

"Silence Before Action"
Sermon by Oby Ballinger
All Saints Sunday

Edina Morningside Community Church; November 5, 2017

1 Kings 19:1-18

Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done, and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword. Then 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." Then 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. But 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." Then he lay down under the broom tree and fell asleep. Suddenly an angel touched him and said to him, "Get up and eat." He 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. The 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." He 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.

At 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?" He 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." He 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; and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence. When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. Then there came a voice to him that said, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" He 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." Then the Lord said to him, "Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus; when you arrive, you shall anoint Hazael as king over Aram. Also you shall anoint Jehu son of Nimshi as king over Israel; and you shall anoint Elisha son of Shaphat of Abel-meholah as prophet in your place. Whoever escapes from the sword of Hazael, Jehu shall kill; and whoever escapes from the sword of Jehu, Elisha shall kill. Yet I will leave seven thousand in Israel, all the knees that have not bowed to Baal, and every mouth that has not kissed him."

I had a friend in college who worked as a personal care attendant at a local nursing home. She was going to be a nurse, and at this position learned firsthand some of the hardships that come from being in that caring profession. Conversations at the nurse's station let her in on some of the less rosy parts of the job. So that year for Halloween, she went as the "inner nurse". She wore a pair of scrubs inside out, and wrote on it all the [things that nurses might want to say](#) but that they keep inside for the sake of maintaining a cheery disposition. For example: "Living the dream!...said no night shift nurse, ever." "I've seen it, smelled it, touched it, heard it, and stepped in it. All of it." "Only two things are guaranteed in this life: death and staying after shift to finish charting." "For someone who's short of breath, you sure do talk a lot!"

If that costume opened my eyes to what nurses go through sometimes, today's Scripture is a similar glimpse into the prophetic life. We overhear the prophet Elijah's harried and overwhelmed self-talk, or what we could call the "inner prophet". Elijah is on the run from King Ahab and Queen Jezebel, really feeling sorry for himself. First he lays down under a shrub and asks to just die, but God sends an angel to feed him. Then he marches through the wilderness forty days and nights to get to the mountain of God.

Finally he gets to Mount Horeb, also known as Mount Sinai. This is the mountain of Moses and the Ten Commandments—this is God’s home.

And sure enough, God finds him there too. “Hey, Elijah, what are you doing here?” Then Elijah’s self-centered “inner prophet” complaint comes pouring out. “I have been very zealous for you, O God. The Israelites have done all sorts of terrible things to your prophets and your name. I’m the only one left of all your prophets, and they’re hunting for me right now.” Poor Elijah—he’s practically hysterical.

And then God does a most interesting thing. God says, “Hey, stand here and pay attention, because I’m about to come by.” Elijah is going to get the chance to see God, in the same place that Moses once saw God. Elijah knew what to expect when God showed up. This is Yahweh—who led the people of Israel by a pillar of cloud by day and fire by night. There could be lightning, thunder, and a great storm—it might be a burning bush, or fire from heaven. It would surely be the greatest thing Elijah ever experienced.

A great wind comes up, so great that it breaks rocks open and splits mountains, but God is not in the whirlwind. And then an earthquake shakes the whole land, but God is not in the earthquake. There is a blazing hot fire, but God is not in the fire. Finally after all of these incredible experiences, there comes a sound of sheer silence. Then Elijah lifts his mantle—his prophet’s robe—and covers his face. It is a fearful and holy thing to come into God’s presence. For Elijah, God is not in all the fancy pyrotechnics. God arrives in the sound of sheer silence.

Silence can be a pretty powerful experience, especially when everything else has been noise. How often do we truly find silence in our lives? If your life is anything like mine, it’s not often. And not all silence leads to Elijah’s kind of spiritual encounter with God. His is a deep kind of silence, restful stillness after all the over-the-top activity has stopped. It’s a kind of peaceful awareness, watchfulness because God is going to show up. It is nothing less than the holy appearance of God. This is why retreats are so important to the spiritual life. They are a break from all the hustle and bustle in our lives, a chance to step back and pay attention, because God just might show up. It’s another reason for coming to church—it’s a regular spiritual practice of stillness, centering ourselves to be aware of God’s presence. Sometimes, we are like Elijah: on a mission, or running from something, or caught up in the fire, the wind, and the earthquake. We need periodic times of silence and stillness, to balance out all the other activities that can distract us from the things that matter most.

Now this is not to say that all silence is created equal, or that silence is good all by itself. Sometimes silence can be oppressive, such as silence about sinful injustice. Silence around the ecological dangers of our consumption habits. Silence around the inequalities that women face in our society. Silence around the ways corporate greed takes advantage of human need. No, silence is not always good in and of itself.

For silence to be divine rather than deadly, it must lead into something more. Holy silence, like that which Elijah experienced, begins with stillness, but it doesn’t stay there. This kind of silence is preparation for the sake of action. It involves stepping back from all the other noise in our lives in order to listen for God’s call underneath everything else.

The Hebrew phrase for what Elijah hears is a bit ambiguous. The translation we read from renders it “the sound of sheer silence.” But other translations call it a “still, small voice.” The Hebrew word *qol* can mean either “sound” or “voice,” so both translations are right. Deep within the silence, there is a still, small voice of God. Divine silence helps us hear God speaking about where God wants us to go next. Notice that Elijah does not stay in the silence. He is commissioned and sent out again. By the end of the passage, he hears God say, “Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus.” There’s a list of the kings Elijah is to anoint, and a promise of seven thousand others who are faithful like Elijah. A new call comes out of the silent encounter with God, and a gentle reminder that Elijah is *not* in fact all by himself in the work.

Such clarity and purpose awaits us too, and while it’s on its way we are invited to rest in the silence. The silences between the sounds here, and in the gentle bread and cup that will be passed through the

pews. The silence of putting your feet up at the end of a long day of service. The quiet stillness of telling stories to children at bedtime. It may be as simple as deep breaths while sitting at a stoplight. Or even the tiny break for breath in the middle of a sentence.

Trust that these times of silence have God written all over them. Let them be a pregnant pause, a chance for us to hear the voice of God. Something new is coming to life inside the silence. There is a still, small voice—God’s call that gives us strength to go out again. May God find you with the sound of silence. Amen.