

Listening to Silence

1 Kings 19:1-18

Cradock Presbyterian Church

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How many of you has ever been in an anechoic chamber? Do you even know what one is? An anechoic chamber is a chamber that has *no echoes*. It's designed with sound-absorbing baffles and wedges on the walls, floor, and ceiling. When you go into that chamber and shut the door, there is NO sound there at all! Which is totally unnatural. Even in the quietest places on earth, like underground in a cave, there's *some* ambient noise – it's just at such a low level you can't recognize it. That's what makes being in an anechoic chamber so scary. Yeah, it's *scary*. Most people who go into one for the first time can't wait to get out. It's so quiet, they say you can actually hear your blood running through your veins and arteries. That's almost – supernatural. Let me outta here!

But there's a part of us that appreciates silence, maybe even craves it. Silence is peaceful. Silence is stillness – no activity. Silence is an absence of stress. Silence is non-threatening. Silence is good – Right?

You could forgive Elijah if he wanted silence. After what he'd just been through, a little peace and quiet would be most welcome. If you go back just one chapter in 1 Kings, you're at Mount Carmel, and you're witnessing hundreds of Baal prophets dancing and screaming and cutting themselves and just creating a general uproar. Then Elijah got God into the act: God sent down this blast of fire from heaven in response to Elijah's prayer, and it evaporated everything on the altar, and the altar itself. Of course,

that set off an even larger uproar, as the thousands of Israelites around exploded in praise of God, and exploded *against* those Baal prophets.

Except, those Baal prophets belonged to Queen Jezebel, and the news about their fate put her into a *murderous* mood. That brings us to where we are in chapter 19. Now, look! You'd think Elijah would have been fearless at this point, what with God answering his prayer so dramatically, and all that. He wasn't fearless, far from it; he knew danger when he saw it. Off he went, as far as he could go as fast as he could go. The better he could hide himself, the better his chances of eluding Jezebel's wrath. Is it a coincidence that he ended up on Horeb, also known as Sinai, the same mountain that Moses was on, when God revealed himself? It seems as though he's not only running away from his troubles, but running *to* God.

Let's pause here for a moment, and think about that. You and I are guilty, more often than we'd own up to, of running from our troubles. Oh, I'm not saying we're *cowards*, or anything like that! I'm talking about how we avoid strenuous things, difficult things, unknown things, as much as we can. It's human nature. But do we run *to* God, when things are tough? That's one thing you have to like about what Elijah did. I'm as guilty as most preachers of making Elijah into some kind of weakling, some kind of "fraidy cat." And maybe there was a lot of fear, that caused him to run far and fast. That first day, he ran about forty miles. I haven't run forty miles in the last 20 years! No, I think you have to look at *where he was going*. He was going to the holy mountain; he was going towards God. He sets up a good principle for us: when you don't know where to turn, turn to God.

At this point, you have to ask the question: What was Elijah expecting? No doubt, he was elated to hear God's voice; that's what the text is saying when it says "the Word of the Lord came to him," that means God's voice. I'm sure he felt some relief at hearing again from God. He launches into a little speech, listing his troubles. ("I'm the only zealous one..." "they have thrown down your altars, killed your prophets..." "...now they want to kill me...") You know how it is; when times are tough, don't you really appreciate a sympathetic ear? But now God does some things Elijah doesn't want him to do. God is, in effect, calling him to get out of that cave!

You have to be careful not to read too much into a text, but it seems clear enough to me that Elijah wasn't about to go out of that cave on his own. So God set up a little show. First there came a really strong wind, enough to cause landslides and rockfalls, certainly a loud, howling thing. And yet, our text says to us, "but the LORD was not in the wind." It was sure impressive, but God wasn't in it. Then comes an earthquake, an even more devastating, scary thing. We hear the same thing: "...but the LORD was not in the earthquake." Then comes fire, and while it might not have been as noisy, it was more familiar. Elijah definitely knew about fire! But once again we hear this rejoinder: "the LORD was not in the fire."

Now again – you have to be careful not to paint a picture of Elijah that's not real. Many folks have Elijah cowering in that cave, only coming out when it's silent. That's when it's safe for him to come out, so the thinking goes. But if you understand what *kind* of silence was about to happen, then you know how wrong that thinking is.

See, here's when really digging into the Hebrew of the original text pays off. We get our familiar translation, "still, small voice," from the King James version. Most translators since then have felt that was a good translation, so they used it. In fact, the words in the Hebrew *can be translated* that Elijah heard "a still, small voice." You begin to get a sense, though, that something's hidden here, when you start comparing translations. The older translations have it "a still, small voice." But the newer ones have things like, "a gentle voice," "a quiet, gentle whisper," and so on. I think NRSV is the closest to right, with the words "a sound of *sheer* silence." But even that misses what I think is a key point. The Hebrew word *Qol*, that gets translated "voice," also has the meaning *thunder*. If it's a voice then it's a supernaturally loud voice; or it's thunderous or thunder. The word *demamaw* means silence, yes, but it's a stunned silence; the very root of the word means to be dumb, silent, from astonishment. And the word *dakah* has as its primary meaning "to crush or be crushed." The silence is because something or someone has been crushed! It's been "silenced!" When you put all of this together, it seems clear to me that the last part of verse 12 ought to be translated something like, "...and after the fire, a thunderous, crushing silence." The point I'm trying to make here is that after all of those *natural* catastrophes that marched past his cave, Elijah heard something that *really* terrified him and yet drew him to the mouth of that cave. That something was a silence so *devastating*, so *terrible*, that he had to come out. He came out because he knew that this silence was so *oppressive*, so beyond normal human experience, that he knew that this must be God. That's why he covered his face before he came out, he was going to be in the presence of God. It reminds me a little bit of

Moses' call; it's really out of the ordinary to see a bush burning and not getting burned up! This was about the same thing.

And as soon as he got to the front of the cave, God said, "You know, Elijah, there are a couple of things I want you to do for me." What God had in mind was restoring the Kingdom of Israel, both northern and southern kingdoms. That's what Elijah went from there to do.

That's what you and I are supposed to do. Oh, not Israel, that's not what we're supposed to restore. We're supposed to restore the church, the Kingdom of God on earth, in our own time. But how does this message from 1 Kings mean anything to us?

I take my cue from the silence, from the oppressive, crushing silence. You and I are living in that silence now. It's the silence of a people who haven't heard good news, encouraging news, in a while, who are scared about the future, and the silence terrifies us. But you know what? It's that very silence that might just draw us out of our caves, and compel us to open our ears to hear the voice of God, calling us to *something*. What will that something be? We'll only know by listening to the silence, and letting ourselves be drawn towards God. Then we'll be ready to hear him tell us what we're supposed to do. Elijah went on to do those things God called him to do. I have no doubt that once God speaks to us from the silence, we'll do his bidding, too. Just don't be afraid of whatever might rush past your cave, don't be scared of the silence; but be ready instead to come out to our Lord.