

THE SOUND OF SILENCE

1 Kings 19: 1-16

Have you ever been on a mountain? At the beginning of this summer, Pam and I had the privilege of travelling with friends to Jasper, Alberta. This was just before the wildfires blew in and very sadly, torched the town. And one of the things that was most spectacular was not only seeing mountains with peaks that reached well into the clouds. No. Even more spectacular was ascending one of those mountains all the way to the top! It was breathtaking looking down and seeing how puny everything was. It was like being on a plane and looking down. That's how high it was.

The other thing that really struck me, especially as I hiked beside glaciers and up to the peak, was the silence. Even as there were other people at a distance and a few animals here and there, it was as if I were in another place far from earth altogether!

Later in the summer I also had the privilege of going to our family cottage a few hours drive north of Toronto. Here, too, there are moments where the silence is so distinct, that my city ears need to adjust to absorb the sheer silence of the place. I'm just not used to it. It takes a while for my ears to adjust.

But you know, external silence, as beautiful and breathtaking as it can be, is not necessarily internal silence. As much as we are our bodies and very much part of our surroundings, we are also our spirits with our own inner worlds. Even when we can eliminate the external noise all around us, eliminating the inner noise is something different altogether.

OK, preacher, what do you mean by inner noise? What are the voices we keep hearing within us? Are they the voices that tell us we're not good enough, that we're flawed in some way? Do the voices tell us we're not good enough friends, or parents or spouses or siblings or children to our elders? Do the voices tell us we can't trust those around us, that they're out to get us... or that maybe we can't make it, that we should just give up and give in, that we're doomed?

What keeps us from abundance in our lives or from deeper inner peace? We need silence not just to get past the inner-critic, anxiety, defensiveness or fear in us. No. We also need silence in order to hear a word of love and purpose and direction for our lives at this time we are living them. Without silence we cannot discern a good choice from a bad one and a healthy perspective from a flawed one. Without silence we cannot hear another person, and without silence within, others see us in all the noise we're contending with making us anxious, afraid, avoidant, on guard or on the defensive.

Of course, social media and electronic devices don't help either. When are we in total silence without constant bombardment from notifications of texts, messages, tweets, calls, pictures, posts, YouTube or TikTok videos? Unless we physically turn off or put away our devices we cannot create space for any silence.

OK, fair enough preacher. You've made some good points. So how may we help ourselves and find help toward integrating greater silence into our spirits so that we can grow healthier in our humanity and hear a genuine word from God? How? Turning off external sound is one thing, but how do we find that silence within?

Our scripture reading this morning is an excerpt from the larger story of one of the great early prophets of the Hebrew people: Elijah. What revelatory wisdom can we find in this part of Elijah's story to help us?

First of all, we hear about the noise that is overwhelming Elijah and won't let him find rest, peace or silence. The great queen Jezebel is furious with Elijah because Elijah the one man has brought down all the corrupt prophets beholden to the queen. In her fury she also threatens him. She sends a messenger to tell Elijah this: "So may the gods do to me, and more also, if I do not make your life like the life of one of them by this time tomorrow." In other words, 'I am holding you responsible for the death of my prophets, Elijah. But I promise you, you will die and die badly once I get a hold of you.'

So what does Elijah do when he hears this message? "Then Elijah was afraid; he got up and fled for his life..." Elijah ran and he ran, fear coursing through his heart as the threatening message from the queen kept playing in his head. Fear, and all that comes with fear – the terror of it, the anxiety, the restlessness, the constant alertness, the inability to rest or sleep.

But finally, after several days of running, Elijah has to stop. He finds a secluded place and collapses under a tree, totally exhausted. He's at the end of his strength. He can't take it anymore. Fear has overwhelmed him and exhaustion has done him in. Here's what he prays to God: "It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors."

Have you ever felt at the end of your rope, that you could not go on anymore? Whether it was fear or circumstances that just overwhelmed you, or illness or a conflict in a primary relationship of your life that was just wearing you down to the bone... Or maybe it was a situation that had robbed you of your confidence or dignity... But whether we've come to this point like Elijah or not, we can all relate to him can't we? We all know what it's like to run away in fear, to be terrified, to be unable to turn off the noise in our heads that won't let us rest... We all know this and we can all feel for Elijah as he just wants it all to end... 'Please, God, just make it all end... please!'

