I Kings 19:11-12, Luke 2:1-7

“Encountering Jesus”

 We have been on a journey this Advent as we look at the encounters different people in Scripture have had with our Savior Jesus. Each one different and unique much like, I hope and pray, our encounters with Jesus have been equally unique and different, and life changing. Over the course of my life from a young age I’ve had incredible opportunities to meet and be in the presence of peole that are considered by many people celebrities, or great people.

 I’ll never forget when my dad introduced me to Corretta Scott King, or when Desmond Tutu came to our house in Ventnor and had lunch. I worked at Golf and Tennis world in Atlantic City during college and while there I had a chance to meet Kenny Rogers, Sugar Ray Leonard, Peter Paul and Mary, Charlie Daniels, while I was working in Europe I had the chance to meet the two Archbishop of Canterburies and Patriarch’s Alexi and the current Patriarch Kirill of Russia.

 My most memorable encounter was with Elke Sommer. Some of you have heard of her, she was married to Peter Sellers. I was teaching tennis and she asked me to be her doubles partner, as a 19 year old kid who was I to say no. I didn’t want to serve it too hard just in case it might stray and hit her. So I spun it in and it had more spin than I wanted and hit her so hard on the head and it seemed like it stuck there for 5 seconds rotating. She hit the ground completely stunned. Looked up at me and smiled and said she would give me two free tickets to her show.

 Each of these encounters all of these people had their entourage and people that followed them everywhere. It was a huge scene anywhere they went. But today in our Scripture we find quite the opposite with the greatest man who ever lived. We’ve encountered the Savior as he met with Nicodemus, we’ve encountered Emmanuel as we reach out to our neighbor, we encountered God in Christ last week. This week we find Jesus. In our Scripture he is a nobody, born nowhere, with nothing in his future. He is called lots of things in Scripture: Savior, Emmanuel, God. We just call him Jesus today, say it with me: Jesus. And we love him so let’s hear about how he came into this world.

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The Old Testament reading is a very well known one. The context is the prophet Elijah who had decided to leave his vocation as a prophet, but he calls upon God to help him decide. You’ve been there before. God, give me a sign of what I’m supposed to do. Just give me a sign. And God does respond but he says wait for me and I’ll reveal myself to you. It is often terrible timing, but it is always the right timing.

 I’m not sure it was September, but God here in this first Scripture does send Earth, Wind, and Fire. A lot of fanfare and all the elements needed in order for God to make his presence felt and known. But the Bible says, nope, God wasn’t in those elements.

 I wrote earlier about Tim Tebow and how his faith has cause the ire of a lot of people. I love what he is doing in football, but like even more what he is doing in respect to our culture as more people are intelligently speaking about faith, or at least engaging the topic of faith in arenas that has never seen that conversation publicly before.

 Yesterday someone called him a prophet, and that’s where I draw the line. Elijah also had this national stage, he had just defeated the priest’s of Baal and he was a wanted man. So, if he asks God to speak to him, the well know, nationally syndicated prophet, you would think God would send something big and important to match his status.

 Instead, God sent a still small voice. God came to him in a way that dramatically underwhelmed him, and it was remarkably different from what he expected, and quite frankly was very different from what we expect when we want God to be in our presence. A still small voice. I think of this year’s nobel peace prize winners and I can’t help but think of still small, unknown voices. Women that I bet not more than 5 of us could say their names or have ever heard of them before. Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, Leymah Gbowee, and Tawakkul Karman.

 Women whose still small voices are changing the course of history in their countries and in the world. It is often the still small voices of the Ghandis, peacefully, the Mother Theresas gently, and the Martin Luther’s King Jrs, prophetically and peacefully that changed lives and nations for the good.

 These small voices sometimes become louder and lose track of the small voices that lead and direct us on a safe and peaceful path. We see them in Egypt and Russia and all across the world today. Might makes right in our world and the still small voices that are from God often are drowned out. IT is so hard to find God today in anonymity. Revelation is to be found in the ordinary course of life.

