

“The Sound of Silence”

Elijah thought he had done enough.

You see, before our passage we read, Elijah had just come out victorious in his showdown with King Ahab and the prophets of Baal. The people of Israel were living through a drought and the consequences were severe. Without rain, food wouldn't grow and without food, the people would starve. Of more immediate concern to King Ahab is that if the people are starving they would feel they have nothing to lose and might decide they need a different king. King Ahab needs to give the people an answer to their pain. He needs to show that he's in control, that he has a plan.

So this is what he decides to do. He tells the people that the God of their ancestors cannot be trusted to save them from the famine. Instead, the people need to start worshipping the pagan god Baal, the god of rain, the god of storm, the god of fertility. If the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob has let them down, well, they have an alternative.

Ahab and his wife Jezebel set up altars and idols to Baal throughout Israel and commanded the people worship them and, just for good measure, they slaughtered all of the prophets of God, all except Elijah who had managed to flee.

During the famine, Elijah managed to remain hidden near oases where he could find food and water. But he could not remain hidden forever. The people were dying. They had forsaken the God who had delivered them from slavery. At some point, Elijah would have to act. At some point, he would have to confront the king.

So he does and, knowing the king wants to kill him, Elijah offers the king a contest, a challenge of sorts. They will prepare two sacrifices – one for God, and one for Baal. The prophets of Baal will ask Baal to send fire to consume the sacrifice and Elijah will ask God...whichever God answers must be the true God. Ahab agrees and the showdown is on.

The prophets of Baal cry out and there's no answer. They even start to cut themselves and no answer. Elijah, feeling confident, starts to mock them. Finally, when they give up, it's Eljah's turn. He cries out to God and God responds. Fire consumes the sacrifice.

Emboldened by his victory, Elijah slaughters the prophets of Baal, getting his revenge for what had been done to the Lord's prophets. And a rain cloud begins to form and drops of water start to fall. The drought is over. With water, there will be food. The people will be saved and Elijah has proven that his God is the true God.

Elijah had won, or so he thought.

But Ahab and Jezebel had other ideas. Elijah had embarrassed them. Elijah had proven that they had led the people astray and, therefore perhaps the people would no longer willingly submit to their authority.

You see, Ahab and Jezebel didn't really care about Baal. They didn't care about saving the people from the drought and the famine. They cared about what all corrupt rulers care about – holding on to power and if Baal was useful in holding on to power, then so be it. If Baal helped them convince the people that they were working on their behalf, then all the better. What Ahab and Jezebel needed more than anything else is for the people to believe that they were better off if the king and queen had unchecked power.

But Elijah had shattered that illusion so Elijah must be dealt with. And to be fair, Elijah didn't help his own cause either. After emerging victorious, he could have offered reconciliation. He could have extended the olive branch. But instead he wanted revenge so he killed the prophets of Baal. And that gave Ahab and Jezebel the perfect excuse to dispose of Elijah. They would do to him what he had done to Baal's prophets. After all, they would simply be executing justice.

So Elijah, who only a few minutes before was so confident, cocky even runs away. The one who had openly mocked the prophets of Baal, who had then slaughtered them, who had brought rain back to the people, who was so sure that all he had struggled against was finally over, so sure that he could just get on with life, suddenly realized that none of it was enough.

I don't know about you, but I can relate to how Elijah must have felt. We have been through so much over the last decade, so much chaos, so much disruption, so much that causes worry and fear. And I can't tell you how many times, I've wanted to believe it's finally over, that we've finally turned a corner only to be disappointed. Like Elijah, time and again, I've thought surely this was enough, surely we can turn the page.

And this is the moment when it all becomes too much for Elijah. He ran into the desert where he wanted to give up. He wanted to die. He even begged God to kill him. Things did not work out the way Elijah thought they would, the way that surely seemed inevitable. After everything he had done, it wasn't enough. And he was done with it. We know that feeling, don't we? When life feels like it's spinning recklessly out of control and we have nothing left to give. We want to just go to sleep and hope it was all a bad dream. Or we want to numb ourselves with whatever numbing agent works best. Or we want to turn inward and only focus on me and mine. We know what it is to have had enough with the world. Elijah was finished.

But not quite finished. He had one more thing to get off his chest. He not only was done with the world. He was done with God. He pours it on, saying to God, "I've been zealous for you. I've done everything right. And what has that gotten me." Elijah has questions about the way God works and why there seems to be no justice. He even implies that he, Elijah, is God's last remaining hope for the world and God is about to screw it all up.

But somehow deep down, Elijah doesn't really mean what he's saying, or at least he's not ready to get rid of God yet. You see, in the midst of his anger, his sadness, his desire to give up on himself and to give up on God, he has made it to Mount Horeb, the mountain of God, the place where God gave the people the 10 Commandments, the place where God first made a covenant with the people of Israel.

