

Sheer Silence

I Kings 19:1-12

Rev. Jeff Chapman ~ December 1, 2019 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church

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¹Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done, and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword. ²Then Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah, saying, “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.” ³Then he was afraid; he got up and fled for his life, and came to Beer-sheba, which belongs to Judah; he left his servant there.

⁴But he himself went a day’s journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a solitary broom tree. He asked that he might die: “It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors.” ⁵Then he lay down under the broom tree and fell asleep. Suddenly an angel touched him and said to him, “Get up and eat.” ⁶He looked, and there at his head was a cake baked on hot stones, and a jar of water. He ate and drank, and lay down again. ⁷The angel of the Lord came a second time, touched him, and said, “Get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you.” ⁸He got up, and ate and drank; then he went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights to Horeb the mount of God. ⁹At 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?” ¹⁰He 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.”

¹¹He 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; ¹²and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence. (I Kings 19:1-12, NRSV)

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Silence is such a rare commodity in our world. It’s so rare, in fact, that people will pay dearly for it. For about \$350 you can buy from Bose a pair of Quiet Comfort 35 wireless, noise-cancelling headphones. Put these things on and silence is yours to enjoy. I remember in high school when I got my first set of stereo headphones. I did not get them with noise reduction in mind. I got them with noise production in mind. Led Zeppelin sounded way better when it was turned up loud. I never would have dreamed of buying headphones that would make things quiet. Hearing aids may be in my future.

Do you know about this noise-cancelling technology? Tiny microphones are imbedded in the headphones which pick up the ambient noise about to hit your ears and then generate the exact opposite pattern of sounds to cancel out most of the undesired noise. In their promotional material, Bose advertises, “Clear away the distractions of the world, and focus on what matters most.” There is so much unwanted noise in our world these days, both audible and digital, that people are paying good money for silence. It’s golden.

Some of you know this story about Elijah. It’s a story that teaches us something crucial about silence. Elijah, remember, was a prophet through whom God had done spectacular things. Just before we meet him here God uses him to triumph over 450 prophets of the pagan god, Baal, on Mount Carmel. It was a miraculous display of power and authority unlike few others in all the Old Testament. But now, Jezebel, the wicked queen of Israel who was quite fond of Baal, is enraged and out for revenge. In response, Elijah runs for his life.

When he arrives in the wilderness he’s spent. He’s fried. He sees no way out. He even asks God to take away his life. He lays down under a broom tree, falls asleep, and hopes he won’t wake up again. And before we go on I want to ask if you can relate. Do you know this place in life, the place where you are so overwhelmed you don’t know how you can go on? A relationship you can’t fix. A person you can’t save. A disease you can’t beat. A hole you can’t dig yourself out of. A roadblock you can’t get around. All of us eventually come to that place where we realize that we are far less in control than we thought we were. It’s a place of desperation to which people respond in different ways. Some, like Elijah, want to just give up. Others resolve to work even harder, refusing to admit

their helplessness. Still others try to distract themselves with busyness or entertainment.

Elijah is in that (seemingly) dead-end place. But God meets him there with simple tenderness and grace. The gift of sleep. A loaf of bread and a jug of water. Not a lot, but enough to sustain him. And then a question. “What are you doing here, Elijah?” God asks it twice. And the tone isn’t harsh. It’s not as if Elijah isn’t welcome. God just wants Elijah to consider the question. What are you doing? What’s become of your life? Why are you in this place of desperation?

Elijah spills the beans. His answer makes a stab at politeness, but just beneath the surface of his carefully chosen words there is brutal honesty. “I’m done, Lord. I’ve been doing everything you have wanted me to do, working my tail off for you. And now look at things. I’m the only one left. What do I have to show for my efforts? Now I’m a marked man. There is no way out. I deserve better. I expected better. Where are *you* doing in all this? Why have you let this happen?”

In response, God says this amazing thing. He tells Elijah to go outside the cave and stand on the mountain and wait there because he is going to pass by. This had happened once before long ago. This is Mount Sinai. This is where God met Moses all those years ago, maybe even in this same spot, and allowed Moses to glimpse his glory as he passed by.¹ Apparently it was going to happen again. God was about to show up.

All of a sudden a hurricane wind sweeps over the mountain and shatters rocks all around. But God doesn’t show up in the wind. Then there is this tremendous earthquake that shakes the very foundations of the mountain. But God doesn’t show up in the earthquake. Then there is a terrible wildfire that engulfs the mountain. But God doesn’t show up in the fire. Finally, after the fire, there is **“a sound of sheer silence.”** In some translations, **“a still, small voice”**, or **“a quiet whisper”**. The Hebrew here is difficult to translate, and almost seems to suggest that the voice does not come in a sound Elijah could hear with his actual ears. Nonetheless, God is in sheer silence. It is there that God shows up.

This makes me think of the Psalmist who writes, **“Be still and know that I am God.”**² Or the prophet who proclaims, **“The Lord is in his Temple: Let all the earth be silent before him.”**³ It makes me think of Jesus who **“often withdrew to lonely places and**

prayed.”⁴ Jesus, maybe every morning, went out and met his Father in the silence.

So here’s my question to you. What if God tends to show up in the silence? If that’s true, how often are you in the silent places God tends to frequent? When was the last time you were silent and still. No noise. No distraction. No agenda. No screen in front of you. Just silence. Most of us avoid silence like the plague. Richard Foster says, “One reason we can hardly bear to remain silent is that it makes us feel so helpless. If we are silent, who will take control? Silence is intimately related to trust.”⁵ In silence we get the perception that nothing is happening, which isn’t true. In silence we have to face what’s deep inside, which we don’t always want to do, the inward emptiness that may be gnawing at us there. Silence strips us like nothing else quite does, makes us face the uncomfortable realities of life. Noise, and busyness, and activity, and distraction are good places to hide. We can’t hide in silence.