 That’s how Jesus came, you know. In the ordinary, without fanfare. We received eternal life through the birth of an ordinary baby named Jesus. Let me tell you about it. My favorite story to tell about Christmas is actually my dad’s story. When he was a pastor in Wilmington, Delaware, they put together a Christmas pageant as all churches tend to do this time of year, and this little boy was going to be the angel Gabriel and he had worked really hard on his lines and he had it down, he didn’t know what his lines really meant, but he knew them: Hail Mary, O favored one, you are with child from the Holy Spirit.

 Well, the day of the pageant came and the time of his line came and he got up there and he completely forgot what he was supposed to say. He knew the gist of it, but his lines left him. So he mustered up his strength and in his deepest loudest and most confident voice he pointed to Mary and declared: Mary, Zap, you’re pregnant.

 It didn’t quite happen that way. Mary and Joseph lived during the Pax Romana, the time of great peace in the Roman Empire under Caesar Augustus. A census was taken and everyone had to go back to their home towns to register with their families. Since Joseph’s family line was through David and Bethlehem was David’s city, he had to go there.

 Notice how God works behind the scenes, quietly, to make the words of Micah 5:2 come true: But you, O Bethlehem of Ephratha, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient of days.

 Jesus had to be born in Bethlehem, but not in the way he was born. He was born in complete silence, in a town, Bethlehem that was considered the lowest of the low. I don’t know which town in Lancaster County is shown the least respect. There is always one town that is somewhat the outcast. Is it somewhere in Solanco? Quarryville? Jesus born in a manger in Bethlehem is like Jesus being born in an abandoned Sunoco garage in Quarryville.

 Jesus’ birth in silence, that still small voice that came to earth as God’s presence among us. Luke tells us that the baby was born and placed in a manger because there was no room for them in the inn. Just so you know, the sleeping arrangements in Bethlehem were maxed out with all the pilgrims. People were sharing rooms and there was no such thing as privacy. If you are a 14 year old girl about to have a baby, would you rather be outside in the stall or inside with hundreds of people seeing all that is going on. I think that whole manger scenes was Mary’s choice.

 But the silence of the birth of God is defeaning. In fact it is so quiet that over time we have added some details to it so that it can be a bit more romanticized and seem to be more suitable and palatable for a scene into which God could come. This past week we had our youth group Christmas party and a group of us were able to run that and I don’t know about the youth, but I had fun. We had a Christmas IQ test and almost every answer was none of the above. You’d be amazed at what we think is part of the Christmas story biblically, but it has really snuck into our understanding of the biblical narrative. It isn’t bad, but it does reflect our attempt to make it more God like in our understanding: 3 Kings, Mary riding a donkey, an innkeeper.

 Brothers and sisters, Jesus was born as Jesus. Yes as we saw last week God, yes our Savior, yes Emmanuel, Prince of Peace, yes. But Jesus was born a smelly crying baby who had to have his diapers changed frequently.

 The inauspiciousness, the silence of his birth is weighty. When Jesus comes into our lives, when he becomes more than a name, sometimes it happens in a still small voice setting. Some of us have known Jesus all of our lives. You love him, you serve and obey him as a disciple. But there was no flash of lighting as you came as you were on your Christian birthday. That’s legit. I think Presbyterians are the still small voice Christians in many respects and some of us are embarrassed about that. Don’t be. If you love Jesus, you love him. That’s enough.

 Now some of us needed a fire, an earthquake, and a strong wind to grab our attention so we could meet him personally. That is legit as well. This Christmas Eve we will be having an opportunity for people who do not know Jesus personally to commit their lives to him. To answer that small voice that tells us to follow him.

 You know, our ability to hear Jesus speak to us depends on how much we listen to him. This season it is easy to not hear his voice as we get tunnel vision to finish everything that needs to get done. Remember, those that changed the world for good normally do it quietly and peacefully and gently.

 The headlines: 1st Presbyterian Welcome Everyone is loud and clear. Not greeting a person in church speaks loud and clear. Saying no to something because we’ve never done it that way before speaks volumes. How much time and energy and effort you give to the youth of this church tells them a lot. Working behind the scenes to set up the hall to look like Christmas is here is a loud testimony of your love for this church.

 Listen to the still small voice that lifts up Jesus as the only way this Christmas season. Amen.