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Proper 8C
Peace, Seattle
June 30, 2019
1 Kings 19:1-21[1]

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.[2]

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 question:
WHERE DO WE EXPECT TO FIND GOD? HOW DO 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, sending 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.

[1] My August 10, 2014 sermon explores similar themes.
[2] Sidebar: Some of the ancient manuscripts, in verse 9, call it "a cave" where Elijah found refuge. That's how it's translated in the NRSV. But others name it "the cave"; definite article What's the difference? The first version suggests it was any old cave. Version two suggests that this could be the very cave where Moses hid when we saw the backside of God. See Exodus 33:17-23.

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But today's 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 the realm of deepest SILENCE?

In a world overrun with words, with everybody competing to get a word in edgewise (witness the presidential debates last week...) **having the time and space to drink in SILENCE can be a true gift.**

An experience I hold dear from my sabbatical five years ago was spending a week with the Benedictine brothers of Weston Priory in Vermont.

The room where I stayed had a window that looked west across a snow covered field to a forested valley. As I read and journaled, the only sound I could hear was the baseboard heater clicking on and off.

And as I walked the ½ mile from the guesthouse to the Priory in early morning and late evening darkness, the winter silence was so profound, I could feel it tugging at my ears.

That silence opened up space for conversation with God.

In her book WHEN GOD IS SILENT, Barbara Brown Taylor recalls the work of French philosopher Max Picard. Picard calls silence "the central place of faith, where we give the Word back to the God from whom we first received it. Surrendering the Word, we surrender the medium of our [own] creation. We unsay ourselves, voluntarily returning to the source of our being, where we must trust God to say us once again." [3]

The God revealed to us in the story of scripture is a God who often defies our expectations.
The Presence of God is not always obvious. So the challenge for us is to let go of preconceived expectations in order to remain open to how God will communicate with us.[4]

Of course, not all silence is welcome silence.
How many LGBTQ individuals have had the experience, after coming out to parents and family members, of having this news greeted by a wall of silence.

And many of us know silence of another sort—the silence of absence.
The silence of a home that's grown quiet because a person we've loved is no longer there.

There's 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 eternal one.

Yet even there in those unbidden silences, God still waits for us, and comes alongside 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.

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[3] Barbara Brown Taylor, *When God is Silent*. She's referring to Picard's book, *The World of Silence*.
[4] Carrie Mitchell, *Feasting* on the Word.

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One of the requirements for our 3 day confirmation retreat in April was that the kids leave their smart phones at home. To their credit they did it without complaining—at least to Nicole and me. And as a result we were able to foster a deeper sense of community during the time we shared.

Several of our Peace families will be heading to Camp Lutherwood this afternoon for family camp.

I truly hope that during our week together, all the families attending camp will have device-free time, because I know that a deeper sense of community will be possible if we do; with opportunities to listen for the still, small voice of the Holy One in our midst.

It was only when Elijah experienced the stillness, the sheer silence that he knew he had come into the presence of God.

And in the sacred encounter which follows he receives assurance that God has not abandoned him; that he is not the only faithful one remaining; that the mantle he's been wearing 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.

Sisters and brothers,

- When communication breaks down;
- when we lose perspective and can't see the forest for the trees;
- when there are too many voices telling us what's important or how we ought to live;
- when we get trapped in old scripts that tell us 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, to clear away the clutter, and to meet God instead in a place of sheer silence...

A place where we can be still and can hear God say:

BELOVED DAUGHTER, BELOVED SON, YOU ARE NOT ALONE. YOU HAVE A FUTURE—A FUTURE WITH HOPE—FOR I AM WITH YOU ALWAYS.

Amen.