

Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done, and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword. ²Then Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah, saying, "So may the gods do to me, and more also, if I do not make your life like the life of one of them by this time tomorrow." Then Elijah was afraid; he got up and fled for his life, and came to Beer-sheba, which belongs to Judah; he left his servant there.⁴But he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a solitary broom tree. He asked that he might die: "It is enough; now, O LORD, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors." ⁵Then he lay down under the broom tree and fell asleep. Suddenly an angel touched him and said to him, "Get up and eat." ⁶He looked, and there at his head was a cake baked on hot stones, and a jar of water. He ate and drank, and lay down again. ⁷The angel of the LORD came a second time, touched him, and said, "Get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you." ⁸He got up, and ate and drank; then he went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights to Horeb the mount of God. ⁹At that place he came to a cave, and spent the night there. Then the word of the LORD came to him, saying... "Go out and stand on the mountain before the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by." Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake; ¹²and after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence. ¹³When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. Then there came a voice to him that said, "What are you doing here, Elijah?"

NEW TESTAMENT READING: Luke 9:28-36

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²⁸Now about eight days after these sayings Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray. ²⁹And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white. ³⁰Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him. ³¹They appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. ³²Now Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep; but since they had stayed awake, they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him. ³³Just as they were leaving him, Peter said to Jesus, 'Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah'—not knowing what he said. ³⁴While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were terrified as they entered the cloud. ³⁵Then from the cloud came a voice that said, 'This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!' ³⁶When the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. And they kept silent and in those days told no one any of the things they had seen.

“The Sound of Silence”

After the wind, the earthquake, and the fire, a sound of sheer silence. (*repeat*) It happened around 900 BCE. Ahab was King of Israel and he had a foreign wife named Jezebel. Neither were good characters. Ahab was an Israelite who worshiped YHWH, but Jezebel was a Canaanite whose pagan religion was Baalism. When she married Ahab, she brought with her 800 priests and prophets of her god Baal. Of course, worship of pagan gods is forbidden in Judaism, so Elijah, God’s prophet, confronted Ahab. He told Ahab that because of his sin in allowing Jezebel’s priests & prophets into his home, there would be a drought. And there was. But after 2 years of no action by Ahab despite the drought, Elijah went further by challenging the 800 to a competition between their god and the God of Israel. So the priests and prophets chanted and prayed on Mt. Carmel, and begged their god to send down fire. Of course, nothing happened. Eventually, Elijah sarcastically suggested that their god was maybe sleeping! He poured water on the altar and called to YHWH, the One, living and all- powerful God, to send fire down onto it. God did, and the fire burned the offered sacrifice despite the water. Then Elijah killed the 800 prophets/priests. Once Jezebel found out about what had happened, she threatened that she would hunt down and kill Elijah. Elijah was frightened and ran for his life into the wilderness of Horeb to Mt. Sinai. He considered giving up, but eventually was led by an angel to seek refuge in a cave. That night, there was a howling windstorm, the earth shook and a fire engulfed the land around him, and finally there was silence, sheer, complete, deafening silence...no noise at all, not a whisper or a cricket or a single wisp of wind. It’s been called “a silence that was so complete that it had its own sound.”¹ Elijah was afraid and wrapped himself in blanket, cautiously walked to the mouth of the cave. And then out of this complete silence there came God’s voice.

You know, seldom do we know of such a complete silence. We live in a very noisy world. Every day our ears are confronted with sounds of cars and trucks racing on the street and highways, of motorcycles “reving” their engines, of sirens, airplanes...of incessantly chattering

¹ John Buchanan. “*Sermon: Sound of Silence*” <http://www.fourthchurch.org/sermons/2007/070807>.

TV sets, blaring car stereos, and the ever-present dings, rings and speakers of cellphones. *At our house, we often hear the booming of artillery fire from Ft. Hood and of the trains coming and going along 190. Mike and I uncharacteristically left a restaurant not too long ago because the music being played overhead, supposedly background music, was so loud we couldn't hear each other. Even when the TV is off and it is nighttime and it seems like it should be quiet in our home, there is still thing in the background...the refrigerator, the ice-maker, the heater or air conditioner, the air filter, the occasional dog's bark.* Indeed, pure, sheer silence is not easy to come by in our world. And for this reason, we need to seek it out, as did Jesus. Scripture tells us that Jesus frequently stole away from the noise and push of the crowds to find solace and silence. In our text today, the one describing the transfiguration, we hear that he'd taken his disciples to a high mountain. Yes, we need to intentionally seek silence out!

