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Summer Sermon Series: Stop, Luke, and Listen  
3. "The Hope That Is Within You"  
*In the aftermath of the Black Forest fire*

1 Kings 19:11-12 from the NRSV [God] said [to Elijah], '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; and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence. When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave....

1 Peter 3:15b Adapted from the NIV Always be ready to account to anyone for the hope that is within you.

Luke 11:11-13 From The Message If your little boy asks for a serving of fish, do you scare him with a live snake on his plate? If your little girl asks for an egg, do you trick her with a spider? As bad as you are, you wouldn't think of such a thing - you're at least decent to your own children. And don't you think the Father who conceived you in love will give the Holy Spirit when you ask him?"

In a life that was full of mis-speaking and mangled statements, most of which were funny and occasionally even made you think because of their jarring way of using language, perhaps Yogi Berra's most famous such statement was this: "*It's deja vu all over again.*" But it doesn't feel at all funny this morning, this week, does it? For it was scarcely a year ago that we were glued to our televisions and computers, our Facebook pages and Twitter feeds, our cell phones and newspapers, reeling at each new horror, amazed and thankful at the courage and skill of firefighters and soldiers and police and EMTs, gathering together as a church family to pray and mourn and remember. *Deja vu all over again.* What we wouldn't give if that were not the case, what we wouldn't

give if we were not gathered here today recalling the horror of a year ago and now of this past week.

But we weren't given that choice. And because that is the case there is no better place that we **should** be. For we need to comfort one another and we need to be reminded of the Word of God, the hope of God, the love of God. We need to speak and we need to hear. We need to speak to ourselves and to one another and to those whom we encounter with words that are good and appropriate and fitting, and we also need to make sure that amidst all of the voice arounds us - amidst the thousands of Tweets and Facebook postings and television interviews - we heed only those that truly comport with a God of love for each and all. So on this hard day, the question is this: what shall we speak?

These are neither the scriptures nor the sermon I had planned for this Sunday. And yet I found that our focus on the Gospel of Luke this summer nonetheless had resources for what to speak and say in a time such as this, for Luke, among all the gospel writers is the most concerned to show Jesus as the One who came to be about healing, who was moved by folks who were laboring under false and hurtful ideas and needed to be healed and made whole. The tradition of the Church says that Luke was a physician, and that fits. For you can't speak well and wisely unless you are indeed healed and made whole, unless that which is abrading or abusing you is exorcized and replaced with something more life-giving. And so in this short parable that Jesus tells and which Luke reports, Jesus is really raising the question of what it is that we should say in hard times.

For, indeed, Jesus' words here are apt on **any** occasion when we are asking

“Why” and when we are asking “How shall we think what shall we say?” in response to pain and hurt and tragedy. Hear His words again: “If your little boy asks for a serving of fish, do you scare him with a live snake on his plate? If your little girl asks for an egg, do you trick her with a spider? ...[Y]ou wouldn't think of such a thing”! Indeed not. Indeed not. For indeed, you and I ARE “decent,” as Petersen’s translation puts it, and here is the point of that perhaps curious phrasing: **Whatever** we think and speak about hurt and pain and tragedy – and most importantly, **whatever** we say about **God** in the face of such things – we need to make sure that what we say of God is **at least** as “decent” as the things we would say to our own children. You’ve heard me offer this test before but let me share it again: When you are tempted to say something about God that, if the same thing were said about a **human** parent and where you would call such a parent terrible if it were true, **please don’t say it about God**, please don’t say it about God. So, what does that mean in this case?

Well, let me offer this gentle reminder: It was funny on Friday – a day we all needed a touch of humor – to hear Sheriff Maketa and others say that we should all go out and wash our cars and leave the windows down as a way to make it rain. But it was **not** so funny when folks claimed that Friday’s wonderful thunderstorm over the fire was God’s will. Because the logic of that inescapably must lead you to also have to say that the fire itself was God’s will and wish. But that is **not** what I want to say or speak, and I don’t think you do either. For you see, God created a wondrous, infinitely complex world where utterly everything has some degree of freedom. Without such freedom, there could be no beauty, without such freedom it would all be a sham. But that also

means that sometimes God's glorious, complex, freedom-filled creation births both beauty and bane, both the holy and the horrific. But hear this: God did not decide on Tuesday to start a fire that would scar and maim and hurt and even kill.

