prevailing powers, who is tired of the violence, frozen by toxic rhetoric, or feels alone. Elijah’s story of the past is a story of God speaking to us today in clear ways if only we will listen.

In rural Madison County New York, a sixteen-year-old young man lived with his grandparents in a home stocked with firearms. He was both the bully and the one bullied by the classmates.

They taunted that he was going to be a drug addict like his parents. And, they called him “the next school shooter.” Finally, one winter morning on the school bus, he turned on his tormentors. Curling his fingers in the shape of a pistol, he said, “I hope you all die.”

What do you do? Run and hide? Stay and fight? This community responded with the collective efforts of one hundred and six people from fifty-nine organizations. They had a plan.

When they began looking into the young man’s life they found a deep sense of alienation, troubled family relationships, easy

access to guns, and intense bullying by classmates. All symptoms of a school shooter.

Those involved went about a life-saving mission. They found the young man was, yes, a potential perpetrator and the sheriff intervened with his grandfather to secure the guns at home. In their work, the labels of “perpetrator” and “victim” became more nuanced.

They found he was also a victim of many things beyond his control. And while the students on the bus were potential victims of an easy-to-imagine scenario, they needed to grasp their opportunity to change and to grow.

The school superintendent stated, “(w)e have a responsibility to develop good human beingstaking a student that has troubles and just saying, ‘Not my problem’ – that just passes the problem on to society as a whole.”

Day by day, they listened to what was said and unsaid. In this small community, they believed in the possibility of one person joined with another person, and in their collective bravery.¹

¹ <https://journeywithjesus.net/essays/3984-seek-shaloma> and <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/09/27/nyregion/mass-shooting-prevention.html>

God speaks. The people of Madison County heard God ask: what are you doing here, languishing as if you cannot do anything to prevent senseless killings?

God speaks in the desperate pleas for safety in among residents terrorized by immigration raids. And God asks why we think we have no voice to say “stop.”

God’s voice attempted to speak this past week among clergy, on behalf of Bread for the World.

Eighty of our colleagues from other faith traditions and denominations were scheduled to meet with one our US Senators to plead for SNAP to continue. This elected senator refused to listen because of our government’s stalemate. He never showed up to the meeting.²

We cannot be silent. Hunger is never a partisan issue. Hunger is deeply human and all our concern.

On this All Saints Day anyone who anticipates hearing the name of their beloved read knows what it is like to listen in the silence. In an empty space they still feel their presence. In a time of questioning they crave to hear soothing words and might imagine their voice.

² Laura Strauss, Facebook post October 29, 2025, https://www.facebook.com/revlaurastrauss/posts/963109245612?ref=embed_post

For me, in the dusky space between the earth and sky at the far horizon, whether dusky light or vibrant hues, I feel the saints. I know they are there. I know life goes on.

God reminds us that in the gaps, in the expectation of emptiness, God connects us to one another, and to God's own self.

In the end, what matters is not what is amassed in life. Any of the stuff we think so important will wither away. The legacy of love flourishes. And that can only be built with and through others. Jesus teaches us this.

No one is an island. We are part of one body.



WESTMINSTER

2040 Washington Road

Pittsburgh, PA 15241

412-835-6630

www.westminster-church.org