

Simplicity: Freedom from Noise

Third Sunday

Read: 1 Kings 19:1-13

1Now Ahab told Jezebel everything Elijah had done and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword. 2So Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah to say, "May the gods deal with me, be it ever so severely, if by this time tomorrow I do not make your life like that of one of them." 3Elijah was afraid and ran for his life. When he came to Beersheba in Judah, he left his servant there, 4while he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness. He came to a broom bush, sat down under it and prayed that he might die. "I have had enough, Lord," he said. "Take my life; I am no better than my ancestors." 5Then he lay down under the bush and fell asleep. All at once an angel touched him and said, "Get up and eat." 6He looked around, and there by his head was some bread baked over hot coals, and a jar of water. He ate and drank and then lay down again. 7The angel of the Lord came back a second time and touched him and said, "Get up and eat, for the journey is too much for you." 8So he got up and ate and drank. Strengthened by that food, he traveled forty days and forty nights until he reached Horeb, the mountain of God. 9There he went into a cave and spent the night. And the word of the Lord came to him: "What are you doing here, Elijah?" 10He replied, "I have been very zealous for the Lord God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, torn down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too." 11The Lord said, "Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by." Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake. 12After the earthquake came a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper. 13When Elijah heard it, he pulled his cloak over his face and went out and stood at the mouth of the cave.

Some thoughts:

We live in a noisy world. There are more opportunities than ever to avoid any potential silence in our lives. TV, radio, podcasts and music - many of us fill our days going from one noise to the next. Then there are the noises we do not choose: the person on the bus playing tinny music on their mobile phone, the piped music in every shop and restaurant and (if we live in an urban setting) the constant cars, sirens and aeroplanes.

Although we cannot say for certain what Elijah's expectations were when he arrived at Mount Horeb, reading between the lines it seems had thought God might appear in thunder and lightning. And why would he not? Elijah knew about Moses' encounter with God and the flames of fire from within a bush (Exodus 3:2); he knew about God leading the Israelites through the wilderness with the dramatic pillars of fire and cloud (Ex. 13:21). Indeed, only a short time before, God has done something dramatic in Elijah's life: lighting up the water-soaked wood and animal sacrifice in a glorious blaze in full view of the people and the false prophets (1 Kings 18).

And yet, when the Lord passes by Elijah, he does not appear in the powerful wind, the earthquake or the fire. God's presence is revealed in a "gentle whisper", or a "still small voice". Or one translation prefers "the sound of sheer silence" (NRSV).

Imagine:

What would it be like to hear “the sound of sheer silence”?

Many of us come from church traditions where the loud and dramatic are signifiers of God’s presence, whether that be through large choirs, thundering organs or wailing electric guitars. The crowd raise their voices, the chorus reverberates from the congregation, the drums resound. Perhaps we, like Elijah, need to change our expectations? Perhaps we need to contemplate the possibility that God will be present with us in our quiet, humble prayer times, just as much as when we are engaged in festival worship?

To worship in the wilderness is by nature a quiet and secluded event. Here we do not find the roaring crowds but instead the silent, solitary heart seeking the Lord. Here is not the loud organs or the well-rehearsed band, but the individual humbly coming before God with no noise behind which to hide.

Challenge:

Experiment with spending increasingly long times in silence, a bit like when you train for a running race. Have no agenda other than sitting quietly in God’s presence. Start with a very short time and build up to a longer five minutes or so. Afterwards, record what you feel during these times, and what are learning. Keep this challenge in mind and return to the challenge in your own time during this period of Lent.

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| 30 sec silence | Date/ Time | Notes: |
| 1 min silence | Date/ Time | Notes: |
| 2 mins silence | Date/ Time | Notes: |
| 3 mins silence | Date/ Time | Notes: |
| 4 mins silence | Date/ Time | Notes: |
| 5 mins silence | Date/ Time | Notes: |