

The Sound of Sheer Silence

Psalms 46/1 Kings 19:1-15

This week as I reflected on the story of Elijah, it became for me an image of the journey of faith in both its inward and outward dimensions. Being faithful to God's call has gotten Elijah into hot water. He has just confronted the prophets of Israel who have misled the people away from the worship of God who led them out of Egypt and into their own land. In a showdown on Mount Carmel, Elijah not only destroyed the credibility of the prophets but the prophets themselves. Now Jezebel, the power-hungry and manipulative wife of King Ahab, has put a price on Elijah's head.

Most of us will not find ourselves in as dire a situation as Elijah. Yet we will discover that the life of following Christ, making a serious commitment to our own spiritual life, does NOT make our lives easier. More fulfilling, yes. More in touch with God and our true selves, yes. More aware of the gift of our lives and the particular gifts God has given us to use for the sake of life, yes. But in other ways, our lives become more difficult. I remember a woman in another congregation I served who had begun to work seriously at a personal level with prayer, reading of scripture, seeking God's leading in her life...all of that stuff. She came into my office one day, plopped herself down, and said: "I didn't realize that being a Christian would be so hard!" Her life was deepening, growing clearer. She was seeing herself and life itself in a different way. And yet some of that "seeing" brought conflict. She could no longer be the same person or look at the world around her in the same way.

That's what happens when we begin to take seriously our discipleship to Christ and begin an authentic spiritual life inwardly and outwardly. We find ourselves in the wilderness, just where Elijah ends up. The wilderness, or desert, is the most vivid biblical image of the journey of faith. In the wilderness there are no external comforts, nothing to hold onto but trust in God's care and leading. It is living on the edge. Letting go of the old, not knowing yet what the new will be, learning to trust God in each present moment. It is a breath-taking adventure, and at times very scary.

Elijah sits down under a bush and wishes he were dead. He is overwhelmed, exhausted, scared to death, and without a clue about what to do next. Elijah falls asleep. An angel gently awakens him. "Get up and eat something, Elijah." Bread and water are mysteriously provided, just like the *manna* during Israel's wilderness wanderings. Elijah eats and drinks, then falls asleep again. Again he is awakened by the angel. "Get up and eat, Elijah, or else you won't be able to make the journey ahead of you."

I find this scene so touching because sometimes we get so fretful, so exhausted, so overwhelmed in our spirits that we neglect the basic, simple things we need for ourselves. Taking our faith seriously is one thing; becoming overwhelmed, exhausted, spiritually and physically depleted is another thing. God is going to continue to call

Elijah to his work as a prophet, but God is not a tyrant driving the faithful to self-destruction. There is nothing spiritually noble about going around exhausted, confusing what may be our self-importance or obsessiveness with God's call and mission. So Elijah sleeps and eats, sleeps and eats. Then he is ready to go on.

Eventually Elijah comes to Mount Horeb, where Moses received the commandments. God's presence is very powerful here. Elijah holes up in a cave for the night. There comes a voice: "What are you doing here, Elijah?" Elijah pours out his troubles, the whole story, how he is now the only true prophet left in all of Israel and is being hunted like a dog. This part of the story always struck me as subtly humorous. God knows very well what Elijah had been doing and his whole situation. Elijah's rattling off of his troubles begins to sound like whining. Our prayers don't need to be long litanies to God of all our troubles, much less complaints about how bad things are. God knows the situation and what is needed better than we do. Our praying only needs to be a simple lifting up of needs and then listening for what God is calling US to do.

Elijah is told to go outside and stand at the mouth of the cave. God is about to pass by. As Elijah starts to get up things get pretty wild outside. A powerful wind, strong enough to split boulders and mountains. The text says, "but the Lord was not in the wind." Then an earthquake, but God is not in the earthquake. Then fire, but God is not in the fire. And after the fire there is the "sound of sheer silence." When Elijah "hears the silence," he goes out of the cave into the presence of God.

Silence is the threshold of God's presence. It is an essential part of the life of faith because it enables us to be aware of God, the world around us, and what is going on inside us. Sometimes there is a great deal going on inside of us, all that we have ignored or avoided or been in denial about--fears, anxieties, anger, hurt, insecurities. The call to an inward journey does not lead us away from ourselves but toward our true self, our real self, and the mixture of stuff that is in us.

