

The Sound of Sheer Silence

Sermon 21 | Greystone Baptist Church | June 23, 2019

1 Kings 19: 1-15

There's not a lot of silence in my life, you might imagine. And truth be told, I like it that way, most of the time. The noise of office chatter and hallway conversations reminds me that I have colleagues who work hard and people who find community in this place. The noises that fill my home are evidence of an almost 6-year old with tons of energy and more questions than there would ever be time to answer. My car rides are used for phone calls to check in on people that I love. The noise of my work, my home, and even my short commute is a reminder that I am nestled in community with a purpose, a calling, and people to journey alongside. So, I don't like silence too much.

Fortunately, I'm not alone. The whole world seems to share my inclination and (some might say even) addiction to noise. With a 24-hour news cycle, on demand TV, and smartphones with push notifications alerting us to, well... everything, we can avoid silence anytime it threatens our busy-ness.

It is more than just noise that is readily available on our smart phones and portable devices... it's the promise of companionship. We don't have to feel alone as we wait for friends to meet us, if we fill our time with online chatter through apps like Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, and Twitter. If the noise of company isn't there for us in real life, we can find it online and on-demand.

Solitude and silence seem to be things of the past.

It's been strangely quiet at my house this week. Mia spent some time in Virginia with her grandparents so the usual noise of toys, chatter, cartoons, and little feet running down the hallway was gone. As a parent, my automatic response to the absence of noise is panic. "What's wrong? It's too quiet," I caught myself thinking at the beginning of the week. "Oh, Mia's in Virginia... it's all good." We get so used to the noises that fill our lives that sometimes, silence can be alarming.

Having spent some time with the Elijah story and knowing that I had a unique opportunity to experiment with noise and silence, I decided that this week, I would pay attention to the silence that I typically like to ignore. I would turn my moments of parental panic into opportunities to hear what lies beyond the noise of my normal life.

It started with a morning jog on Tuesday. With no noise from headphones I was able to hear the sound of the wind rustling through the trees. Then the pounding of my dog, Penny's, feet on the pavement. Next, I heard a squirrel disturbing mulch beneath a shrub. A few yards later Penny and I stopped because she'd noticed a turtle walking through the grass of a neighbor's yard. I was overwhelmed by the sights and sounds of nature that seemed to be out-doing themselves for us on this extraordinary morning. Then it hit me...

this was no extraordinary morning. It was actually a very ordinary day; the only thing that had changed was me.

Rather than being consumed by the noise and responsibilities of work, family life, and the alerts popping up on my phone, I had set my intention to be present in the moment, to embrace the absence of every-day noise and to pay attention to the sounds of silence.

The scripture reading that started all of this finds Elijah as he journeys through the wilderness, feeling isolated and betrayed... until God meets him on the edge of Mt. Horeb. This isn't the first time Elijah encounters God. In chapters 17, 18 and 19 alone God speaks to him through noisier and more predictable means: ravens, angels, widows, and fire. But this time, the presence of God is like the sound of silence.

In this part of the story, Elijah is running away from an action-packed past as a prophet to the king. He is running south, away from the Northern Kingdom of Israel where Ahab and Jezebel sit on the throne, away from his responsibilities as a prophet of Yahweh, and away from the threat of death that awaits him as long as this king and queen are in power.

They were angry with Elijah because he had just killed all of the prophets of Baal, a Canaanite god in whom Ahab and Jezebel had placed their trust. As he feared for his life, the prophet fled south, first through Judah, the Southern Kingdom and then beyond the border and into the utter wilderness.

The illustrations in the story highlight Elijah's sense of loneliness and isolation. He leaves his only traveling companion (his servant) at the Judean border near Beer-sheba and travels for an entire day before he "rested himself under a solitary broom tree," (v.4). Even the tree is alone! There, exhausted, alone, and afraid, Elijah begs God to take his life away, to release him from his prophetic responsibilities because the burden has grown too heavy.

It's easy to characterize Elijah as a weak and complaining prophet. Here, in these verses he does sound a bit like Jonah who ran from God's call to Nineveh simply because he didn't want to go. But Elijah is no Jonah. He is not running from his calling; rather, he is exhausted by it. So, he goes into the wilderness seeking refuge and release. Refuge from the threats associated with being a prophet and release from his God-given vocation.

We can understand that, can't we?

Old Testament scholar, Walter Brueggemann, teaches us that the vocation of Elijah and his interference with the prophets of Baal may seem to us, a postmodern audience, like a superficial debate between competing religions. To truly understand and to make meaning of this story for our lives, we have to try to understand how the Israelites understood the Baalism in their ancient context. For Brueggemann, "Israel's understanding of Baalism is a system of religious beliefs and practices that, "try to manipulate the natural

rhythms of life, fertility, and fruitfulness which the Israelites believed to be created and managed by God alone. For those who followed Baal, there was no ethical dimension to controlling these natural rhythms and so they were subject to abuse and exploitation.¹ Such abuse and manipulation is on full display in chapter 18 when the 450 prophets of Baal put on a show, dancing, yelling, calling on their gods to ignite their altars with fire, satisfying the crowds (and the King and Queen) and justifying their idolatrous noise with feelings of satisfaction and ecstasy². Their noise made them feel like they were doing something that mattered.

