

When Silence Speaks

Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost

August 13, 2023

Scripture

1 Kings 19:9-18

At 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?" 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."

He 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, 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. Then there came a voice to him that said, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" 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." Then the Lord said to him, "Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus; when you arrive, you shall anoint Hazael as king over Aram. Also you shall anoint Jehu son of Nimshi as king over Israel, and you shall anoint Elisha son of Shaphat of Abel-meholah as prophet in your place. Whoever escapes from the sword of Hazael, Jehu shall kill, and whoever escapes from the sword of Jehu, Elisha shall kill. Yet I will leave seven thousand in Israel, all the knees that have not bowed to Baal, and every mouth that has not kissed him."

Sermon

Elijah had had enough. He was tired of being Yahweh's prophet to a people who would not listen. With death threats coming from Jezebel, wife of King Ahab of Israel, Elijah runs and flees for his life, running alone into the wilderness, the Syrian desert, collapsing under a solitary broom tree. He prayed, "It is enough now, O LORD, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors" (1 Kgs. 19:4), and then went to sleep. An angel appeared, touched him, and said, "Get up and eat." Hot cakes and water were given to him. He ate and drank and traveled forty days and forty nights to Horeb, the mountain of God. There he came to a cave and spent the night to escape from the world.

This is where we find Elijah, alone in a cave. Exhausted, depressed, despairing. God asks, "What are you doing here Elijah?" "I alone am left," he answers, "and they are seeking my life,

to take it away" (1 Kgs. 19:10). Elijah is told to stand on the mountain of the Lord. Elijah is told to expect the presence of God, to look for God, and to wait for God who is about to pass by. And so we wait and are pulled into one of the most memorable theophanies in the Bible. Visually and physically arresting, exploding with energy and emotion. A great wind, devastating in its power and intensity, splitting mountains in two, shattering rocks into pieces. Then an earthquake, shaking the earth. Then a fire. Earthquake, wind, and fire. One would perhaps expect God to be present in any of these. But God was nowhere to be found.

After the fire came something entirely different. Translations differ. Following the King James Version, the Revised Standard Version reads, "a still small voice." The New International Version reads, "a gentle whisper." Today's English Version prefers "the soft whisper of a voice." The New English Bible reads "a low murmuring sound." And The Jerusalem Bible describes it as, "the sound of a gentle breeze." Only the New Revised Standard Version gets closer to the Hebrew and captures something of the awe-inspiring power of this experience: "and after the fire a sound of sheer silence."

Sheer silence. Not noise. Not the sound of winds blasting mountains to pieces. Not the sound of tectonic plates shifting under his feet. Not the sound of a consuming firestorm. The opposite of sound, sheer silence. Sheer silence, deafening silence. An unsettling silence, a silence that stirs the soul.

The text says, mysteriously, that it's only after Elijah hears the sheer silence that he moves out toward the opening of the cave. How does he "hear" sheer silence? What did Elijah hear or even feel or sense in that silence that summoned him out of his fear and depression toward the presence of God? Only then does he hear a voice that asks again, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" Elijah gives the same answer as before the theophany. In many respects, nothing has changed because of this experience. And, yet everything has changed. It got Elijah's attention and maybe that is the point. Silence has a way of getting our attention. In his book *A Sunlit Absence: Silence, Awareness, and Contemplation*, Martin Laird observes that "Silence and awareness are in fact one thing." [1] God wasn't finished with him. He had to go back to work: "Go, return," God says to him.

We don't know for sure what Elijah experienced, but it's clear that there was something about his encounter with sheer silence that stirred something in him. Maybe perhaps in the silence he came very close to the presence of God. Silence is the place of meeting. And silence calls forth silence. We read in Habakkuk, "Yahweh is in his holy temple; let all the world keep silence before him" (Hab. 2:18-20). The prophet Zechariah commands, "Be silent, all flesh, before the Lord; for God has roused Godself from God's holy dwelling" (Zech. 2:13). The psalmist wrote, "For God alone my soul waits in silence. From God comes my salvation" (Ps. 62:1). God summons us to "Be still and know that God is God" (Ps 46:10). And sometimes the experience of God's presence stuns people into silent awe, and we realize that there's nothing to say, words are inadequate. To say more is to say less. And, of course, I'm conscious of the irony that here I am offering a sermon about silence and using words. I should just be silent. But since this is a sermon, there's more to be said.

The medieval Dominican theologian and mystic Meister Eckhart (c.1260-c.1328) said, "Nothing in all creation is so like God as silence." The 16th-century Spanish mystic St. John of the Cross (1542-1591) said something similar, "Silence is God's first language." They're speaking from experience.

Yes, it is true that the Bible begins, creation begins with God speaking, "Let there be..." And there was. In the beginning was the Word, and the Word took on flesh, full of grace and truth (John 1:1-14), and the Word spoke and preached and called and healed and bore witness to the love and grace of God. Scripture also implies that before God speaks, God is silent and dwells in the silence. As the mystics know, everything emerges from silence and returns there. Words emerge from silence. Music emerges from silence. Sure, there are times when we want God to speak to us, when we would like a "word from the Lord," when we would like to hear God say something, anything to us. Many these days, though, think that God has stopped speaking and no longer speaks to people as God did in former times. Perhaps our problem is that we never stop talking long enough to listen to the silence, to find something of God's presence and life in the silence.

