

Storm and Silence
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Storms can be beautiful, breath-taking, even. If you are watching the sky change and listening to the wind rise from a safe place, you can feel excitement and wonder at nature's power. You can actually revel in feeling small, but safe, in a huge universe. I remember hearing an interview with a woman in the mid-west who had survived a passing tornado. She said, "I used to love storms, and lightning and thunder and wind. But now I feel sick to my stomach when the wind rises like that." She had weathered the storm, but it still lived with her and she felt forever vulnerable.

Those who make their living on the water, as did some of Jesus' disciples, had too much experience to love storms. They knew vulnerability, they knew power, and they knew when they needed help. In the ancient world, people believed that God, or the Gods were actually riding the storm. Maybe we modern folks have inherited this idea with the phrase "Acts of God" for weather events that no one can predict or control.

Some of us might argue, though, that acts of God, or the voice of God, is more subtle than big weather. Some of us listen for and search for God in less dramatic ways. A group of us meets every Tuesday in the parlor for what we call "Centering Circle": a time of silent contemplative prayer, followed by a discussion, followed by more silent prayer. It is an amazing energy cell of inspiration and insight. In the quiet, we pray by listening, not speaking. It reminds me that then the late poet and wordsmith John Ciardi was asked, "What are human beings?" he answered: "We are what we do with our attention."

When I read Scripture from the pulpit, I usually preface it with the invitation to listen for the Word of God. That invitation is especially poignant given our text from the Hebrew Scriptures for this morning: the story of the prophet Elijah listening for the Word of God.

Elijah is a powerful and revered prophet in the Hebrew tradition. There are lots of stories about him, not so many actual words of prophecy. He had a ministry of confrontation with the King and Queen of Israel, Ahab and Jezebel. He criticizes them for dishonesty, greed, and for persecuting God's priests in order to establish the Queen's cult of worshiping the storm god Baal. We first meet Elijah in chapter 17 of first Kings, hiding out from the royal family... apparently he's already in trouble...hiding out in a ravine during a punishing drought. We read this in worship 2 weeks ago. He is miraculously cared for and protected by God, living on water in the ravine's stream and bread brought to him by ravens. Then he is sent to a more distant foreign town, where he is miraculously fed and sheltered by a widow. God then sends him back to the royal court for a showdown with the priests of Baal.

A contest is proposed: animal sacrifices will be offered to the Lord, Elijah's God, and to Baal by their respective holy men, then they will call for fire from heaven to consume the sacrifice. The audience will know which God is greater by the strength of the fireworks. The Baal worshippers are unsuccessful, while Elijah's prayer to God meets with a spectacular display of fire:

everything is consumed. As the people are convinced of the power of the Lord, Elijah takes this opportunity to kill all the idolatrous priests. The drought comes to an end with a storm, and our prophet is victorious. In an amazing display of strength, or adrenaline, he runs in front of Ahab's chariot for 17 miles to return to the nearest city. You would think that he could ride on the wave of this success to become a powerful mover in Ahab's court.

But the opposite happens. Jezebel is furious and vows to kill Elijah in revenge. Here our passage begins, with Elijah's escape to the desert. It is not his most attractive moment. He is in despondent. He has used up all his resources, his great success seems all for nothing: he's done, he wants it all to be over. He prays for death. (By the way, I find this ironic: if he really wanted to die, he could have stayed put in Jezreel. Jezebel was happy to do the job for him. But Elijah is not working with the logical part of his brain. He operates in fight or flight mode.) Under the scanty shade of a broom bush, he falls into an exhausted sleep. An angel appears with food and an order: "get up and eat, you're going on a walk." He is reminded, as are we, of all those difficult times in the past when God sustained him, fed him when hope was gone.

Elijah now makes an epic journey to the mountain of God, where the law had been revealed to Moses. He is going back to his roots, so to speak, back to the source, to try and plug into the depth of God's power and life. He hopes for a Moses-type encounter: perhaps a fiery bush or pillars of fire and cloud. He hears God speak, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" I can't help but think that Elijah was a bit exasperated by this question. And he responds, with a note of self-righteous anger: "I have been very zealous for you, God, because the Israelites have all turned against you, all your prophets are dead, I'm the only one left, and I'm barely alive. What am I doing here, indeed!" I get the feeling that he has been brooding over this story for some time, his anger and self-pity fueling this litany of divine betrayal.