When we stop running and sit for prayer, for our daily inward journey time, the experiences, feelings, and thoughts that are in our hearts and minds may seem just as frightening and powerful as what was going on outside Elijah's cave. But God is not in those things. They swirl around, make a lot of noise, seem to be overpowering, but they pass. They spend their force if we sit long enough and do not attach ourselves to them. Eventually comes the silence, the "sound of sheer silence." At this soundless sound Elijah knows it is time to go out to meet God. The silence is the threshold of God's presence and voice.

Psalms 46 is a good parallel here. The shaking of the earth and mountains. The roaring of mighty waters. The trembling of the hills. These are images both of the frailty and insecurity of life, AND God's lordship over the whole of creation. Therefore we do not fear. God is our refuge and strength in the midst of the circumstances that are always changing and sometimes filling us with fear. What are we to do? "Be still, and know that I am God." Literally this means, "Stop fighting, and know that I am

God.” It is a command from God to us as peoples and nations to stop the fighting, the wars. God is about breaking the bows, shattering the spears, and burning the shields, all the weapons of war. “Be still. Stop the fighting.”

Those words also have an inner meaning. “Be still. Stop fighting within yourself. Stop struggling. Then you will know that God IS.” The inward journey, the life of prayer is not supposed to be a war we carry on within ourselves. It is not about battling against things we don’t like about ourselves. It is about being still. It is stopping and calming. It is letting everything settle down within us so that we can then listen to the “word of God” that speaks peace to us. When we practice stopping and calming, sitting and becoming quiet, we simply become aware of our fears, anxieties, anger or hurt, embrace them gently with compassion, but not attach to them. They are disempowered and transformed not by turning our inner life into a battlefield but by embracing them in compassion and understanding.

As the storm subsides, as we are able to sit long enough to become inwardly quiet and more peaceful, we begin to hear the “sound of sheer silence.” It is that inner stillness in which we become more fully awake and aware in our relationship to the One who created us, the very Source of Life. It is the silence in which we begin to hear what we call the voice, or word, of God.

“Elijah, what are you doing here?” What a wonderful question! On one level it can mean, Elijah, what are you doing hiding out in that cave? Come out; I’ve got work for you to do. It’s time to get back to it. Yet in another sense “What are you doing here?” can be the most focusing question of the spiritual life. What AM I doing here on earth? What has God put me here to do with my one precious and brief life? This is a wake-up question. It is not about what everyone else is doing. We waste our lives, our time, our energies measuring everyone else, judging what they are doing, what they are giving themselves to. What a waste! The only question for us is, What am I doing here? What is God calling ME do be and to do with my unique life? When we start living with that question, then things start happening! I don’t think we need to worry about what the answer is, for we will each find it for ourselves if we continue an inward journey of always going back to the silence that is the threshold of God’s presence and voice.

Friday evening, Sylvia Hobson and Sandy Knodel, Co-Directors of the Festival Center, and Selina Field brought a group of teenage girls to our retreat center here for an overnight. These girls are part of the Thursday afternoon “Young Women’s Group” that meets at the center. Their lives, like all teenagers, are filled with noise and activity, yet also with pressures and stresses not a part of homes and neighborhoods that are affluent and white. A part of the vision of the Chrysalis Interfaith Retreat Center is to make this place of peacefulness and quiet available to those who would not otherwise be able to have such an experience.

As the girls walked into Kitty’s Cottage, the first question was, “Where’s the TV?” That was the last time that question was asked. I sat for a moment with Sylvia

Hobson in the living room of the cottage yesterday afternoon. She was getting a little quiet time for herself while the girls were in the pool. She spoke of how wonderful the experience had been for the girls, that it was something they would remember their whole lives. Now, this was certainly not a silent retreat for these girls! They laughed, talked, played games, sang, fixed meals together, and stayed up into the wee hours of the morning. Sylvia, Sandy, and Selina were certainly not physically rested by the experience! But there was something more, something deeper. These young people were able to touch something in themselves, something at the heart of who they really are and what life truly is about. In their own teenage way, they had begun to listen to the “sound of sheer silence” within themselves and around them.

The more I work with this business of prayer or the inward journey, I find that when I am asked about how to do it, I simply want to say, “Learn to be silent.” Begin to listen for that “sound of sheer silence,” and the rest will come to you.