

“Listening for a Silent God”

1 Kings 19: 1-15a

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I don't know that I fully understood the power of silence until just this year. My whole life I've been hard of hearing so sound is generally more muted than most people experience it. This leaves me with only a little distinction between sound and silence, so I think for the most part I haven't fully appreciated what silence can do.

This changed after I had surgery in January and my hearing was—at least temporarily—restored to full volume. As my ears were adjusting for the first time, everything felt incredibly loud and overwhelming—traffic, rustling, chirping, beeps—everything had a sound attached to it, many of which I had never noticed and some I had never heard before. When faced with all these new noises, I was surprised to find myself seeking out quiet places. I didn't want the TV on. I didn't listen to music. I dove into books because even though the pages turning were loud, I could read slow enough that there would be whole minutes of absolute quiet. It became important to have an escape from the constant barrage of sounds that I experienced in the world.

Having had that experience this January, I am much more appreciative of silence and why people covet it. I understand for the first time the appeal of going on a silent retreat or spending an afternoon quietly at home, not doing much, and not making much noise. I also understand how it is so easy to get caught up in the noise of our daily lives and out in the world that it can seem impossible to find silence or we forget how to seek it out.

It was these new experiences with sound and silence that caused me to choose the story from 1 Kings as our last text in the “Encounters with God” preaching series that we have been in this Lenten

season. I can finally appreciate a God encounter that comes when the cacophony and the chaos settles and all that is left is quiet. It turns out that there is a holiness and sacred moments that can be discovered in silence.

It is in this story that Elijah encounters God not in the great wind so strong it split mountains and broke rocks in pieces, and not in the earthquake that came after that, and not in the fire that followed the earthquake—but after all that is finished, Elijah encounters God in the sheer silence. Other translations say that Elijah hears the small, still voice of God. Whatever words you use, the text is telling us that when Elijah listened for God and yearned to hear God's voice, Elijah was only met with silence. But in that silence, he knew God was there.

This experience of God is a new one for Elijah and comes at a very vulnerable moment in his life. Previous to this, Elijah was your typical bold, cocky hero—someone who knew what he wanted and went after it no matter what the cost. He was not afraid of anything and stepped into situations of conflict and even violence without giving it a second thought. He was an outspoken prophet who took on an entire army by himself and came out victorious. It seemed he was exactly the opposite of the type of person who might appreciate what it means to encounter God in silence. I would have thought that Elijah was too busy making a lot of noise in the world to allow for a space where God could enter in quietly.

But something changes for him. We see the facade that he built up for himself fade away in this story. After conquering the army of rival prophets and men, Elijah finds himself once more facing opposition--this time in the form of threats from Jezebel. But this time he is afraid. He is scared. And he runs away to hide in defeat. To us, the reader, this seems like an abrupt change--we don't know what shifts inside of Elijah to cause this shift from transforming from a brave heroic man into a scared little boy.

This is like watching your favorite action adventure movie with a strong lead hero and having it go all wrong. For me it would be Indiana Jones but maybe for you it is Batman or James Bond.

Imagine, in the midst of outwitting and outfighting the evil villains, your hero gives up—Indiana Jones throws down his whip and crumples up his hat. Batman takes off his suit and puts on plain flannel pajamas. James Bond trades his Aston Martin to drive a more sensible Dodge minivan. The hero stops in the middle of the final fight scene and says, “I’m sorry, but I can’t do this anymore! I am hungry and tired and really just need a nap.” You see him hiding out in a bunker by himself, crying himself to sleep, and then the credits roll and the movie is over. It wouldn’t make for a very exciting story! I could see audiences booing in the theatre, demanding a more satisfying ending, one they have come to expect and rely on.

For Elijah, something happens that causes his own adventure story to come to a halt. I imagine that it wasn’t any one thing, but rather an accumulation of all the struggles he had faced, all the battles he had fought, all the strength he had summoned, finally overpowering him. Maybe slowly over time his bravery had been chipped away, adding to the already enormous weight on his shoulders as a prophet of God, until finally, when the armies had been defeated, it only took the threats of one remaining person for him to crumble.

