

Taking Refuge: The Sound of Silence

Psalm 46/1 Kings 19:1-15

The story of Elijah flight to Mt. Horeb can serve as an image of the journey of faith in its inward and outward dimensions. Being faithful to God's call has gotten Elijah into hot water. He has confronted the prophets of Israel with their failure as spiritual leaders. They have led the people away from the worship of God who brought them out of slavery in Egypt. In a showdown on Mount Carmel (Ch. 18), Elijah destroyed not only the credibility of the prophets but the prophets themselves. Now Jezebel, the power-hungry wife of King Ahab, has put a price on Elijah's head. Elijah is running for his life.

Most of us will not find ourselves in as dire a situation as Elijah. Yet we will discover that the life of following Jesus and 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 who had begun to work seriously with prayer, reading of scripture, deepening her relationship to God...all of that stuff. She came into my office one day, plopped herself down, and said with a sigh: "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 through a new lens. You might say that she was waking up to life. She could no longer be the same person or look at the world around her in the same way. She was looking more deeply at decisions, at beliefs about many things, and at her relationships. By saying that all of this was hard, she was not saying she wanted to give it up. Quite the opposite. She felt genuine joy and gratitude for this new path she was on.

Things like this happen when we begin to take seriously our discipleship to Jesus in an authentic spiritual life. 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 can be very scary. Yet in this desert is also the place where new life, real life begins to blossom.

One day into his journey, 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 messenger. "Get up and eat, Elijah, or else you won't be able to make the journey ahead of you."

I find this scene very touching. Sometimes we get so fretful, so exhausted, so overwhelmed that we neglect the basic, simple things we need. Taking our faith seriously is one thing; becoming spiritually and physically depleted is something else. God is going to continue to call Elijah to his work as a prophet, but God is not a tyrant driving us to self-destruction. There is nothing spiritually noble about going around exhausted and depleted. We must not confuse what may be our self-important drivenness or obsessiveness with God's call and mission. Caring for others, being on mission, does not mean neglecting care of ourselves. So Elijah sleeps and eats, sleeps and eats. Then he is ready to go on.

Finally, 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 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 humorous. God knows very well what Elijah had been doing and his whole situation. Elijah's rattling off of his troubles, not once but twice, begins to sound like whining. It causes me to think about our own praying. Do our prayers become long litanies to God of all our troubles, dwelling on 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. Less talk and more listening always works best, in prayer and in life.

Elijah is told to go stand at the mouth of the cave. God is about to pass by. As Elijah gets up, things get wild

outside. A 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. Notice the progression here. The kinds of events or signs of God's presence that we might expect, big "special effects". Then there is the "sound of sheer silence." Other translations say "a still small voice". But that is not accurate. It is the sheer silence, the quiet after the storm, that is the threshold of God's presence and speaking. When Elijah "hears the silence," he goes out of the cave into the presence of God.

Are we still looking for God in the big and dramatic, the dazzling light show or the thunderous noise? Lots of popular religion is built on that kind of thing. Silence, however, is the gateway of God's presence and speaking. 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 "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 breaking the bows, shattering the spears, and burning the shields, all the weapons of war. If that is where God is working, why are we still justifying our weapons and our wars? "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 is not a war that 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, and we grow in our ability to not attach to them. The things that frighten and overwhelm us are dis-empowered and transformed, not by turning our inner life into a battlefield, but by embracing everything in compassion and understanding. I like to call this practicing God's grace in our own lives. As the storm subsides, we begin to hear the "sound of sheer silence." In this inner stillness we become more fully awake and aware in our relationship to the One who created us, the very Source of Life. In this silence 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, and judging ourselves over against them. What a waste! The only question for us is, What am I doing here? What is God calling ME to do 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.

About three years ago, Sylvia Hobson and Sandy Knodel, who were Co-Directors of the Festival Center, and Selina Field brought a group of teenage girls to our retreat center here for an overnight. The girls were part of the Thursday afternoon "Young Women's Group" that met at the center. Their lives, like all teenagers, were 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. This was

our first opportunity to host such a group.

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 was told afterward 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 late, going outside to look up at the stars. But there was something else going on. These young people were touching 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." There are so many books, ancient and modern, on prayer and spirituality and so forth. Many of them are quite helpful and good. There are even advanced degree programs now in spirituality and the spiritual life. What I have learned, however, is that this can become a distraction. Someone shows us a "method" and we buy into it. Soon enough, if we are aware, we realize that we are very good at practicing the method and knowing a great deal ABOUT the spiritual life, but still have not begun to "be still and know that God is God". We are again filling our minds with words and ideas and concepts. Read the books. Use what is helpful. But most importantly, begin to stop running. Learn to take refuge in yourself and your relationship with God. Learn to listen for that "sound of sheer silence," and the rest will come to you.