But why is this? Why is silence so important? Well, I think it is because "God's first language is silence."² Out of the silent void, God spoke and there was. Last week we said that the we need to be attentive to the happenings of our lives, for so often God speaks through them. Well, God also speaks through the silence, and we need be still, quiet, to hear... "*Then there came a voice to him that said, "What are you doing here, Elijah?"*"

Now, sometimes, it just very hard for us, humans, to be still. In times of prayer, for instance, we know we should be listening for God's voice, but we have so much to say! We end up doing all the talking, listing off our concerns and our frailties, our fears, and then we offer our suggestions for what God needs do about them. We pray as though prayer is a vacuum that WE need fill up. We also pray without remembering the direction of power, overusing the phrase, "*Hear us, Lord*" as if the entire burden to listening is on God. We underuse the phrase, "*Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.*"

In addition, we struggle with inner chatter. This is because we, humans, can understand speech at a much faster rate than we can speak it. *Did you know that most people can speak at the rate of 120-150 wpm although we can process speech at 500 wpm. Consequently, our*

² St. Andrews Episcopal Church. "Sermon: The Silence of God." <http://www.saintandrewshawriver.org/sermons/the-silence-of-god> (accessed 2-7-18).

*brains fill in the lag time with inner speech, our own mental chatter. This can make silence during prayer time hard....We're so used to our voices chattering in our heads, we chatter further.*³ We need to work at being better listeners...to drown out our own voices when we enter into prayer, to turn off the TVs and put away the computers, cell phones, to minimize distractions, to take deep breaths, and to not get frustrated when it takes time to quiet our minds. *Fred Craddock says that the "voice of God in Jesus is not a shout. In him, the revelation of God is like a whisper. In order to catch it, we must hush, lean forward, and trust."*⁴

In addition to finding it hard to be still in the silence, we don't hear God's voice because we're trying to take charge of the silence. We don't let God be where God is often MOST present...in the silence. When we find ourselves, for instance, needing to comfort others in a time of loss--a death, a divorce, a lay-off, the aftermath of natural or un-natural violence--we often struggle for words. We labor for something to say which can fix the pain. But, in my experience, the reality is that there's often not much that can be said, and it is best to just simply be there, to just be present. Simply hold a hand, pat a back, engage small conversation, and then get out of the way so that God can speak. *John Buchanan says, that "the most profound silence is so often the moment of God's most profound presence."* "It's when," he says, "silence can be so elequent."⁵ Remember when Jesus stood before Pontius Pilate? Jesus was there, accused of sedition, bound, whipped, a crown of thorns on his head. "Speak!" Pilate commanded. "Have you no reply? Say something!" The Son of God made no reply, and we're told, "Pilate was amazed." Silence can be eloquent, filled with the sound of God's voice, if we let it.

And finally, sometimes we do not hear God speaking in the silence because we do not want to hear. Like Elijah, we're running, so overcome with our own emotions of fear, anger, pride, self pity, exhaustion. Sometimes we're just impatient. Sometimes, there's no evident reason. But in all these cases, it's easy to take the next step and assume that God is absent, or intentionally snubbing us. However, this is wrong. One preacher says it so well, "*Only an idol*

³ St. Andrews Episcopal Church.

⁴ Fred Craddock. *Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon Pres, 1985), 57.

⁵ John Buchanan.

always answers.” Our God is a God beyond anyone’s control and understanding. An answer will come, but not until the silence is complete, whenever that needs to be. And even then, the answer may be given in the silence. We can look to the cross on which God’s own son begged for a word ...and then we can look to the empty tomb, 3 days later. There’s the answer.⁶

Brothers and sisters, Scripture is full of silences from the divine. The best advice for these times, often referred to as “dark nights of the soul”, is to be comfortable with the silence, to not view it as our failing or an abandonment by God, to remember, as Martin Buber, a Holocaust survivor, said “*an eclipse of the sun is something that occurs between the sun and our eyes. It is not in the sun itself.*”⁷ We need enter into the mystery, trusting the Holy Spirit to speak for us in the silence with “sighs too deep for words”. *John Crowe Ransom wrote, “Two evils, monstrous either one apart, Possessed me, and were long and loath at going; a cry of Absence, Absence in the heart. And in the wood the furious winter blowing...But then, at the very depths of the silence, there was the Yes of an awakening, responsive God.”⁸*

Friends, Jesus so often sought out the silence that Elijah knew, the silence in which the sound of God is so eloquent. As we enter into the season of Lent, a time to be introspective and reflective, preparing our hearts for the passion, death and resurrection of our Lord, we need to seek out the silence. I encourage you to set aside regular time, and to find a place where you are undistracted by the noise of our noisy lives. There, intentionally quiet your mind, settle and center yourself, and open the ears of your heart. Be patient with yourself to hear. Remember always that the most profound silence is so often the moment of God’s most profound presence. And trust that when the silence is too deep for you to comprehend, the Holy Spirit will speak for you. Seek, friends, the sound of silence. Amen.

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⁶ Barbara Brown Taylor, “*When God is Silent*” (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Pub;1999), 80.

⁷ Martin Buber, “*The Eclipse of God: Studies in the Relation Between Religion and Philosophy* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press International, Inc., 1988), 23.

⁸John Crowe Ransom. Quoted in Martin Marty, “*A Cry of Absence*” (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers; 1983), 148.