Maybe because he had no where else to go, maybe his legs seemed to know something that his brain didn't, Elijah returned to the very birthplace of his faith, perhaps instinctually knowing that if there's an answer to be found, he would find it there.

And he did get an answer, but my guess is not the answer he was expecting. From the mouth of his cave hideout, Elijah witnesses a violent wind, but God was not in the wind. He then sees an all-consuming fire, like the one that had consumed the sacrifice, but God was not in the fire. Then an earthquake, but God was no in the earthquake. And after all of these wonders – wonders that God was not in – God shows up.

Some translations of the text say that it was like a gentle whisper or a quiet voice but the most accurate translation of the Hebrew words is "sheer silence." This is not just the silence that is the absence of sound. This is the silence where you feel like time is standing still, where you're on the precipice and you could fall off the mountain or come back to solid ground and you don't really know which way you'll turn. It's the silence of the hospital room as your loved one takes their last breath. It's the silence when you hold your loved ones hand not daring to speak because you can't think of anything to say that will come close to being helpful. It's the silence when the events of the world seem spiraling out of our control and we've no more tears left to cry.

What Elijah discovers is that somehow, some inexplicable way, it's in those hollow and thin spaces of utter and complete silence where God is most present. We don't know how long the silence was – maybe a few seconds, maybe a few hours – but it lasted for as long as Elijah needed it to last. And somehow, in that silence, in that encounter with the mystery of God, Elijah is changed and he is now ready to hear what God has to say to him:

God reminds Elijah that he is not alone. And then God tells Elijah that there is more work to do. There is no quick fix. There's no earthquake or fire or wind coming to fix things all at once. Elijah had already tried that with the showdown with the prophets of Baal. There is only the frustratingly slow work of putting one foot in front of the other, of trusting that God is with us, and finding strength from our communities of friendship. The work of justice, the work of God is not about the big moments, but it's about doing the next right thing. It's about trusting that when all seems lost, it isn't really. It's about knowing that God still speaks – not always in ways we'd like or in ways we'd expect but in our most desperate moments, somehow God is there.

That at least was what Elijah discovered. And he was not alone. This was also the truth that our nations' greatest prophet discovered as well.

In 1955 when Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on the Montgomery bus, a young Dr. Martin Luther King, only 26 years old, was thrust into the national spotlight at the person chosen to lead the Montgomery bus boycotts. He had only been the pastor of his church for less than a year. And like any young, talented, ambitious person, he was ready to set the world on fire. And like any young, talented, ambitious person, he assumed change would happen quickly. But it didn't.

The boycott had been going on for two months and they seemed to be making no progress. Money was drying up. People were getting arrested. The KKK was becoming more aggressive in their attacks. And the people were tired. King found himself confronting one of those moments of sheer silence and he prayed this prayer:

"Lord, I'm down here trying to do what's right. I still think I'm right. I am here taking a stand for what I believe is right. But Lord, I confess that I'm weak now. I'm faltering. I'm losing my courage. I am afraid....The people are looking to me for leadership, and if I stand before them without strength and courage, they too will falter. I am at the end of my powers. I have nothing left."

And in the quiet of that kitchen in the middle of the night, King ultimately found these words come to him, "Stand up for righteousness. Stand up for truth. Stand up for justice. And lo, I will be with you."

So Martin Luther King, Jr. picked himself up and he went out again the next day, and the day after, and the day after. Over the next thirteen years, he kept standing up for truth, standing up for righteousness, and standing up for justice. He had high moments like when he gave the "I Have a Dream Speech" to hundreds of thousands of people and he had low moments like when he wondered if he was to blame for the 16th street Baptist Church bombing where 4 little girls were killed. That prayer in the middle of the night would not be the last time he would meet God in sheer silence.

But he kept going even to the very day of his assassination. On the night before he was killed, King gave a speech called, "I've Been to the Mountaintop." And it's one of the most eerie speeches in history because it's almost like King knew that his life was coming to an end even though he was still a young man. He ended his speech like this:

"Well, I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it doesn't matter with me now. Because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the promised land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land. And I'm happy, tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord."

These are the words of someone who has found God over and over again in the sheer silence, who had learned that the worst thing is never the last thing, and that the slow, the frustratingly slow, work for justice and love and peace would continue for as long as it takes, even if he couldn't continue the walk himself.

This is the hope that King found in the silence. This is the hope that Elijah found in the silence. And this is the hope that can sustain us.

In the silence, when we feel that all is lost, God is there.

In the silence, when we feel like we're all alone, we realize we're not.

And in the silence when we can't believe there's still more work to do, we somehow find the courage to keep going, to keep working, and to keep hoping for as long as it takes. Amen.