

Haslett Community Church-United Church of Christ
Fifth Sunday after Pentecost- June 27, 2010

Scripture lessons: Psalm 42:1-5a & I Kings 19:1-19

IN THE SILENCE

You get to a point in your life where you have to make a hard decision about something very important. Maybe a crisis has hit and you don't know what to do. You might be out of a job or in a job rut. There's a new prospect that looks exciting or no prospect at all that looks promising. Maybe you're dealing with an illness, a separation, a dwindling bank account, or a wayward child.

Whatever it is, you feel you need lots of help because it's something you can't face alone. So you sit down in an empty room or on a quiet hilltop or in the solitude of your car, and you say something like, "OK, God. I'm listening. I'm looking. Please show me a sign."

You've heard that this sort of thing works for religious people. Moses saw a burning bush and Noah had a rainbow. The disciples received resurrection appearances and Paul got a jolt, a voice from heaven, and some temporary blindness. You'll take any of those signs now because you figure only something far out-of-the-ordinary can give you hope that will last. "Show me a sign, God," you say. "I'm ready."

Frederick Buechner tells of a time in his life like that. His anorexic daughter was dying. She refused treatment even as the doctors assured the family that she'd die soon if she didn't start eating. Buechner had failed in so many attempts to break through to his daughter that he felt completely powerless to change the situation.

He writes, "I remember sitting parked by the roadside once, terribly depressed and afraid about my daughter's illness and what was going on in our family, when out of nowhere a car came along down the highway with a license plate that bore on it the one word out of all the words in the dictionary that I needed most to see exactly then. The word was TRUST.

"What do you call a moment like that? Something to laugh off as the kind of joke life plays on us every once in a while (or was it) the Word of God? I am willing to believe that maybe it was something of both, but for me it was an epiphany. The owner of the car turned out to be, as I suspected, a trust officer in a bank, and not long ago, having read an account I wrote of the incident somewhere, he found out where I lived and one afternoon brought me the license plate itself, which sits propped up on a bookshelf in my house to this day. It is rusty around the edges and a little battered, and it's also as holy a relic as I have ever seen."

Maybe God has a keen sense of humor. Maybe this is the kind of subtle and silent communication God prefers but that we miss as we look for big stuff like burning bushes, miraculous healings, and heavenly voices. Subtle and silent isn't our preferred mode of God's voice, but when we have ears to hear, it's full of grace.

Take today's second Scripture reading, for instance. Elijah is hiding out in a cave. He's killed hundreds of Queen Jezebel's priests and she wants him dead for it. Elijah's in a crisis.

And he's not just any prophet. He's to the world of prophets what Elvis Presley was to the world of rock 'n roll. He's the king and he's been on a giant-sized mission, but his people of Israel have sold out. They've started to worship Baal instead of Yahweh. Israel is dying a slow and painful spiritual death, and Elijah is the last remnant of the way things used to be.

So one day he just snaps. In a heartbeat, he kills four hundred prophets of Baal right in front of King Ahab. Ahab runs home with his tail between his legs and reports the news to his dreaded wife, Jezebel. Everybody knows that you don't mess with Jezebel, but Elijah has, so Jezebel rages and Elijah runs for cover. He's got a bull's-eye on his back and a bounty on his head.

He's sitting deep in a cave and wanting to die. He may have won the battle, but now it looks like he's lost the war. Despairing, hopeless, and nearly suicidal he feels like he's got no way out and nothing left to live for. He's failed in his mission, he thinks, and his mission has been his life. He hides out in the darkness and waits for the ax to fall.

But God is in the business of giving people like Elijah a sign. The plot, the pacing, and the promise of this story cry out for a sign, so we look and we wait for it. Finally it comes, but not in the way we prefer.

I Kings 19, verse 11 says, “Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the Lord.” We think, “There it is. There’s the sign.” But the story says, “(A)fter the wind (there was a great) earthquake,” and again we think there it is, that must be the sign. But the story says, “The Lord was not in the earthquake.” Is God toying with Elijah?

The story continues. “And after the earthquake a fire”- alright, there’s the sign. “But the Lord was not in the fire.” Like Elijah we start wondering if the Lord will be *anywhere* in this story. But “after the fire (came) a sound of sheer silence.” It’s as if time stops, the world shuts down, and all of life holds its breath.

It’s bad enough when a friend gives us the silent treatment, but when God gives it, it can feel unbearable. That’s because we assume that when God is silent, God must be absent, and that’s why we go where the noise is. We play music in elevators and shopping malls. We fill in conversational gaps with aimless chatter. We always leave a TV or a radio on so that things aren’t too quiet. We wrap noise around us like a blanket.

