

The Right to Remain Silent

1 Kings 19:1-15a ; Luke 8:26-39

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on June 20, 2010 by the Rev Dr Joy J. Moore

Silence is a difficult mode for those who live amid the constant sounds of headlines news, talk shows, reality TV, satellite radio, mobile phones and personal MP3s we carry in our pockets. Even when the sounds are mere white noise in the background, we are inundated with a constant stream of information through status updates, instant messages, visual voicemail, texts and tweets. Still, whether the total lack of audible sound, or the true absence of genuine communication, silence remains a difficult mode for most of us.

There was a time when silence of a sort was more the norm; a time long before trains, planes, and automobiles. A time when the earth trembled and the people turned aside in the presence of the God who told the oceans how far to come on shore. A time when the mountains quaked and creation turned attention to the one who gave the sun a hiding place until dawn. A time when lightning flashed, and all creatures stood in awe of the one who hung the stars in the skies.

Today, in our busyness and constant noise, we have been taught to appreciate the episode read from 1st Kings this morning because it has allowed us to calm ourselves into meditation and silence. It has long been tempting to skim through these all too familiar episodes in search of a catchy phrase, useful slogan, or a 140-character tweet. Something like:

Be still and know: we will find the divine presence in the silence;
for God was not in the sound bites; but in the silent bits.

(128 tweetable characters, by the way)

As if one can expect predictability from the God who took a young mother's last bit of flour and opened a donut shop for an officer of the law where the little lit stayed on until it rained. God response is not so easily calculated.

The result of these false expectations has been a superficial comprehension of an amazing drama narrating the presence of God. In our flash-and-bang blockbuster movie world, it may be comforting to hear that God comes to Elijah in the "a sound of sheer silence."¹

But God was not there.

Like a fleeing suspect, this familiar episode in Christian Scripture, is interrupted with a report of the absence of God – a moment when God exercises the right to remain silent. I want to suggest, this episode tells us more about vocation and call than the nature of revelation. (My apologies to those who came this morning wanting a still small voice –not something I have even been accused of having.)

This can be both comforting and disruptive. To learn that revelation is to be found not in the spectacular manifestations of nature but rather the ordinary course of life, is a cause for greater

¹ New Revised Standard Version

alertness. Even in the biblical narrative, there was a time when the psalmist proclaimed that heavens declare God's handiwork, the earth trembles, foes fall before fire. Yet, what the heavens declare, we bear: the glory of God. (Hold that thought)

Today, we control the winds and the rains, at least we claim to. The weather channel (which even non-television-watching purists seem to harbor an addition to) predicts, describes, and calculates storms we name Charlie, Ivan and Katrina. Maybe because of this text, at least in spite of it, we no longer expect God is in the so-called "acts of mother nature." (unless, of course one files an insurance claim, when suddenly the worlds greatest spokesperson knows you are in good hands with your good neighbor who is committed to the belief in acts of God) It is almost comforting to know God need not be blamed for tsunami's in Indonesia, earthquakes in South America, and hurricanes along the gulf coast.

The absence of God should come as no surprise, for the narrators of scripture have always been careful to separate the divine presence itself from its outward manifestations. Today's untrained reader tends to assume that in contrast to the first three cacophonous manifestations God is really meant to be present in the mysterious small voice. The narrative gives no warrant for this - one way or the other. The contrast is between the disruptive display and the still quietness.

I once was attempting to hold a conversation with a mother of a toddler as the child pulled over books, pushed around noisy toys and kicked most everything in sight. Now, I have learned to ignore the distractions because it is the only way to have a conversation with the parent of a toddler. At one point, however, the mother became distracted and abruptly cut me off. Not because of a loud noise, mind you, but because of a lengthy silence. Only when the thunderous noise died down, replaced by a contrasting quiet was she distracted. (she was right, by the way, we found the child, in my living room, one hand in her mouth the other in the candy dish as she shoved chocolate in her mouth as fast as she could switch hands) It seems one must worry more when the children are quiet that when they are engaged in noisy activities.

Seems this was a lesson Elijah had also learned. The disruptive display left him huddled in the cave. There, he remained sullen and seated during the thunderous displays. But the silence got his attention. And this is the moment where we find Elijah. In the hoorah and hubbub of confronting the prophets of Baal, he knew what to do. Their chants and dancing did not phase him. But now, behind the stayed, calculated voice of Queen Jezebel, Elijah is undone.

Let's reset the scene -

Jezebel got a status update from Ahab about Elijah. Elijah has had some great victories. It really ruined her day. So she emailed Elijah with a serious threat that messed up this poor fella's mind. She called on her own gods to destroy her as he had destroyed her prophets if she didn't kill him the next day. 24 hours [Jack Bauer, ancient original not-made-for-TV script]. A message sent of high importance by the Queen, and Elijah is undone.

Now, unfortunately for our catechism, rather than reveal the divine, the bible has become a self-help manual exposing the fragmented nature of humanity. So these events seem well placed on Father's day in the midst of global economic disaster. Surely today's men can identify with the depression illustrated by Elijah's failure to please the reigning Queen in his life? Not merely

religious fathers, but anyone who has won the fear of the fella's, but failed to gain the respect of a woman.

Elijah panics and runs for a day. (note, that's pushing toward 24 hours, but let's give her gods some time, they were a little slow on sending that fire signal a few events back) So now Elijah asks that he might die. Clearly this is not his aim...if he wanted to die, let Jezebel kill him! So God provides...food for a lengthy journey...and it seems it should have been enough for Elijah to begin to understand Jezebel's own words are against her now. It wasn't.

Because despair will cause you to be distracted from your mission. And Elijah was.