So what **was** God doing? Just as Jesus says in his little parable that God conceived us and this whole world in love, God is always present in the midst of both beauty and bane working in love. For you see, there is a crucial difference between saying, on the one hand, that God wills and **causes** everything, and, on the other hand, saying that God **is in the midst of everything** working in love to bring the good that is possible. God didn't cause the lightning strikes by the side of I-25 on Friday afternoon, but God did seek to move in love to motivate those passers by to stop and stomp out those grass fires that the lightning started. God's love was and is moving to motivate the soldiers and firefighters and pilots and police and EMTs to want to serve their fellow human beings – and it has been a humbling sight to see such courage and skill deployed to help save people that likely few of them even knew! Or did you see that picture on Wednesday of the huge line of cars waiting to contribute food to Care and Share to help the firefighters and evacuees? How do you explain these things except by the love of God moving in those folks to inspire them to care? God did not cause the fire, but God indeed, the One who conceived us and this world in love, continued to move in love in every moment – and that is what I hope you'll speak

There are some other things that are being said, sadly, that I hope that you and I will not repeat. It didn't take long for folks on both the theological right and the left to begin making statements about God and the fire that are not, to use Jesus' criterion, "*conceived in love.*" Let me be plain: Whether it is a "liberal" saying that God is trying to

send us a message through the fire about our responsibility for global warming, or it is a “conservative” saying that the fire is God’s punishment for this or that alleged sin, again, think about this: **does speaking such things really reflect a God of unconditional grace and love?** Does it pass the test of not saying about God what you wouldn’t say about a human parent? After all, would you call any human parent “good” who hurt someone in order to teach an entirely unrelated person a lesson?!? ***I don’t think so.*** So let’s not speak that either from whatever ideological perspective! For God doesn’t work like that.

There’s a third thing that we may be tempted to speak and it is certainly something we hear all around us. You know the sentence I’m talking about: *“God never gives you more than you can handle.”* Once again, though, I want to gently but clearly say that while I understand the motivation for folks speaking that – for they are indeed somehow *wanting* to say that God is loving – the upshot, if we again follow the logic, is that God **caused** these terrible things. But, as I have said, I hope we don’t want to say that. No, what I hope we might say instead is a crucially different version of that statement: Not that *“God doesn’t give you more than you can handle,”* but instead that ***“God never leaves you no matter what you have to handle.”*** The first statement implies that God might once again decide to send you hurt and pain, the second says that God is never, ever absent even in the midst of hurt and pain. Do you hear the difference? For once again, we must hearken back to Jesus’ words and know that a God who conceived us in love would never hurt us, but will always seek to help us. So let’s speak that instead.

The prophet Elijah had had a horrific week. Forced to flee for his life, under a death threat by the Queen, hungry and exhausted he was naturally looking for meaning, looking for the sort of dramatic explanation that would be just as dramatic as what he was enduring. Yet that familiar story we heard this morning of Elijah's encounter is God reminding him that sometimes – in fact, more often than not! – what is called for is not drama, not screaming, not yelling, not spite, not alleged explanations that blaspheme the God of love. God – and the meaning of life lived under the care of God – is not to be found in the hatefulness and hurtfulness of the fire. For God is not in the fire – except as the One who works incessantly to bring good out of that effects of that fire. And while the NRSV translates the final verse as “sheer silence,” the more familiar version – God’s “still, small voice” – that is on your bulletin cover is the one that reminds us that the voice of God, more often than not, is to be found in quiet conviction, tenacious tenderness, and maybe most of all, **nuance**. Now, nuance these days is not something our culture prizes; it prefers the grandiose and the loud; it prefers the Keith Olbermanns and the Rush Limabaughs. Yet both those sorts of voices, those sorts of claims, such shouting are too often just so much wind – and God is not in the wind, but indeed in the still small voice of nuance, of quiet and undying love, and of hope.

Hope. Hope. It was what Peter reminds us that our job as Christians is, to not only live in hope, but to **speak** in hope, to tell **why** we hope, to share with a needy and hurting world the good news of a God who is a loving parent to all, who wills no one evil, who never ceases to work to bring good out of pain. *“Always be ready to account to anyone for the hope that is within you.”* My friends, on this morning of pain and hurt

and sadness, on this morning let us nonetheless leave this place quietly but oh-so-firmly convinced and convicted that we are held in hope and let us go out and tell the world what we know and why we indeed have such hope within us. For we do, we do, we do. Thanks be to God, we do.