So he is told to stand out on the mountain and wait for God. There is a breathtaking display of wind and earthquake and fire – very impressive, reminding us of all the natural wonders of the Exodus. But the God of the prophets is more than a display of power. Perhaps those natural wonders prepared Elijah, made him listen –the way listening to ocean waves or to a babbling brook works - it is not the sound of God speaking, but it puts one in a certain frame of mind. God has more to say: words that can only be heard in silence.

In Hebrew, the phrase is *Qol Dmamah Daqah*. Our King James Bible calls it the 'still small voice,' while today's reading translates it as "the sound of sheer silence." Clearly it is hard to put into words, because other versions say gentle whisper or a sound of gentle blowing or a gentle breeze or a quiet whispering voice. One Jewish commentator translates it as "the voice of fragile silence", and I think that I like this best. It names that fact that silence, true contemplative silence, is rare and precious. Sometimes we have to go to the desert to hear it. Sometimes we have to be at the end of our rope to hear it. From this desert silence come words that Elijah hears with his inner ear.

Surprisingly, they are the same words he's already heard, the exact same question: "What are you doing here?" And Elijah gives exactly the same answer: about being the only zealous, devout person left, about all his past accomplishments, about how alone he is and how dangerous his future is. I think, though, that the difference is this: in that moment of fragile silence, Elijah could finally hear himself. He could finally hear the words he uses to describe himself, and the implied criticism of God. He is beginning to sound like an egomaniac, even to himself.

But in the desert, God's word can eventually get through. "Go." That's the first word. Go back into the thick of things, where life is difficult. But don't go back as a loner, the only good guy, the only zealous prophet, full of self-righteous self-importance. Go and anoint kings, not just of Israel, but of neighboring nations, too. Go and anoint another prophet, Elisha, who will join you in your work. Find a new self-definition, be engaged in the world, not as a murderer of false prophets, but as a prophetic partner in naming injustice. Prophecy has changed for Elijah. No more spectacular miracles, no more fire from heaven and earthquakes. Also no great revelation of law, no new rules. Elijah must now learn his role-model Moses' greatest virtue – humility. The zealous warrior is given his most difficult mission: to confront his pride and see himself as he truly is. Like Jesus, he gets a new clarity about his mission.

This new mission, with the recruiting of another prophet, is a turning point in Elijah's life. But it seems that it took a drastic event to bring him there. It took hard times, danger, solitude, despair. It took a journey. It took a struggle for receptivity. It took waiting for all the drama to pass, until the desert silence could speak. It took listening to his own words, and knowing them as inadequate.

I like the idea of an active church, a busy church, a zealous church, even. We often measure our success by the success of our programs. We measure our failures the same way. But I believe that we have a wonderful lesson to learn from today's scripture, and a wonderful opportunity ahead of us. We don't have to take a trip to the Sinai desert like Elijah, but we might need to take an interior journey to the place where the voice of fragile silence speaks. This is a journey that calls on all our past experiences: memories of zeal, of success, of failure, of grief, of despair, of solitude, of celebration. On this journey we are asked, "What are you doing here?" Our first answer will probably be the recitation we've already composed in our minds: "Well, I've worked really hard, but..." You can fill in the blank: demographics are against us, sports schedules are against us, the pace of life has changed, we are fragmented, etc, etc. God can create a space, a silent space, where we hear that answer. Then God asks again. God is persistent. What will our new answer be?

I mentioned our Tuesday Centering Circle earlier. Last Tuesday, a few of us gathered in the parlor and sat in silence for 20 minutes. Then we read a Psalm in a translation by a Jewish spiritual teacher. This led to a discussion about names for God in the Psalm, and we ended up re-reading the Psalm, substituting the word "Love" for God. Then, we had 20 more minutes of silence. Then, some of us crossed the street to be part of a vigil to witness against the gun violence and hatred in Orlando last weekend. To me, there was something seamless in the movement from the parlor to the Norwich Green. We moved from witnessing to God's presence with our listening, to witnessing to God's presence by standing on a street corner. Our vigil was just a different kind of prayer.

I believe that one of God's words for us, spoken into the silence we make, will be "Go." Go and stand on the corner, go and stand with the LGBTQ community, go and stand with murdered children, go and serve the hungry food, go and show the power of love and kindness in a world of Hatred and prejudice. Listen, then go.

So, stand at the mouth of the cave with me. Watch the fireworks of nature, and the fireworks of our political discourse, and the storms of divided communities. Then listen to the silence. When our souls are stilled, listen. Listen for the voice of fragile silence that will lead us on.