

Proper 14A
Peace, Seattle
August 10, 2014
1 Kings 19:9-18

MEETING GOD IN SILENCE

Elijah had had a rough go of it. Going toe to toe against Israel's worst king on record—King Ahab—and his evil (trophy) wife Jezebel had taken its toll.

And even after pitching a shutout against the 450 priests of Baal in one of the most celebrated contests recorded in the Hebrew scriptures, (1 Kings 18:20-40) Elijah was feeling more vulnerable than confident.

So when Queen Jezebel puts a bounty on his head, Elijah flees for his life, journeying 40 days and 40 nights to the holy mountain of God – Horeb.

Elijah arrives there feeling depressed, defeated, fearful and alone. He wonders whether all his efforts for God's sake have been for naught. Exhausted, he crawls into this cave and he waits for a sign.

There's a lot packed into this story, into what precedes it and what comes after it, but I want to focus on three verses, vv. 11-13.

Elijah is commanded to "Go out and stand on the mountain before the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by." And so Elijah, bone weary, looks toward the mouth of the cave.

Listen to what happens next:

THERE WAS A GREAT WIND, SO STRONG 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;

AND AFTER THE EARTHQUAKE A FIRE, BUT THE LORD WAS NOT IN THE FIRE;

AND AFTER THE FIRE A SOUND OF SHEER SILENCE...

It's when Elijah hears that...SILENCE...so deep, so pervasive that it tugs at his ears, that he wraps his mantle around his head, crawls to the mouth of the cave, and he stands up before the Lord.

What is this story about? It seems to me it has to do with the questions, WHERE DO WE EXPECT TO FIND GOD? HOW DO WE EXPECT GOD TO SHOW UP FOR US?

The testimony of some of the best known stories in the Hebrew Scriptures is of a God who's great at special effects: Earthquakes, fireworks, parting seas, plagues; a God who orchestrates military victories and defeats, who brings water from rocks and manna from the skies. A God who's willing to disturb the natural order if necessary and to intervene in history to keep his relationship with his covenant people alive.

But this story looks at all of that and says, IF YOU THINK YOU KNOW HOW GOD WORKS AND WHERE GOD WILL SHOW UP, THINK AGAIN.

What if the place where God waits to meet us is not in the place of spectacular miracles, natural events or outward signs, but rather within the realm of deepest SILENCE?

During the first month of sabbatical, I spent a week with the Benedictine brothers of Weston Priory, on the edge of the Green Mountain National Forest in Vermont. It was mid-March when I arrived there, the temperature was dropping into single digits at night—it was still deep winter.

The room where I stayed had a window that looked west across a snow covered field to a forested valley that slowly rose to a distant ridgeline.

As I sat there reading and journaling the only sound I could hear was the baseboard heater clicking on now and again. And as I walked the ½ mile from the guesthouse to the priory in the darkness of early morning or back again after evening prayer, I'd stop and look up at a sky awash with stars and I would drink in the quiet.

The winter silence on some of those nights was so profound that I could feel it tugging my ears as they searched for some sound to latch on to.

Silence like that, at that time and in that place, was a balm for my soul. It opened up space for conversation with God.

I remember my first Eucharist with the Brothers. I noticed how, as they passed the bread and wine first to one another and then to us who'd joined them, no words were exchanged. Instead there was a purposeful moment of looking each other in the eye as the elements were shared.

At first this felt odd to me—where were the words “the body of Christ, the blood of Christ, given for you...shed for you”? But as the days wore on, I came to appreciate this silent gesture and the way our souls met through the eyes.

Not all silence, of course, is welcome silence. This also is true. Many of us know the silence of absence. The silence of a home grown quiet because one we've loved is no longer there.

There is a different quality to this sort of silence, when a voice we've lived with—sometimes for decades—moves on to college or out of our lives or leaves this earthly life for the heavenly one.

Yet even there in those unbidden silences, God is still waiting for us.

In our overscheduled, device-dominated culture, finding moments of silence, moments of Sabbath, when we can listen attentively for God's voice, is becoming more and more challenging—it's almost as if silence in our world is an enemy that must be overcome at all costs.

In every country we visited in our travels, on every mode of transportation—be it plane, train, metro, or ferry—we found ourselves surrounded by people glued to their devices, traveling in their own world.

We found it was in those places where Internet reception was limited or nonexistent—places like WESTON PRIORY and IONA COMMUNITY—that we formed the deepest friendships and could enter together into shared silence as we listened for the still, small voice of God.

Only when Elijah experienced the stillness, the sheer silence, did he know he had come into the presence of God. And in the encounter which follows he finds the assurance that God has not

abandoned him, that he is not the only faithful one remaining—in fact there are 7,000 other faithful ones like him; that the mantle he’s worn will be passed on, and God purposes will ultimately prevail.

From his limited perspective in the cave, Elijah could see none of that. But God drew him out of the cave and enlarged his sense of future.

When we lose perspective, when we can’t see the forest for the trees; when there are too many voices telling us what we ought to do or how we ought to live; when we get trapped in old scripts that repeat how we’ve fallen short and where we’ve failed and that our future is bleak, God invites us to lay all these distractions aside and to meet God instead in a place of sheer silence.

A place where, with those other voices absent, we can be still, and we can hear God call to us:
BELOVED DAUGHTER, BELOVED SON, YOU ARE NOT ALONE. YOU HAVE A FUTURE.
AND I AM GOING TO PROVIDE FOR YOU ABUNDANTLY.

Amen.

Sabb shoes squeak

When we let go of an idea of how God would reveal Godself, of who God should be, when we take the shackles off God, then we will be ready to receive God on God’s terms.

In last week's gospel, Jesus' quest for silence and solitude was interrupted by the needs of a needy crowd, and today, after feeding them, he sends the crowds home and sends his disciples across the lake and alone once more he goes by himself up the mountain seeking some prayerful silence.

What happens next terrifies the disciples. After spending all night battered by waves, struggling against the wind and unable to make landfall, they see this figure coming toward them on the water. The sounds of the storm, the heavy wind and waves fill them with fear and they don't recognize him.

Even when he says, TAKE HEART, IT'S ME – DON'T BE AFRAID, they hesitate. But for one of them, Peter, the voice is unmistakable, and he gets out of the boat.

A lot is made from the fact that Peter began to sink and had to be saved by Jesus, but what comes through for me in this story is Peter's courage. He's the only one willing to get out of the boat.