But again, what if silence is where God shows up, where God speaks, where God heals and loves, where God feeds our souls? All the spiritual masters agree. Henri Nouwen said, “Without silence it is virtually impossible to live the spiritual life.” The Spanish mystic, St. John of the Cross, said, “Silence is God’s first language.” Mother Teresa put it simply, “God is the friend of silence.” Finally, Richard Foster says, “Our adversary, the devil, majors in three things: noise, hurry, and crowds. If he can keep us involved in much-ness and many-ness he will rest satisfied.”⁶

I’m asking these questions today because we are entering into what is, ironically, the noisiest, most hurried, crowded season of the year. I say ironically because Advent, these four weeks or so before Christmas, has been set aside by the church for centuries as a time of waiting and stillness and silence. The word Advent is taken from the Latin word for ‘coming’. That’s what this season is about; we are waiting for Jesus to come. Not as a baby in a manger; that already happened. We are waiting for Christ to show up in our world again - at the end of time, yes, but also in every moment.

But it’s gotten to the place these days that people talk about surviving the holidays. When I try to set up meetings with people in December I’m often told that we need to wait until January, when things settle down. And there is so much expectation this time of year.

⁴ Luke 5:16

⁵ Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline* (Harper, 1978), 100-101.

⁶ I’m borrowing references cited in an excellent sermon by John Mark Comer at Bridgetown Church in Portland: *Unhurrying with A Rule of Life: The Power of Quiet in a World of Noise* (November 17, 2019). Listen at <https://bridgetown.church/teaching/unhurrying-with-a-rule-of-life/4370/>

¹ See Exodus 33:21-23.

² Psalm 46:10.

³ Habakkuk 2:20

There are wonderful traditions to be sure, but in the end the shopping, and the decorating, and the hosting, and the traveling, and the mailing, and the baking can turn us into people working so hard to prepare for a party while, all along, we completely ignore the guest of honor. I know that some of you are weary already just thinking about what's on the calendar this coming month and it's only December 1st.

I don't want to add to that burden this morning. That's the last thing I want to do. Instead I want to offer you a simple invitation. As we enter into Advent this morning, resolve to make silence a part of this season. Not just silence for the sake of silence, though that in and of itself can be healthy, but silence for the purpose of waiting for, and listening to, God who, as he did with Elijah, often shows up in the sheer silence speaking in a still, small voice. God says through the prophet Isaiah, **"In returning and rest you shall be saved; in quietness and in trust shall be your trust."**

It does take trust. The German theologian Eberhard Arnold once noted, "People who love one another can be silent together." Think about the people in your life with whom you can be silent and at ease. Those are people you love and trust. The same can be true of God, once we know him. We can be silent before God. No justifying. No explaining. No excuses. No blaming. No complaining. No posing. Just quiet before a God who, if we will sit still long enough to learn, has nothing but love for us.

So here's my invitation. Before you leave here today I invite you to think of one way you can practice stillness and silence this season of Advent as we together wait and watch for God, in Christ, to show up.

Perhaps you want to cut out some activity you've traditionally done this time of year and, instead, take time to be still. If you miss it terribly, you can always add it back in next year. But you might not miss it.

Create a space in your home this December where each day you can sit, even for just 15 minutes, and be still. Light a candle if it helps. Brew a cup of tea or coffee. Read the scriptures and then just be quiet before God.

Abstain from some source of noise in your life, remembering that not all noise comes into our heads through our ears. Unplug the television. Log off social media for the month – trust me, all your friends and all their posts will be waiting for you in the New Year.

Drive in silence without music, without the news, without podcasts...just silence.

Go outside and walk and leave your headphones behind. We have this beautiful river right in our neighborhood. Go up on the levee and just walk alone for thirty minutes or an hour in silence. Pay attention to what you hear.

For our part, we are going to do our best to make this space in December a true sanctuary from noise, and hurry and busyness. Our Wednesday evening services, and even to some extent Sunday mornings, are going to make intentional space for stillness and silence. Make plans to come, and when you come, come expecting to be still, and to listen, and to wait. Our Fireside Room in December is set aside as a sanctuary as well. We encourage you to spend time there on Sunday mornings, or anytime during the week.

Understand, I'm not suggesting you shut everything down this month. I'm not expecting that any of us will do what Elijah did, spend forty days fasting in the wilderness. No, just take a small step or two in this direction. God may not show up in the way you expect him to show up, or exactly when you want him to show up. He's not a genie in a bottle, but the sovereign Lord of the universe. He is also our Father. And he has come near. In Christ, God has come so close he became one of us. By his Spirit, God even now makes his home within and among us. Yes, our God shows up in all sorts of ways. But one of those ways is silence, sheer silence. We are invited to go and meet him there.

Amen

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The Next Step

A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application

1. Read I Kings 19:1-12. It's an amazing story. What stands out to you here?
2. Why does God show up to Elijah in the sheer silence?
3. Psalm 46:10 declares, **"Be still and know that I am God."** What do stillness and silence have to do with knowing that the Lord is God?
4. When was the last time you were completely silent? (Sleeping doesn't count!)

5. Do you agree with Richard Foster who says, “Our adversary, the devil, majors in three things: noise, hurry, and crowds. If he can keep us involved in much-ness and many-ness he will rest satisfied.” Is he right or is that putting it a little too strongly?
6. What have you heard Christ speak to you today through this message?
7. What is one step you are going to take in response to what you have heard from Christ?
8. What is one way you can intentionally practice silence and stillness this Advent season, waiting in that place for God to show up? Be as specific as you can.

Table to Table Question

A question for kids and adults to answer together

Do you like to be silent? Do you think we can hear God better when we are quiet and still?