It is a sad moment. It is a moment of defeat. But, for me, it is also the moment when Elijah becomes a lot more relatable and likable as a person. Although the heroics and bravado are thrilling to read about or to watch in movies, the reality is that most people have a lot more in common with a hero or prophet who isn’t perfectly brave or perfectly strong. We can more easily relate to someone who has given in to their fears or feels the need to run away from a threat in their life.

Most of us have had an experience of being too overwhelmed or stressed out to keep going. Most of us know that feeling when you are so tired that it sinks into your bones and it feels like you may never be able to recover. Most of us know that feeling of one final thing pushing you over the edge after a really long, well fought battle, leaving those around you saying, “But what happened? Why can’t you keep going just a little longer?”

And in those moments, I imagine that many of us have had a very similar conversation with

God like the one Elijah had on that day. When Elijah was in the wilderness, tired and resting, slowly eating and drinking to satiate the hunger that had built up, Elijah begins a conversation with God. Elijah says, “God! Have you seen what I have done? Have you seen how everyone betrayed you and it was me that defended your honor and me that was loyal to you and fought for you? Have you seen the hard work I have accomplished? And have you seen how after all of that, after I gave everything I could to you—they are still after me?” Elijah says, “God, why do all the hard things keep happening to me? I don't think I can do it anymore.” Elijah is pleading for a miracle from God. Elijah is asking God to sweep in and show him a big, grand gesture so that Elijah will know that his hard work was worth it, so that he will know once and for all that God has his back.

I think I've had this same conversation before. “Are you there God? Can you just give me a sign? Something to keep me going a little while longer because I don't think I can do it on my own anymore? Are you with me, God?”

So Elijah does what we all do—he looks for God in the mighty wind. He looks for God in the earthquake. He looks for God in the fire. He looks for God in the powerful events that surround him. And God isn't there. All that Elijah is left with is silence. After the pleading and crying have ceased Elijah does not make a sound. He is quiet. The world falls silent around him.

This silence, the resounding quiet that comes when you are seeking a word of comfort and hope directly from God may be one of the most relatable and understandable moments in the whole Bible. You ask for something big—for some sign or some miracle—and you receive a silence so loud it is deafening and a silence so bright it blinds you. I have heard it from many of you and I have said it myself. I have gone to the mountains looking for God and I have gone to the ocean and the ashram and seen the wonders of the world and I have longed for that one word that will reveal everything to me or make it all okay or give me the clarity I seek....but what I have received is silence. What I have been given is so subtle it is almost imperceptible. It is defeating.

For Elijah, it could have been enough to ruin him. To make him wither and die right there on the

spot. He had done so much, surely he deserved more than the sheer silence he received? But he doesn't die. He doesn't wither. He somehow finds a new strength within himself. He stands up, he wraps his cloak around himself, and he goes out. He leaves the cave, walks back through the wilderness, and returns to the world. He returns to the work of being a prophet. Even though he did not receive the answer he was looking for, he discovers that he is nourished. He is rested. He is ready to face a new day.

Elijah is able to describe what so many of us have experienced but not understood. Even though he did not find God where he expected, and even though he did not receive the answers he was looking for, he still encountered God. To him it felt like silence, but God was present when he was hungry and found food to eat. When he was thirsty and received fresh water. When he needed a rest from the attacks and the violence that he faced and God led him alone into the wilderness. It felt like silence, and it didn't feel like much at the time, but God was there.

We often talk about how God comes to comfort the afflicted and strengthen the weak and care for the poor. I think we expect that we should be able to see a direct line from God to the good things that happen in our lives, and that we worry that if we can't, or if we don't receive what we ask for, there must be something wrong with us. We worry that everyone else is hearing something that we can't.

But what Elijah reminds us is that even when we can't see it or feel it or hear it, God is still present. Faith comes in accepting that we don't have all the answers and still believing that God is working and moving in ways that are greater than our understanding, even when it leaves us wondering if God is working at all. We have faith because at the end of the day, when we are tired and worn down and defeated, we often find a place to rest. We find a way to recover. We find the food we need and the comfort we seek. We step into the silence and we find ourselves ready to go out again, suddenly with strength we thought had left us and perseverance we didn't know we were capable of, ready to face another day. And in that moment, we know that we have encountered God.