

Silence as a Powerful Presence

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Jon M. Fancher
Rocky River Presbyterian Church, Rocky River, Ohio
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1 Kings 19:1-15a (GNT)

¹ King Ahab told his wife Jezebel everything that Elijah had done and how he had put all the prophets of Baal to death. ² She sent a message to Elijah: "May the gods strike me dead if by this time tomorrow I don't do the same thing to you that you did to the prophets." ³ Elijah was afraid and fled for his life; he took his servant and went to Beersheba in Judah. Leaving the servant there, ⁴ Elijah walked a whole day into the wilderness. He stopped and sat down in the shade of a tree and wished he would die. "It's too much, LORD," he prayed. "Take away my life; I might as well be dead!" ⁵ He lay down under the tree and fell asleep. Suddenly an angel touched him and said, "Wake up and eat." ⁶ He looked around and saw a loaf of bread and a jar of water near his head. He ate and drank, and lay down again. ⁷ The LORD's angel returned and woke him up a second time, saying, "Get up and eat, or the trip will be too much for you." ⁸ Elijah got up, ate and drank, and the food gave him enough strength to walk forty days to Sinai, the holy mountain. ⁹ There he went into a cave to spend the night.

Suddenly the LORD spoke to him, "Elijah, what are you doing here?"

¹⁰ He answered, "LORD God Almighty, I have always served you—you alone. But the people of Israel have broken their covenant with you, torn down your altars, and killed all your prophets. I am the only one left—and they are trying to kill me!"

¹¹ "Go out and stand before me on top of the mountain," the LORD said to him. Then the LORD passed by and sent a furious wind that split the hills and shattered the rocks—but the LORD was not in the wind. The wind stopped blowing, and then there was an earthquake—but the LORD was not in the earthquake. ¹² After the earthquake there was a fire—but the LORD was not in the fire. And after the fire there was the [sound of sheer silence].¹

¹³ When Elijah heard it, he covered his face with his cloak and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. A voice said to him, "Elijah, what are you doing here? ...Return to the wilderness near Damascus, then enter the city.... [where I'll guide you in the next way you'll serve me.]"

Luke 17:20-21 (NRSV)

²⁰ Once Jesus was asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God was coming, and he answered, "The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed, ²¹ nor will they say, 'Look, here it is!' or 'There it is!' For, in fact, the kingdom of God is among you."

I attended graduate school in the city of Chicago. Our seminary apartment was a half-block from a fire station. A busy fire station. Their ambulance or firetrucks were called out on emergency runs probably ten to twenty times a day, at all hours of the day or night. Whether I was in class, or we were eating dinner or playing Trivial Pursuit with our neighbors, we grew accustomed to the throaty roar of the firetrucks' diesel engines and the piercing sirens echoing among the apartment buildings lining every block in the Hyde Park neighborhood.

Even at night we would hear emergency vehicles screaming past our apartment. But we became accustomed to it: I would be awakened by the siren, think to myself, "Yup, somebody's awake and taking care of the world," then drift right back to sleep.

¹ Alt. text from NRSV; original text in Good News Translation is "soft whisper of a voice."

So after seminary when we moved to a lovely neighborhood in one of Detroit's southwestern suburbs, our first night in our new home was... quiet. Real quiet. Too quiet. We lay there in bed, unable to fall asleep, eyes wide open, staring into the darkness, as if trying to see what we were surrounded by and could not escape: namely, a sound of sheer silence.

In our day that sheer silence is a rare commodity.

- Thanks to smart phones and Bluetooth connectivity you can listen to books or podcasts or tunes as you walk or bike or workout or drive.
- There's music playing softly in the background when you enter a store or clinic, a lobby or elevator.
- At any professional sports event they fill every break in the action with a video or on-field activity or announcements about upcoming events.
- Even as you're pumping gas into your car, the gas pump is talking to you about the latest news or sports headlines or encouraging you to buy a drink and a snack.

The sound of sheer silence? Nowadays it's rare.

Earlier this week I was playing in a charity golf outing at a course set amid the lovely rolling hills of Knox County about two hours south of Cleveland. The layout took us past some lovely new homes built along the course's perimeter. In our foursome we all remarked that we couldn't live out there, so far removed from everything. In suburban Cleveland we're accustomed to a wide variety of shopping and entertainment and dining and healthcare opportunities within just a few minutes' drive.

On the other hand... we also noticed that the only sounds we were hearing out there were the ones we were making... and the birds, and wind through the trees, and the chorus of bullfrogs calling to one another from adjacent ponds. We could imagine that maybe people who choose to live on those small county roads running along the perimeters of the golf course are attracted, in part, by their ability to appreciate the sound of sheer silence... and frogs and birds and rustling leaves.

Today's Old Testament reading described Elijah encountering God in "the sound of sheer silence." What put Elijah in the position that he experienced the power of God in the sound of sheer silence?

Let's learn a little about Elijah.

