

“The Sound of Silence”

June 19, 2022

Living the Spirit Life series – Father’s Day, Juneteenth

I’m sure that many of us think of a certain song lyric line when we see this message title: “Hello darkness, my old friend...” The song from Simon and Garfunkel, first released in 1965, has some of the most poignant lyrics and has remained a powerful word to the world. You can read multiple interpretations about what it means and how it continues to resonate today.

It was years before the song was released, in 1952, when composer John Cage’s work titled “4’33” debuted. It was literally 4 minutes and 33 seconds of no music, but Cage’s goal was for the audience to hear the piece “full of accidental sounds” from wind outside to rain on the roof to the noise of people in the room as the pianist sat on the piano bench not playing.

It won’t surprise you that Cage’s work was controversial, but I wonder what Elijah would make of it. After all, he experienced God in the silence, in the stillness, in the whisper. Elijah was a prophet who lived 1,000 years before Christ. When we meet him at Mount Horeb, he’s just coming off a victory against those who were worshiping other gods - including Baal. King Ahab and Jezebel are out to get him. He’s on the run - alone, by himself, and wondering what’s next for him. His victory isn’t enough to sustain him. He’s at the end of his strength and wisdom. He’s searching.

Maybe you’ve been at that place or you know someone who has. It’s a tough place - despair, loneliness, and a sense of surrender. It’s a place of deep discouragement, which is a gut punch. It’s a place of wanting to give up, which isn’t cause for shame, but rather an opportunity to be open to God.

We know the importance of mountains as a place to meet God, which is where God leads Elijah. Moses received the Ten Commandments on the mountain. Jesus took a few disciples up to the mountaintop for an amazing vision when he was transfigured. Even now, we know that people take spiritual pilgrimages to the mountains as a way to grow closer to God. Even this week, two people sent pictures of the Grand Tetons as they enjoy the majesty and beauty of God’s creation.

Elijah is a bit more desperate running away from Jezebel and Ahab. He’s had enough, and even after seeing God do amazing things, he needs God’s help. Is he

trying to avoid his call to be a prophet of God, or is he trying to figure out where God will lead him next? Either way, God provides and leads Elijah into the wilderness. God speaks to Elijah and asks him what he wants. *What are you doing here?* Elijah lays it out honestly - he's been faithful, but some of the Israelites haven't, and now he's fearful for his life.

One part of this story that I love is Elijah's honesty. Are we willing to share our feelings and be honest with God? And if we're honest with God, are we also willing to listen so that God can be honest with us? Perhaps God has a word for us. We get a powerful word from Elijah's experience of God. God doesn't respond directly to Elijah, but invites him to come out and meet God on the side of the mountain.

Perhaps we think that God speaks with might and power - a mighty wind, a thundering roll, a roaring fire. Elijah had every right to think that God might speak that way because God had shown up that way before. But as we've said, the way that God works - the presence and power of the Holy Spirit is unpredictable.

And, it's difficult to imagine that God speaks exclusively that way as we see the remnants of natural disasters right now - the wind of tornadoes that bring down strong buildings, the floods that wash out roads like out West, earthquake that shake firm foundations, and the heat of fire that can destroy so much. Perhaps what we can take from Elijah's experience is that God isn't found in these spectacular displays. God isn't found in what's terrifying or destructive, but in something else, somewhere else, some other way.

The Hebrew translation for how God shows up for Elijah can be "a gentle whisper," "a gentle breeze," "a still, small voice," and even "the sound of sheer silence." That's how God speaks to Elijah - in the most unassuming, unspectacular way. It's almost the opposite of what we experienced on Pentecost when the Spirit showed up so powerfully in wind and like tongues of fire. Just when we think we know how God will show up, then we get this reminder that sometimes God needs us to be still, to quiet ourselves, so that we can hear more clearly. It's a voice of encouragement and hope that keeps Elijah going.

Worship is about sorting through the noises of our world, noises out there and noises inside of us, so that we can learn to listen to the voice of God. And it's a fight sometimes. Silence can make us uncomfortable. I can only imagine being in the audience for John Cage's piece wondering what was going on. We may want to fill the silence too quickly.

We want the big show from God. I want it to be clear and loud with no doubt how to proceed. We assume that noise means power, and power means noise. The loudest voices sometimes get our attention and get the most attention. And yet, Elijah's experience tells me it's not always that way. And I have some work to do.