Reading the narrative, rather than skimming the texts, we are lead to understand Elijah's original efforts are motivated by a divine agenda so global in scope that this mere preacher/priest had taken on the Queen. But now he is distracted from this vocation.

Elijah was experiencing the consequences of a less tested practice today. While he, a religious leader, still held a place of social power and influence, unlike many today, Elijah insisted upon speaking with serious conviction concerning the public claims of the claims of this particular God.) He submitted all acts of justices and righteousness to the rule of God, the creator of the universe.

Elijah expected his actions to display the presence and power of God. Something he forgot when asked by God about his current situation. This moment, like some chapters in our own lives, is not dramatic, flamboyant, or mesmerizing. It is not graduation, promotion, election or NCAA victories. It is the quiet moments alone. It is when your parents have left you home for the evening and your mind wanders what to do next. It is when the last child has left the nest, and a husband and wife have to spend time with each other again. It is when the unemployment runs out and the job offers never came. It is when the cancer returns. These momentous moments arrive after dramatic events, but the quiet is more unsettling as we hear our own whimpers and whines.

Our present political climate begs our complaint. The uncontrollable oil spill in the gulf highlights our failures. The loss of jobs, spread of AIDS, and continued human trafficking demands we protest. It is enough to cause you to lose faith.

There is Elijah, whimpering about his past zeal and his communities' present unfaithfulness. No mention here is this recitation of the victories on Elijah's behalf that so agitated Jezebel. Without faith, Elijah is imprisoned with despair and the fear of Jezebel's discipline.

And God shows up asking a not so simple question: "What are you doing here, Elijah?" This is a vocational question.

The memorable moments the prophets recalls are linked to events in his recent past. Not the victorious displays of the presence and power of God; somehow he forgot these when asked by God about his present situation.

And in so forgetting, Elijah missed his calling. And now, it would not come in the wind, the earthquake or the fire.

For God is exercising the right to remain silent.

In contrast to the cacophony the low murmuring sound draws Elijah out of his cave wrapping himself either in protection or as a sign of guilt. What we do know is that Elijah is in the same situation after the theophany as before - registering his complaint. (here, Elijah could really use a Stephen Minister!)

Elijah does what every desperate people must do. Grieve the loss, and express their resentful sadness about what was now is not and will never again be. Taking time to live in the silence before too quickly claiming comfort, redemption and victory. One can only appreciate gain when one has rightly recognized loss. Only then does one adequately rejoice aloud again.

The most obvious reality and the greatest threat to our call is the power of despair. Everything we have worked for is irretrievably lost. When God remained absent, Elijah may have concluded that he was without a God who makes any difference. Instead, when God remained silent...*that* got Elijah's attention. Like a parent scrambling to the last location of their once noisy child...the silence rather than the noise draws Elijah out.

And when God breaks the silence, he gives Elijah a reminder of his call. His despair is transformed into missional energy and a stewardship of generosity. That thought you were holding? Elijah is restored to one who is capable of bearing the image of God. This is how John Wesley defined salvation.

So I must ask you: What are you doing here? Or better put - in this seeming silence of God - what are you doing as you await God's next move?

Elijah would need to have faith again in order to be released from the prison of despair and the fear of Jezebel's discipline. In Christ, we have this faith, a confidence that if God can raise Jesus from the dead than surely he can use our ordinary everyday lives to give the world a glimpse of his glory. For this is the promise to Abraham - that every nations would be blessed when his people were blessed. The benefits of living as if God reigns are not only for the Jew or the ancients, today it means not making distinction between male and female and reconnecting the broken relationships of slavery and war.

The first century followers of Jesus saw this as they watched Jesus encounter a man living in the silence of the tombs; A man living in the wrong zip code; A man whose name had become his failures. This man too turned aside in despair before hearing the divine call. But after seeing what Jesus did with the swine, he wanted to participate in the drama, be among the spectacular, take part in the fantastic, maybe hang around when Jesus takes a little boys sardines and crackers and opens a Long-John Silvers franchise on the lakeshore.

But Jesus calls him to an ordinary everyday existence that glorifies God. Go home - the most difficult mission field there is - go back among your people.

- Those who doubted you and who doubt like you.

- Those who know your failures and have worse ones of their own.
- Those who want God on their own terms and you at arms length.

Return to your most familiar place, and declare how much God has done for you.

The man would. Elijah would. What about you and me? We have a right to remain silent. AND we have a responsibility to be those who proclaim the healing presence of God.

We are inheriting a world rife with war, environmental degradation, dysfunctional health and educational systems, dangerous dependence on fossil fuels, creeping totalitarianism, diminished civil rights, and a fragile economy. Following the same instructions originally given to humanity, we too must innovate our way out of our current problematic situation, and discover and implement solutions that will work on a global scale. God's directive to Adam and Eve, make this world their home, to prosper, to increase the population, to go into all the world and manage it, taking responsibility for what lives in the waters, flies in the air, and every living thing that moves upon the earth, - this still remains the divine instruction for humanity. Until God's kingdom comes in its fullness, we are to be like Christ, bearers of the glory of God.

Our means of setting things right must be submitted to the reign of God. So when you choose your strategy, ask yourself: what are you doing while you wait for God's next move? Write a check for Haiti, allow someone to cut in front of you in traffic, call up that sibling you have yet to forgive or whom you believe can never forgive you. Do this not as a politically correct activity – do this to show that God is faithful; that God is present; that God hasn't given up on setting the world right again.

You see, God has the right to remain silent, because he has given us the responsibility to proclaim his glory. And you have the right to remain silent. But I ask you: **What are you doing while we wait for God's next move?**

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