Elijah was committed to worshiping only the One True God of Israel. He could not accept simply doing whatever was convenient, whatever was popular, whatever was trending. Elijah's ministry, his mission, his focus was to encourage the Israelites to return to their faithful relationship with God. His ministry was based on the first of the Ten Commandments: "You shall have no other gods besides me."² In the words of his predecessor in the faith Joshua, Elijah's prophetic ministry urged, "...Decide today whom you will serve.... As for my family and me, we will serve the Lord."³

² Deuteronomy 5:7 NRSVUE

³ Joshua 24:15 GNT

Yes, Elijah was passionate for the One Living God of Israel. He felt called to commend those who remained faithful to God and to convince those whose faith had wandered to return to the God of Israel. You see, in Elijah's day there was a folk deity that many people had been drawn to, a god-idol called Baal. One reason for Baal's popularity was that Samaria's King (Ahab) and especially the Queen (Jezebel) had abandoned the God of Israel and devoted themselves to worshiping Baal. They thought it made them more popular with the populace.

Let me remind you of a famous episode that's described in the chapter preceding today's Old Testament reading — a story often called "Elijah and the Priests of Baal." Elijah challenged 450 prophets dedicated to Baal to a duel of sorts — kind of a sacrifice competition. (Those prophets of Baal were favorites of Queen Jezebel.) First, the prophets of Baal built an altar to sacrifice a slaughtered bull; Elijah did the same, except that his altar honored the Lord God of Israel. The challenge: to pray to their respective god to send fire from heaven to consume the sacrifice. Elijah said that whichever came through — Baal or the God of Israel — would be proven to be the One True God. Elijah let the visiting team go first: the prophets dedicated to Baal encircled their altar. They whooped and hollered, danced and prayed. Nothing. For hours. Nothing. Not even a spark.

Then Elijah said, "Step aside." Around his altar to God he dug a trench. Then to increase the degree of difficulty Elijah called on some local spectators who had gathered and had them douse the altar with buckets upon buckets upon buckets of water, so much water that the perimeter trench was filled to the top. Then Elijah prayed that the Lord God's power would be visible for all to see. Immediately fire descended and consumed the altar — sacrificial bull and all — *and* scorched the earth *and* dried up all the water.

The prophets of Baal and their so-called God had been discredited. The crowd of spectators praised God, and chased away the prophets of Baal... but not far enough. Elijah rounded up the prophets of Baal and killed them. Pretty brutal stuff for us to hear.

So in today's episode, when Queen Jezebel heard about how her prophets had been humiliated and then killed, she put a price on Elijah's head. He fled the capital city and walked about as far south as he could go, to the remote desert town of Beersheba ninety miles away. Once there, he walked about a day's journey into the desert where he sat in solitude, exhausted and depressed, wondering what he'd gotten himself into. In a miraculous way God fed Elijah in the wilderness, enabling Elijah to get up and walk about 200 miles further south to Sinai, the same holy mountain where Moses had received God's Ten Commandments.

When God called out to Elijah sheltering in a cave on Mt. Sinai, "Why did you come here?" Elijah didn't directly answer God's question, but his response expressed fear, futility, detachment from reality, self-doubt. In today's terminology we'd say that Elijah was suffering from depression.

God needed to redirect Elijah's attention. Years ago a telephone company used to have a commercial slogan that urged people to pick up the phone and make contact with a friend; the slogan was "Reach out and touch someone."

That's what God did next. Drawing Elijah out of the cave, God's power was manifested in a tremendous windstorm, next in an earthquake, and then in a dramatic fiery display of some sort, and after the storm and quake and fire there was... there was a sound of sheer silence.

It was the power of that silence that stirred Elijah. Not the special effects. Not the pyrotechnics. The Bible says that the Lord was not "in" the wind or earthquake or fire; God is not fire, or wind, or sky or water or any other *thing*. Those phenomena were merely "opening acts" to "the sound of sheer silence."

It was through the power of that palpable silence that Elijah experienced a renewed commitment to his calling to be a spokesman for God, God's agent. He sensed God's directing him to travel another 350 miles to Damascus so Elijah could prepare the person who would succeed him.

In last week's sermon I noted how Jesus urged people to slow down their pace, to settle their surroundings, and to listen for God's guidance. Jesus would often conclude messages with the direction to "Listen, then, if you have ears to hear." I pointed out that "listening is hearing that pays attention."

Sometimes when we listen we think all we hear is silence. Our hearts cry out to God. We reach out to God in an act of prayer. We may be expressing gratitude to God, or seeking help, or craving guidance, or hoping for reassurance. And sometimes the cry of our heart or the plea of our prayer seems to go unanswered. Guidance for a decision isn't forthcoming. Our situation doesn't get better. We listen and think we're getting no response.

But silence is a response. Indeed, silence can be a helpful response. When I was brand new in ministry I wondered about how to offer pastoral counseling. I wondered about what questions I should ask or how I should respond to someone sharing what was on their heart. My mentor helped me discover that silence can be a helpful tool in the process of providing pastoral counseling. When a counselee shared a concern with him, usually his response was not a possible solution, or even a follow-up question for more information. Often his response was simply, "Hmmm..." a response of silence that invariably resulted in the counselee talking more, and often eventually discovering for themselves what a good next step might be.

So perhaps as our hearts and thoughts and prayers engage with God, let's consider that a response we perceive as silence can be God's way of saying, "I am with you. Stay with me." As we heard in the life of Elijah, it was God's silent presence with him that lifted up Elijah and gave him clarity to pursue what was next.