But the Bible reminds us that God is in the silence. In his book, *God Was in This Place and I, I Did Not Know* Rabbi Lawrence Kushner highlights this in connection with King Solomon’s temple. In the Scriptures, Solomon’s temple is built to be God’s dwelling place on this earth. Rabbi Kushner points out that in First Kings it says that the inner sanctuary of this temple, known as the Holy of Holies, was empty except for a single throne, which also was empty. On either side of it were two gold cherubim with their wings spread over the throne.

This sanctuary was completely silent and undisturbed, except for one day out of the whole year, the Day of Atonement. On that day, the high priest entered the Holy of Holies to make amends for the whole people. To do this, he needed to speak God’s name, but- this was a major problem because no one quite knew how to do it. How do you pronounce a name that has no vowels? No one dared to try nor were they permitted to try except for the high priest on this one day, the holiest day of the year.

Yet, amazingly, in the Holy of Holies as the high priest inhaled and exhaled, he could start to hear God’s name on his lips- *Yah-weh. Yah-weh.* God was in the silence. God’s holy name, uttered with each breath, could be heard and spoken only in the silence.

Back in I Kings 19, Elijah begins to realize this. When the great wind, earthquake, and fire come he stays in the cave, but at the sound of sheer silence he comes out. It’s at that moment that God speaks: “What are you doing here, Elijah?”

Elijah answers, “Your people have sold out, Lord. They’ve torn down all Your altars and whored after Baal. They don’t care about You anymore, but I- I, in my zeal for You, killed four hundred of Baal’s prophets. Jezebel is out to kill me for it, so, Lord, it’s over for me. I’m the last of Your righteous remnant, and I’ll be dead soon.”

God says, “Elijah, get over yourself. Your story’s just beginning, so get up, stop wasting time, and go back to work.” In the silence, God comes, God speaks, and God puts Elijah back on track.

Why are we uneasy with or even afraid of silence? Could it be that the noise we work so hard to create and be surrounded by serves only to conceal what’s deepest in us? Could it be that the silence we try so much to avoid is actually the doorway to discovering who we really are, whose we are, and why we are?

Noise is concealing, but silence is revealing. It may be that the only sure way to hear God is in the silence, in the place where we literally have to strain to hear what God is saying. It’s probably also the only way to hear truly what other people are saying to us. The words that emerge from the silence likely hold much more truth than any of our noisy chatter can even begin to lift.

In recent years, our world has been slugged with conflict and bloodshed, with so many noisy, quaking, windy, and fiery times that threaten to leave us hopeless and despairing like Elijah in his cave. Such times of major turmoil also seem to bring out in us the urge to try and declare definitively what God is saying to us amidst all of the sound and fury. A disaster happens at the hand of nature or of our fellow human beings and we pastors, priests, rabbis, imams and other religious leaders are out there ready to tell everybody what’s what.

We go on about how God uses such events to try and push us to get our act together, to warn us that if we don't straighten up soon, only worse will come. There's often significant truth in talk like that, yet I wonder if it might help us a lot more if we urged each other simply to be silent, just to sit still with these things for awhile.

Don't rush to conclusions, don't wring our hands, don't hurry to assign blame, don't speed up to do something just so we can look like we're on top of things when we're not, and don't claim to know what God is up to.

Rushing around, wringing our hands, blaming, pretending to be in control or in tight with God we likely sound a lot more like noisy gongs and clanging cymbals than loving and faithful disciples of Jesus Christ. Recall in the gospels when Jesus calms a storm for his disciples. They're frantic and shouting, running around full of anxious prattle and worry when Jesus says, "Be still!" I wonder if he was commanding the storm or his disciples with those words. In any case, both became silent.

Listen for God in the silence. That's the better part of wisdom, especially in any troubled, anxious, and noisy time. Listen for what God is saying when we see the sun first kiss the sky in the silent dawn, or when we peek over our child's bed in the quiet dark of night, or when we finally turn off all of our electronics in order to be face to face with ourselves and each other. Go to those places and what will God say to us then?

I won't presume to know, but I do think I know what Elijah would say. He'd say, "God will speak. God will speak words that bring us to life and give us peace if we can be silent enough to listen." Amen.

Kurt Kirchoff

PASTORAL PRAYER

Holy Lord, there's often too much noise in our lives. It jingles and jangles us so much that we end up frantic and shouting, running around full of anxious prattle in our hearts, souls, and minds. We rush to conclusions, wring our hands, hurry to assign blame, speed up to do something so we can look like we're on top of things when we're not, and claim to know everything that You're up to. We ask You to help quiet us down.

Help us be with You in the silence so that we can listen for Your words of life and peace. Help us to become Your loving, peaceful, and faithful people who resist every temptation to despair and hopelessness. Keep us present to You in the silence where we can hear Your word that anchors us, that gives us courage to oppose evil, that gives us strength to stand against injustice, and that gives us grace to forgive each other when we all fall short. Teach us to serve You in quiet and humble confidence with all of our hearts, souls, and minds. We pray this in Jesus' name and we pray as he has taught us, saying together, "Our Father, . . ." Amen.