Our feelings about silence are ambivalent. And sometimes, there are good reasons why the silence haunts us. Philosopher Blaise Pascal (1623-1662) reflected upon his place in the universe and said, "When I consider the short duration of my life, swallowed up in the eternity before and after, the little space which I fill, and even can see, engulfed in the infinite spaces of which I am ignorant and which know me not, I am frightened, and I am astonished at being here rather than there; for there is no reason why here rather than there, why now rather than then. Who has put me here? By whose order and direction have this place and this time been allotted to me? The eternal silence of those infinite spaces terrifies me." [2]

Some crave more silence; others fear it and become anxious when there's too much. So we keep the television on or have background music playing all the time. There's the silence of an empty house after one's children have left home. There's the silence after the loss of a loved one. There are good reasons why we avoid silence. There's actually something called sedatephobia, the fear of silence. One counselor who treats this condition notes that in the 21st century, we are constantly bombarded by noise. Everywhere we go there is music, computers, mobile phones, ring tones, buzzers, conversation, people, and television screens. This technological revolution has had the side-effect of creating a glut of people who find silence unsettling and uncomfortable. "These patients report an unhealthy need for constant noise and interaction with others which can cause serious problems in their lives." [3]

Old Screwtape knew a thing or two about noise. In C.S. Lewis's *The Screwtape Letters*, a young demon-in-training, Wormwood, is writing to his experienced uncle, Screwtape. "Music and silence—how I detest them both! How thankful we should be that ever since our Father entered Hell...no square inch of infernal space and no moment of infernal time has been surrendered to either of those abominable forces, but all has been occupied with Noise—Noise, the grand dynamism, the audible expression of all that is exultant, ruthless and virile—Noise which alone defends us from silly qualms, despairing scruples and impossible desires. We will

make the whole universe a noise in the end. We have already made great strides in this direction regarding the earth. The melodies and silences of Heaven will be shouted down in the end." [4]

The writer Sarah Maitland knows how noise separates us from our souls, from that which gives us life and separates us from God. In her memoir *A Book of Silence*, she describes growing up in a noisy family, a noisy world in the 1960s, and how she slowly began to yearn for and finally embrace the importance of silence in her life; it did not come easy. Eventually, she made her way to the fierce, wild moors of the Scottish Highlands and built a house to experience presence in the apparent absence. She discovered silence was not a "negative absence or loss" or lacking anything, instead, she discovered that silence "is a real, separate, actual thing, an ontological category of its own: not a lack of language but other than, different from, language; not an absence of sound but the presence of something that is not sound." [5] And we begin to see why the mystics say silence is God's first language. The silence has something to say to us.

Reflecting on this text, I was reminded of a story my mentor James Loder (1939-2001) used to tell. It's the story of working with one of his patients in a psychiatric hospital in Massachusetts. "Willa, a middle-aged woman, came from a home in which she had always lived as an intruder. Her birth forced her mother and father to marry. She was chronically neglected and mistreated, and after her second year in college suffered a schizophrenic breakdown. While getting treatment in a state hospital and not making any progress, she was, as she described it, 'too depressed to make myself distinguish between dreams and reality.' Her head nurse told Loder that the staff was resigned to Willa's never leaving the hospital. She would sit for hours, hold her stuffed doll, 'Tony,' and wish for death. One day, after being in the hospital for some time, she felt a Presence come up behind her, embrace her, and 'tell' her, 'The silence is not empty. There is purpose for your life.' When she turned around, there was no one there, but the silence remained full of affirmation for her. The experience was remarkably effective in motivating her back into life. Complete health was not instantaneous, but whenever she felt stronger in her ego functioning she felt more convinced of this experience. Moreover, she said the experience "made people appear as people" and established meaningful boundaries for subsequent relationships." [6]

The silence is not empty. For the Holy One dwells in silence and speaks to us from the silence. The silence speaks. The silence is not empty, as Elijah knew. There is a presence in the apparent absence. There is something, someone there, behind, under, within the silence that summons us, that wants to connect with us. And so, like Elijah, let us wrap our cloaks over our faces and with fear and trembling move toward the silence, and stand at the mouth of the cave, stand before the presence of the Holy One, stand before the one who summons us to step out of our fear and calls us into life. May it be so.

Sources

[1] Martin Laird, *A Sunlit Absence: Silence, Awareness, and Contemplation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 44.

[2] Blaise Pascal, *Pensées* (1699).

- [3] <https://blog.echobarrier.com/blog/a-noisy-world-increases-peoples-fear-of-silence>
- [4] C.S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (1942).
- [5] Sara Maitland, *A Book of Silence* (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint, 2008), 27-28.
- [6] James E. Loder, *The Transforming Moment* (Colorado Springs: Helmers & Howard, 1989), 168.