By contrast, the Hebrew people, those who worshiped Yahweh, were bound by a sacred covenant to respect and honor the rhythms of God's creation, to worship the one God of Israel, and to love one's neighbor wholly and without compromise. The Israelite faith called believers to selflessness and humble concern for the public good.

Unlike the intriguing show put on by the 450 prophets of Baal, Elijah stands alone before God and prays for fire to consume his altar.

Elijah was God's prophet, God's voice against the cultural gods of selfishness, control, and power. His quiet, solitary prayer directly contrasts the loud cries put forth by the prophets of Baal and gives us a clue about how God might show up in the end.

Although Elijah felt alone in his calling, the whole of scripture reminds us that he was not. Numerous prophets from Moses to Isaiah to Obadiah to John the Baptist and to Jesus himself echo the same prophetic call, the one that beckons all people to turn away from self and toward our neighbors. But when everything around us offers sensationalism, and power, and a sense of control over the uncontrollable... it can be so tempting to join in the noise.

God showed up through fire, in response to Elijah's quiet prayer. A fire that claimed Yahweh and his prophet triumphant over the numerous, clamoring prophets of Baal. But even in his victory, Elijah's life was at risk. Jezebel wanted revenge. Without a moment to celebrate and enjoy his victory, Elijah's life is on the line so he flees to Mt. Horeb - which is also called Mt. Sinai - the place where Moses met God in his moments of exhaustion and frustration.

While he waits, there is a great wind, an earthquake, and then fire. And we might expect God to show up there, in all of that excitement and noise. But this time, God is not there.

Then, after the fire, there is something different, something new and perhaps unexpected... a sound of sheer silence, a gentle breeze, a still small voice as the King James Version says; and God *is* there.

¹ Brueggemann. *1 & 2 Kings*. p. 228.

² Eugene H. Peterson. *The Jesus Way*. loc. 1355

Elijah may have been looking for God in the ways that Moses did, looking for God in an obvious interruption, looking for God in the noise around him, but God was not there in the noise, God was in the silence.

Immediately after the mysterious encounter, Elijah picks up his mantle and sets off and returns on his way. In the most unsensational way, Elijah encounters God and finds that his strength is renewed... not by anything God says, but by the inarticulate and undeniable presence of God who is *with* him in the sound of sheer silence.

This is tricky for us because silence can be a bit elusive in our daily routines. Just think about how hard it is to sit still in that 60 second pause we take after the sermon each week. Think that's easy? Try to incorporate 3 minutes of silence into your daily routines and tell me how it goes. Silence is hard because it forces us to put our whole lives on hold while we sit and wait and listen.

Chosen silence (like trying to incorporate a regular pause into our lives) is hard enough, but sometimes silence is forced upon us and it feels more like loneliness, isolation, and abandonment. Maybe our social calendars aren't as full as they once were. Maybe our job has been downsized or outsourced and now we don't have anything to fill our days from 9 to 5. Or maybe we have a lost or broken relationship, leaving us with a little too much silence where there used to be love.

And sometimes, when we face this kind of overwhelming silence it can seem like there is no path forward, no future, and no way out. In times like these it seems like we are doing all we can and still nothing is working out the way we had hoped. It's tempting to run away, just like Elijah did. But even in his times of trouble and in his running away, God was with him, providing food for the journey through the angel in the wilderness.

"Get up and eat," the angel says, "otherwise the journey will be too much for you."

All of us are on a journey of faith. Along the way we experience times of ease and times of wilderness. While our paths will look different because they are uniquely ours, we all need food for the journey. Spiritual food that looks like encouragement, prayer, and support of faithful friends. None of us can do it alone. But the good news is, we don't have to.

God was with Elijah when he was sent to Ahab and Jezebel, calling them to repent and return to the God of Israel. In the sound of words given to Elijah from God's own self, God's presence guided Elijah, protected him, and provided him with everything he needed.

God was with Elijah when the fire came down from heaven, lighting the altar, and showing the people that Yahweh was the one true God.

God was with Elijah when he felt overwhelmed and overpowered, when he fled, and even when he found himself up on Mount Horeb. In all the noise and in all the silence, God was there.

I am definitely guilty of filling my life with noise... all kinds of noise. The noise of a busy schedule. The noise of a full calendar, filled with both work and play. The noise of current events so I can feel relevant. The noise of affirmation, persuading me that I might be successful. The noise of alerts on my phone showing that somebody liked my photo or found truth in my post. Noise, noise, noise from everywhere and at all times. I've filled my life with so much noise, that sometimes it's hard to make room for silence. That's why I was surprised by the way the wind sounded in the trees, the way the turtle's feet crunched the grass...

The noise that I created to make myself feel important, loved, and valued had drowned out the presence of God which was there all along, like the wind and the wildlife, giving me the very purpose and calling that brought me here in the first place.

We are a people who like to know what to expect. We like to have things at our fingertips like a responsive app and on-demand TV. But that isn't how God works. Yes, God is always there, but as Elijah learned on Mount Horeb, God isn't always in the obvious places. We may expect God to show up in the earthquake, in the wind, or in the fire... but God is in the silence. The quiet, steady, and ever-present silence that lingers behind all the noise we build up around it. All we have to do is open ourselves to it.

Maybe when my house is once again full of childish chatter, maybe when the stresses of work and life are mounting, maybe then I will remember the blessing of hearing the wind rustle the tops of the trees, the squirrel scurrying through the mulch, the turtle chomping through the grass, and the presence of God who draws near in the sound of sheer silence.