

## **The Sound of Silence**

Rev. John Allen

When I am preparing a sermon, one thing I always like to do is read a few different translations of the bible passage. After all, the bible was not written in English, but Greek and Hebrew, so we read it in translation.

A lot of the times, the translations are pretty much the same. Maybe a word here or there, a slightly different phrasing of the same basic idea.

And then there are times when the translations are so different, that it points to something in the text that is a bit of a mystery.

And that is what we have, with the closing words of this morning's reading.

As Elijah sat looking out of that cave, God was not in the great wind, nor the earthquake, nor the fire but in....

The translation I read says:

a sound of sheer silence.

Here are some others:

a gentle whisper

a still small voice

the sound of a gentle breeze

the soft whisper of a voice.

a sound. thin. quiet.

These all point us in the same direction more or less, sure there is some confusion, is it a voice? the wind? or just the sound of silence itself?

But the diversity here points us toward a poetry that is difficult to translate accurately. A beautiful turn of phrase that in many ways remains the sole purview of the original language.

I think the obscured meaning here is no accident of the text, but it is what happens when you try to describe the presence of God. It is like an over-exposed photograph. Hard to make out. Shrouded in the ineffable presence of the almighty.

I do like the translation I used. A sound of sheer silence.

It reminds me of power-outages. When the power goes out, and everything shuts down all at once. Suddenly, all the subtle, almost imperceptible whirs and hums that form the background noise of our life vanish, and we are left standing in a silence that is actually quite rare to us in our lives now.

And, at least to me, it has a sort of sound. That silence. It has its own resonance. A ring.

It is thin. Sheer.

The sound of sheer silence.

There is an order of monks at a Trappist Abby in Iowa who believe themselves the stewards of perhaps the quietest place on earth. A small underground chapel.

It is so silent that the brothers even warn visitors, especially those from cities, that they simply may not be able to bear it.

The monks have a regular practice of “listening to the silence” for the believe that within it, they may hear the still. small. voice of God.

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There is another thing that I always do when I am preparing a sermon.

I carry the text for the week with me, on a little card. Sometimes, like this week. I just jot down some cue words.

And I listen for what I might encounter in the week that might resonate with, or echo the text.

This week, I carried this note, which simply says. Wind, earthquake, fire, silence.

It practically vibrated in my pocket, when I was reminded that this weekend marks the 75th anniversary of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Wind. Earthquake. Fire. Silence.

And God was not in the wind, nor the earthquake, nor the fire, as surely as God was not in the bomb.

And then... a sound of sheer silence.

It was then that the prophet came to the edge of his cave, his head still shrouded against the blinding light

And God said: “What are you doing?”

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Wind. Earthquake. Fire. Silence.

a still small voice

a sound. thin. quiet.

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After any great calamity. There is a moment. Maybe a mere instant. Where that thin silence surrounds us. Where the power has just gone out, and we hear an uneasy hum. Where we stand in a place so devoid of orientation that we may not be able to bear it.

It is this kind of halting that our words cannot quite touch. And that passes us by before we can even account for it.

What if that is where God speaks? What if that is where we might hear the voice of God?

What if, like it was for Elijah, the silence that follows catastrophe is the space in which God asks us: “what are you doing?” and then sends us off in a new direction.

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I think right now we are a lot like Elijah in that cave. And all around us the maelstrom is raging.

For so many the murder of George Floyd was a galvanizing moment. To some because it was uniquely horrifying. To other because it was horrifyingly familiar.

But the release of that video. His cries out from the ground for nearly 9 minutes. They stopped everything. And I think even know if we take a breath, in stillness, we can touch the silence wrought of that violence.

We can make a choice not to move on from the way it disturbed us but to step into the void it exposed.

After any great calamity. There is a moment. Maybe a mere instant. Where that thin silence surrounds us. Where the power has just gone out, and we hear an uneasy hum. Where we stand in a place so devoid of orientation that we may not be able to bear it.

What is demanded of us in that place is to bear it. Is to immerse ourselves in that sheer, and stunning silence, to hear the voice of God calling us in a new direction.

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I think right now we are a lot like Elijah in that cave. And around us the maelstrom is raging.

Our world is gripped by a virus that is killing thousands each day. Our ability to grieve is interrupted by the need to social distance. Our ability to be present to one another is redacted by our need to wear masks.

The very things we need to do to be safe, prevent us from doing the things we need to do to feel sustained through crisis.

What new direction might God be charting for us out of the deafening void of this cruel chaos?

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There is a pandemic. But God was not in the pandemic.

There is white-supremacy. But God is not in the white-supremacy.

And there was an wind, that rattled the mountains, but God was not in the wind.

And an earthquake, but God was not in the earthquake.

And a fire, but God was not in the fire.

Then...

The sound of sheer silence....

and the still small voice of God.

“What are you doing?”