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Sermon—23Jun19
IKings19
“Silent Treatment”

In the Name of God, Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier. Amen.

Commentators on the problems of our society today often mention *noise*.

Noise is everywhere—from the roar of traffic in our cities to farm machinery in the country.

Today, it seems like every restaurant and every elevator comes equipped with a musical sound track. An architect once told me that new restaurants are designed so that conversation echoes all around, and diners can feel that the place has a buzz!

In New York City, we have the audial enhancement of airplanes and helicopters passing above our heads, and subways rumbling below our feet.

In such a noisy world, *silence* can come as a relief. We can be grateful for the relative quiet of the city late at night, before we go to bed.

And so we can begin to appreciate the strange experience of the Prophet Elijah that we heard described in our first Lesson. The reading begins by telling how Elijah had offended the rulers of Israel when he questioned their judgment.

As a result, the Prophet had to flee for his life to the holy mountain of Mount Horeb; he remained on the mountain for a period of forty days, fasting and praying.

Then, at the conclusion of this period, Elijah had a sense of God “passing by.” What that means isn’t clear, since God doesn’t walk around like a human being.

Perhaps we can say that God was in some way “present” to the prophet for a moment. Then, having “passed by,” God’s presence was no longer felt.

What happened next, though, was even more mysterious. According to the Bible, “...there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the Lord.” However, the text says, “the Lord was not in the wind.”

Then, after the wind died down, an earthquake occurred. But in this event as well, God hadn’t returned to Elijah. Nor was the Lord in a fire that arose.

After the fire, though, the Bible reports that there was “a sound of sheer silence.” In this moment, God once again appeared to Elijah.

The Hebrew words translated here as “a sound of sheer silence” have been interpreted in various ways. For example, other translations read: “a faint murmuring sound,” or “a tiny whispering sound,” or “a light murmuring sound.” The traditional King James Version says, “a still small voice.”

Whatever the translation, though, the idea of the text is that God *doesn’t* necessarily appear in wind or earthquakes or fire. The divine doesn’t need to be manifested in the spectacular phenomena of nature.

Instead, the lesson suggests that God can come to us in quiet moments when we are able to put the clamor of the world aside.

Even so, silence isn’t always something that we desire. You might argue with a friend, for instance, and then receive what you would call, the “silent treatment.” You’re not happy with your friend’s behavior because it means that she is refusing to communicate with you.

But this lesson from the Bible reminds us that silent treatment from *God* can be a good thing. It can be the *best* thing—the divine appears as the Bible says in an experience “too deep for words.”

God speaks to us when we pause in a noisy world to listen to him. This is why silence can be refreshing—and why it’s necessary to our spiritual health.

But here’s another question. If we need silence, why do we so often choose noise?

For example, many of us turn on the radio or the TV as soon as we get home. Many of us choose to live in noisy apartments or crowded neighborhoods.

Granted, the noise we choose might just be a part of the background of our lives. I need to be close to my work, and that means that I won’t live in a quiet part of town. Turning on the TV after work might simply be a habit that I have picked up.

But it can also be the case that we have bad associations with silence. Periods of silence might make us anxious. Old fears might creep into our conscious minds when there are no sounds to distract us.

Again, if a colleague at work gives you the “silent treatment,” you know that he isn’t pleased with you. Silence that comes from broken communication is also disturbing.

All the more reason, then, to ponder the story of Elijah’s religious experience. Something definitely happened when he cried out to God.

Whether a subtle divine whisper—or a mystical silence: something occurred that made a difference to Elijah. God spoke to him and he was able to discern the path that God was calling him to follow.

Thomas Merton was a monk who loved silence. He was a member of the Trappist Order in the Roman Catholic Church. This order restricts the periods during the day that monks can spend talking to each other. The rest of the time, they use sign language or they don’t communicate at all. (One of Merton’s books was called “Elected Silence.”)

Despite this lifestyle, Thomas Merton produced hundreds of thousands of words. He wrote a dozen books; he maintained a vast correspondence with both famous people and ordinary Christians; and he kept a voluminous journal.

So out of Merton’s silence emerged a number of spiritual insights. He once commented, for example that, “In an age when there is much talk about ‘being yourself,’ I reserve the right to forget about being myself, since in any case, there is very little chance of my being anyone else.”

We don’t need to worry about “being ourselves. We don’t need to fear silence because it can be a pathway to God. That is the real message of the story of Elijah.

Sometimes I find that, for me, one of the best parts of a church service is the time of quiet before the music starts. Since I’m here early, I get to sit in church and savor the moment.

Another high point for me is the period of solemn silence after what is known as “the Fraction”—the place in the service when the priest breaks the bread of the Eucharist. This action reminds us that Christ’s body was broken on the Cross for us.

Today, for a change, let’s conclude the sermon with a moment for individual meditation. At this time, we can be thankful to God for all his gifts to us—especially when God reaches out to us, not in wind or fire, but in sounds of sheer silence.

[Silence]

Amen.