

THE SOUND OF SHEER SILENCE

Psalm 42 & 1 Kings 19:1-15a

*My soul is athirst for God, athirst for the living God;
when shall I come to appear before the presence of God?
My tears have been my food day and night,
while all day long they say to me, "Where now is your God?"*

Earlier in the week when I thought about the unique and profound encounter that the Prophet Elijah had with God on Mount Horeb, how after the windstorm, earthquake and firestorm, Elijah encountered God in the sound of sheer silence, I thought cynically to myself: *Well sure God, roll out your special effects, give any of us a windstorm, an earthquake and a firestorm, not to mention angels giving us food and council and we'll come trembling waiting to hear your voice! Lots of us have heard the sound of your sheer silence and not rejoiced in it but been overwhelmingly frustrated. We've prayed and pleaded, seeking your guidance, seeking your help and all we've heard in response is your sheer silence. What does your sheer silence tell me when my money has run out and I desperately need a job? What does your sheer silence tell me in the face of my loved one's terminal illness? What are we to make of your silence? Are you really present in the silence? Can we receive help and direction even when we can't hear you?*

After my first cynical thought about this passage, perhaps it was the silence that spoke to me and brought to my mind the awareness of other sounds and signs I had heard that day. I awoke to the gentle early morning light on a cool, comfortable summer morning. There was a cacophony of birds singing outside my window. All creation seemed to be alive and singing. At breakfast my 2-year-old grandson came downstairs, full of wonder, curious about everything. What a joy it has been on this visit to see the world through his eyes. From there I went to mid-week early morning worship, shared the blessed Sacrament in the intimate setting of the Lady Chapel and sat down afterwards to breakfast with a couple of our regulars and a visiting former member. Christ was in our midst. Perhaps my life is full of signs, both miraculous and mundane of the living presence of the living God, if I would but stop to listen?

This is the third of four weeks that we follow the story of the great Prophet Elijah. Elijah was a powerful prophet, a man on fire for God. More than any other prophet in the Old Testament Elijah is the prophet of the big, the bold and the dramatic. Immediately before we picked up the story in 1 Kings 19 Elijah had engaged in a contest with the priests and prophets of Baal. They both built altars to their gods, placed an offering of a bull and laid wood for a fire. The offering that was supernaturally set on fire would represent the true God. The prophets and priests of Baal sang and chanted over their offering, cutting themselves and swooning on the altar. Elijah mocked their efforts and poured water on his altar. Finally, when the prophets and priests of Baal could not entice their storm-god to light the flame Elijah called on the name of the living God of heaven and earth, who sent forth fire from heaven and consumed the offering of the bull, the wood and even the stones from the altar. Elijah then prayed for rain and the 3-year drought was ended. This should have been Elijah's hour of triumph as the King and people returned to faith and

worship of Yahweh. Instead Queen Jezebel sent word that Elijah's life was in jeopardy. We pick up today's lesson as Elijah flees the scene.

Elijah was not happy. He was ready for God to take away his life, for despite all his efforts and successes the King and people had not repented and returned to God. And so God lead this prophet of the dramatic all the way to Mount Horeb, the Mountain of God. There in a cave God responded dramatically, descending first in wind, then earthquake, then flames and finally in a sound of sheer silence. Here Elijah discovers God not in the dramatic, the big and the bold, but in quiet and stillness.

And what does God tell Elijah in the silence? First Elijah repeats the litany of his complaint, in answer to God's question of what he's doing there. *"I have been very zealous for the Lord, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down you altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away."* Then, as the story continues God tells Elijah that he is not alone. There are 7,000 (a symbolic number) whose knees have not bent to Baal. Elijah is given three tasks, to anoint Hazael as king over Aram in Damascus, to anoint Jehu as the King of Israel in place of Ahab and to anoint Elisha as the prophet to succeed him. (We'll pick up the story of Elisha next week.) In other words God is at work in the events of the day and Elijah is one of many servants of God in this process.

Elijah, the prophet of the big, the bold and dramatic, met God in silence and in duty. Where can we whose souls are athirst for the living God come into his living presence? Actually, I don't think that God's living presence, or even encountering God, is something that we control. But I do think that we can learn to have our eyes open and our ears attuned to better see and hear when we do come into the presence of the living God. Let me share with you some examples.

The Psalmist in Psalm 42 is aware of his thirst for God, his longing for God. He has met God in the past in the midst of worship and praise and he longs to see God again. Most scholars believe the psalmist is in exile in Babylon far apart from the worship he once experienced in the Temple in Jerusalem. He tells himself to trust God even in the midst of exile and oppression:

*Why are you so full of heaviness, O my soul?
And why are you so disquieted within me?
Put your trust in God;
for I will yet give thanks to him, who is the help of my countenance, and my God.*

Even as the Psalmist prayed I have the sense that was already answering his prayer.

One of the candidates for my Assistant when Mother Julia was hired two years ago shared a sermon that has stuck with me. She described an experience before she had entered down the path towards ordination. She had been on a wonderful retreat at a Convent in Brewster, NY and was driving back home to her home in Ithica, NY, enjoying the drive when a billboard put out by the Roman Catholic Church caught her eyes –

JOIN THE CLERGY – and in the instance of seeing that billboard she knew for the first time that she was called to the priesthood. God can speak to us anywhere and through any medium.

The author of Hymn #333 in our hymnal, *Now the Silence*, Jaroslav Vajda was shaving – a time in fact when he got many of his best ideas – when the hymn began to take shape in his mind as a list of awesome and exciting things that one should expect in worship, culminating in Eucharist and benediction. (*Hymnal Studies 6, A Commentary on New Hymns*, Raymond Glover, Church Hymnal, NY, NY, 1987, p. 40)

Now the silence
Now the peace
Now the empty hands uplifted
Now the kneeling
Now the plea
Now the Father's arms in welcome
Now the hearing
Now the power
Now the vessel brimmed for pouring
Now the Body
Now the blood
Now the joyful celebration
Now the wedding now the songs
Now the heart forgiven leaping
Now the Spirit's visitation
Now the Son's epiphany
Now the Father's blessing
Now, Now, Now

Worship and praise is certainly a key place we often encounter God's living power.

Oftentimes we experience more of God's silence than of his word and presence. But even in the silence God is powerfully present. Even more the good news for us is that God's Word became flesh and was spoken in the life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. And so we understand that God wants to make his Word known, wants to bring his Word into life and flesh and being. Oftentimes we are unable to see it, but his living Word is there, present, even in the silence.

We cannot hurry God or force him to make himself known to us. What we can do is to be expectant, to wait, to hope, to look and listen for the ways that God's life, God's Word, God's special Word and direction for us might become known. We can come with expectantly to worship to meet the living God here as he gives himself to us – his Body and Blood – in these bits of bread and sips of wine. We can look with expectancy also in the midst of our lives and in our prayers to receive his Word, his commission, his direction, his answers to our prayers often in surprising ways and surprising places.

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