But it doesn't end... From near death, Elijah will rise up again with purpose in his life and his vocation as a prophet... How does this happen? It starts with some basics. Seclusion, a feeling of safety, some water and food... We read that Elijah slept, and slept, for a long time. Every time he got up there was an angel there... Was it someone local or friends who had not abandoned him? Whoever they were, they were messengers of God. They made sure Elijah ate and was hydrated, and back to sleep he went... Who are your messengers from God, your angels?... And once he got up again, he was told that he had a journey to make. He needed to eat and drink some more for the journey would take time.

How much time do we need to find our way back or just find our way in a new situation?... How much time do we need to find our purpose in what we're living or to discern what we must do given the circumstances that are now part of our lives? ... What must we discern we must let go and what must we take up and commit to? What must we work to change and what must we find peace to accept as it now is, and the resilience and grace to live it?

We're told Elijah "went in the strength of that food for 40 days and 40 nights to Horeb, the mount of God. At the place he came to a cave, and spent the night there." OK, a couple of points here. 40 the number means something important. First of all, it means a long time. Elijah travelled for a while, physically speaking. But more importantly, 40 also means internal journeying. 40 is the number representing a time of inner testing, struggle, discernment. Elijah needed to find the silence within himself to figure out what to do next, to hear the voice of God within him and to clear out the noise of fear, terror and anxiety that was overwhelming him.

He also needed to find that sacred place where he could be alone before God. Mount Horeb is another name for Mount Sinai where Moses encountered the burning bush and much later also received the 10 commandments. Clearly, it is a sacred place. Where is your sacred place? Where and when do you find stillness within to be before God and hear God speak? What place and what space is it? Is this space here one such place? What about that inner place within you?

So what happens after a night on the mountain? It's a new day. The sun rises and Elijah steps out of the cave on the mountain. He is refreshed and alone before the vastness of God! So what does he see? What does he hear?

We're told there are a series of awesome natural events – a great wind, and then an earthquake, and then a great fire, probably lightening induced or volcanic... Moses heard God speaking out of such awesome natural events. And sometimes, when we're terrified and feel vulnerable and weak, we need to experience the greatness of God as an assurance that God has got us covered no matter what happens to us. A great wind, an earthquake, lightening strikes... these are great spectacles and happenings that humble us and bring us to our knees.

They can open us up to the vastness of God and the greatness of God and sometimes we need to know God this way to feel that assurance that we are held and cared for by a greater power.

But this is not what happens to Elijah. After all these awesome events happen, and anticipating that God would speak to him just like God spoke to Moses, Elijah does not hear God speak. But then, we read this: there was “a sound of sheer silence.” How do you hear sheer silence? Clearly it can’t simply be an external sound, because it’s silence. It has to be within you...

We’re also told that once Elijah heard this sound of silence, he wrapped his face in his scarf and went and stood at the entrance of the cave. Wrapping his face is a sign of reverence before the awesome, holy presence of God. In the sheer silence, Elijah hears God speak and they talk... Have you ever talked with God within yourself? What if all you’re thinking and feeling and working things through is talk with God? Have you ever thought of prayer like that? Imagine if we’re in God’s presence all the time. Does that thought terrify you or elevate you into renewed possibility?

And what does God say to Elijah speaking into the silence of his heart and thoughts? God questions Elijah. That’s what God does, always asking the questions within that open up a re-think about things and new doors of possibility, direction and action. New perspectives can only come when we question old ones and new ways of seeing can only come when old ways are re-thought, and sometimes from the ground up.

Elijah tells God he has been faithful and he has tried to stand up for justice and right with integrity and it has all fallen apart. ‘Not so,’ says God. ‘Even though you feel abandoned and alone and very vulnerable and afraid, go back... return... I have fresh work for you to do.’ And God speaks into Elijah directives for what he must do as the prophet of God. Elijah finds his strength again, his purpose, his direction and he is empowered. God is with him. He is not alone.

So, my friends... where are you on the journey?... Unless you find that place, that sound of sheer silence within yourself, how can you really know where you are and how can you really hear God speaking to you?... How can you discern God’s voice from the many other voices? ... It takes time, as long as 40 days and nights sometimes... It takes time to separate the cataclysmic signs from the moments of real silence when we can get the clarity, and then receive the power, the courage and the resolve to do what we must, go where we must, and the trust that we will get there.

PRAYER: Come to us, O God... help us find that place and space of silence... Help us clear away the noise... Speak to us so we can hear you... And give us the courage and strength to trust and act in service of your love and justice for ourselves and the world around us... Amen.