I don't get quiet often enough, but there are moments when it happens, and I realize how much I need it. This week, I had a first face-to-face meeting with a group of newer pastors. We're on a journey together as they work toward ordination. My co-facilitator for this group prepared a devotion and invited us to be still and led us through a guided meditation. It was meaningful - and again - needed. It was a moment to rest in God's presence and also recognize how often I don't take the time to be still, get quiet, and pay closer attention to God speaking in a still, small voice.

And you'd think I'd learn from that experience, but later this week, I had great intentions of going to the new county park and getting in a workout. I was dressed for it in my workout clothes, had my headphones on, and my playlist ready to go on my phone. I got out to the trail and realized that I couldn't get a good connection to play my music. I also realized that I really can't go as fast as I want to on a sandy path. I don't run well, and especially not in sand. I'm used to a hard surface like a treadmill or a road.

So, I took off the headphones and gave up on listening to music, but decided to walk down the trail and check it out. It may not surprise you that I ended up hearing a symphony of sounds - God's playlist - water lapping on the shore, some birds, rustling of dune grass, and buzzing of insects. It was different than I planned.

Elijah experiences something different than he expected. God came to him in the presence of an angel - to feed him and sustain him. Lauren Winner writes about the importance of a meal, including how we consider Communion. She recalls the words of one pastor who literally calls it "the sacrament of maintenance." Winner says, "It is like what the angel said to the exhausted and broken prophet Elijah, collapsed in a sleep under a broom tree. The angel woke him and said, 'Arise and eat, else the journey will be too great for you.'" It's the same for us. We're sustained by those moments with God - signs of grace - along the way.

SLIDE: This is your gentle reminder that one time in the Bible Elijah was like, "God, I'm so mad! I want to die!" So God said, "Here's some food. Why don't you have a

nap?” So, Elijah slept, ate, and decided things weren’t so bad. Never underestimate the spiritual power of a nap and a snack.” It’s a true word. We need to care for the basics and to be still.

Today we’ll celebrate the sacrament of holy baptism – a sign of grace in our midst. Baby Sophie will be washed with water as we acknowledge that she is claimed by God. God’s grace is already at work in her. And as we welcome her and witness it, we remember how God speaks and how God calls us.

Elijah expresses his need honestly and seeks God. And God speaks to him clearly. It’s not that God is not with us, but my sense is that all of us could use some time to get quiet to both speak our hearts to God - and to listen to God - to get quiet enough that we might hear something new in a “gentle whisper,” a still, small voice, in sheer silence.

Elijah prayed, and I hope that we might pray, too. Today - any day - is a good day to start. Maybe it means one minute of silence to get started and work your way to two or three or five minutes. I’ll share the “Be Still” centering time that we shared today. Maybe it means taking time to journal your prayers with pen and paper or in the notes app on your phone. Take time to be with God – to speak and to listen.

What I especially love about Elijah is that he stays in relationship with God even when he’s wondering what’s next. He keeps in contact with God and waits for God to show up - even when God shows up in a way he doesn’t expect. We can set aside time to focus on sitting in God’s stillness, sensing God’s guidance, and settling into God’s presence. I was struck by the truth from writer Melissa Spoelstra, “God doesn’t work according to the microwave mentality (not the hot pot either!); God is more into the crock pot.”

Elijah receives an answer even as God has asked him, “What are you doing here?” God directs Elijah back to be a spiritual leader and mentor to Elisha. And there’s a word for us to take away. How do we know when it’s the Holy Spirit speaking and moving? For Elijah, it’s clarity of purpose and affirmation. It’s not a sense of guilt or shame, but a clear sense of God’s presence and power at work in our lives.

We’re invited to seek God. God is there, to be sure, but we seek and search, too. We celebrate God’s grace in our lives today as we celebrate it for young Sophie and remember it for ourselves. And yet we know it takes the care and nurture of family and a faith community for her to know the fullness of God’s love and care.

God is working - sometimes redirecting, reorienting, or refocusing our attention to the unexpected and places we may never look. God is working - even quieter, obscure ways. God is working - even when it seems unlikely. God is present, even when it feels like God is absent. God is active, even in the stillness. Elijah was searching and encountered God in the place he wasn't looking. He found hope in his despair and encouragement to serve God. I pray that we would be open and searching for God, even and especially in the silence of God's promised presence, in the stillness.

Thanks be to God! Amen.