

TWELFTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME, YEAR C

June 23, 2013

I Kings 19:1-15

The Sound of Silence

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In today's reading from 1 Kings, we continue the dramatic story of the prophet Elijah's encounter with God, which I preached on two weeks ago. If you missed it, here's a short recap. The Israelite people, living in the northern kingdom of Israel, had once worshiped Yahweh, the one true God. Their king, Ahab, was even a believer. But since that time, many of the people had abandoned God in favor of the god of Ahab's wife, a very influential queen named Jezebel. She worshiped the god Ba'al. God sent the prophet Elijah to turn the people around and bring them back to worshiping the God of their ancestors.

God commanded Elijah to set up a contest between the two gods, by preparing two altars; one to the god Ba'al, the other to the God of Israel. The (G)ods were to be summoned and whichever one was the true God would bring fire upon their altar. When the altars were prepared, the eight hundred fifty prophets of the pagan gods lined up in front of their altar and the people began to cry and plead, even cut themselves, for Ba'al to show up and light their fire. But there was no response.

Then, after pouring water on the altar of the God of Israel, Elijah summoned God with this prayer:

"Lord God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel, let it be known this day that you are God in Israel."

Then the fire of God rained down, consumed the sacrificial offering, and lapped up all of the water that had fallen in the trench around the altar. The people fell on their faces crying, **"The Lord indeed is God; the Lord indeed is God."** Then Elijah commanded the people to seize the prophets of Ba'al and kill them all.

In today's reading, Elijah is fleeing for his life. Queen Jezebel has gotten word of this event and threatens to kill Elijah as he killed the prophets of her god. After a day's journey on the run, he flops down under a broom tree and begins to contemplate all that has happened to him. Elijah is in total burnout. His exhaustion turns to despondency. He cries out in desperation to God in prayer. I've asked Jonathan to sing Elijah's prayer, which was so beautifully set to music by the composer Felix Mendelssohn, in his oratorio, *The Elijah*.

"It is enough, O Lord, now take away my life. For I am no better than my fathers."

After his prayer, Elijah immediately falls asleep. Suddenly he's jarred awake by an angel commanding him to rise and eat in preparation for the next leg of his journey. Fearful and totally spent, Elijah tries to hide from God in a cave. Thinking he is safe, he falls asleep again.

God appears to him and asks:

“What are you doing here, Elijah?”

Elijah pours out his story.

“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.”

God says:

“(Elijah), Go out and stand on the mountain before the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by.”

Obediently, Elijah stands on the mountain watching for God, when a sudden wind comes out of nowhere; a wind so strong it splits the mountains around him, breaking rocks into pieces before his eyes. But God is not in the wind. Then comes an earthquake, but God is not in the earthquake. After that comes a fire. But the Lord is not in the fire.

So where was God to be found if not in these dramatic and overpowering demonstrations of power? The sound of sheer silence follows the fire. And God chooses that silence to come to Elijah and begins preparing him for the next part of his journey.

Elijah was not the only one of our biblical ancestors whom God chose to speak to in silence. One memorable day, Moses was out on a quiet hillside all alone with his sheep and his thoughts. It was in that silence that he caught the vision of a bush burning without being consumed. God spoke into that silence, sending Moses on a journey to Egypt to save his people. And, it was in a quiet moment that the angel announced to Mary that she would birth the Son of God.

Sometimes God spoke to people in the quiet of night while they were dreaming; like Joseph who was warned to take Mary and the infant Jesus into Egypt; Jacob who saw angels climbing up and down a ladder that reaching to heaven.

In the gospel accounts, we find Jesus often leaving behind the noisy crowds that followed him, and going off by himself to a quiet place to be with God and pray. In the silence of those moments, Jesus heard God speak to him and prepare him for the work ahead.

It's hard to find silent spaces in our culture. Many of our larger stores and restaurants play music while we shop or eat. Runners on our streets and sidewalks wear ear buds attached to devices that keep them entertained on their runs. The air is filled with the ringing of cell phones and some cars whiz by playing music so loud you wonder how the drivers stay on the road.

Many of you will remember a song written by Paul Simon and Art Garfunkel in the

1960's entitled, *The Sound of Silence*. The song begins with these words:

“Hello darkness, my old friend,
I've come to talk with you again.
Because a vision softly creeping
Left its seeds while I was sleeping.
And the vision that was planted in my brain
Still remains
Within the sound of silence.”

The lyricist, Paul Simon, then reflects on what he saw in that vision, a deeper and clearer picture, a better understanding of the real world he lived in; a vision he could only fully experience in the silence of the darkness of night.

Sarah Young, in her devotional book, *Jesus Calling*, penned these words which are written as if Jesus were present and talking to her and to her readers:

“When you approach me in stillness and in trust, you are strengthened. You need a buffer zone of silence around you in order to see the things that are unseen...Spending time alone with Me is the best way to develop seeing eyes and hearing ears. The goal is to be aware of unseen things as you live out your life in the visible world.”

Our culture values busyness. We have embraced *twenty four seven* as our watchword. Family, work, school, recreation, church and community involvement gobble up our time. We leave little time nor space to spend quiet time with God, to nurture our inner lives.

Author John Greenleaf Whittier speaks into the chaos of his world with this verse from his hymn, “Dear Lord and Father of Mankind.”

“Drop Thy still dews of quietness,
til’ all our strivings cease,
Take from our lives the strain and stress
and let our ordered lives
confess the beauty of Thy peace.”

They say you should practice what you preach. So I’m going to do just that. I invite you to stay seated as we prayerfully sing together the song printed in your bulletin, *Be Still and Know that I Am God*. After Jon plays it through once, we will sing it. Then we will observe a minute or two of silence to experience God’s presence in the stillness, then end our time by singing the song one more time.

Amen.