

Hearing God

a sermon
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1 Kings 19:9–13

One day, Elijah needed to hear God.
And he did.
But it wasn't how he expected to hear God.
He needed to hear God because he was afraid:

He was afraid for his life.
He was afraid for his people.
He was afraid for the future of his nation.
He was afraid for the soul of his country.

And so he needed to hear God, to receive on his ears and in his heart God's speaking to him, so he might be assured, and comforted, and directed, and blessed.

I can relate to that. I suspect a good number of you can, too.

Now, it was a bit strange that he was afraid. Because just a little while before, he was at the center of a very dramatic event in which God decisively, noisily, showed up. It was a contest between Elijah, on the one side, and the prophets of a false god, an idol, called Baal, on the other.

Here's how the contest was set up. Baal and the Lord would each have a sacrifice of a bull offered to them. The prophets of Baal would prepare the sacrifice to Baal, and Elijah would prepare the sacrifice to the Lord. Each altar of sacrifice would have its own stack of wood at hand, which when placed on the altar and then lighted would be fuel for the sacrificial offering that would consume the slaughtered bull.

But here's where the contest part came in, a condition on which Elijah himself insisted. Once an altar was ready to be lit, then things would stop. It's like what happens in those cooking contests on TV, when the countdown has ended and the M. C. shouts out "Time's up! Hands off! Step away from the table." Instead, all the prophets gathered around their altar would step back. And so no prophet would set fire to that altar. Instead, that altar's own deity would have to set the sacrifice on fire.

This was the test: which god, Baal or the Lord, would ignite the sacrifice?

In the end, it was the Lord God who won, handily, noisily, with a boom and flash, with fire coming down out of the skies. God caused the altar to burst into flames so intense that the whole thing was burnt away: bull, wood, stones, dust.

And with this, the people knew *who* was really God and *what* was just an idol.

When all the people saw it, they fell on their faces and said, "The LORD indeed is God; the LORD indeed is God" (1 Kings 18:39).

But then, just a few days later, Elijah was despondent. He was worried. The great “high” he had felt from the victory over the prophets of Baal had been pushed aside by a debilitating trough of despair, and he was no longer certain that God would be faithfully served in Israel today, or tomorrow, or next month, or next year. What would become of them? What would become of Elijah?

So up the mountain Elijah went, to God:

with his questions,
with his fears,
seeking direction,
seeking answers.

God has Elijah stand in this spot on the mountain, because God was going to pass by, to give Elijah what he sought, what he needed. So Elijah stands there and waits.

First there was a wind. Boulders were crashing, the mountain was shaking. But God was not in the wind.

Then there was an earthquake. But God was not in the earthquake.

Then there was a fire. But God was not in the fire.

God was not in any of those things. And the thing is, a good many people would expect God to be in those things: in the dramatic, in the bombastic, in the loud. Not only would a good many people expect God to be in those things, but they even *look* for God in those things.

Maybe even Elijah expected that. Because just a little earlier, God *had* been in the fire, or if not *in* the fire, then *behind* the fire, the *cause of* the fire, the fire that turned the altar of God to ashes, proving that God was God and Baal was no god.

But now God does something maybe a bit unexpected. God was not in the wind, or the earthquake, or the fire. But instead God’s presence is marked ... by *quiet*: “the sound of sheer silence,” in our translation,¹ but some of you may find more familiar this way of putting it: “a still, small voice.”² Other ways of saying in English what the Hebrew seems to be saying include:

- “a gentle whisper”³
- “the soft whisper of a voice”⁴
- “a soft murmuring sound”⁵

God was present, and heard, in the midst of quiet.

Silence.

Whisper.

Elijah heard the voice of God sounding, yet not exactly sounding. He heard God’s voice instead carving out its space in an *absence* of created and creaturely sound, showing God’s power

¹NRSV

²RSV, KJV

³NIV

⁴GNT

⁵Tanakh

not with force,
not with volume,
not with flashes of lightning or peals of thunder,

but with a quiet that draws the prophet in and then asks a question:

“What are you doing here?”

With all this, God makes a new way with God’s people, because God knows that people are so easily enraptured by the loud, and can so quickly make idols of the noisy and powerful. God shows

that God’s ways are often quiet ways,
that God’s comfort may start with a whisper,
that God’s direction may begin with a question,
that God’s power may remind one of weakness
(perhaps even the weakness
of Word made flesh,
of suffering servant,
of beloved son on a death-dealing cross).



We live in noisy times.

There is so much sound: filling our ears, filling our moments, coming at us

from speakers and earphones,
from TVs and radios,
from cars and trucks and trains and planes,
from people we know and people we don’t
... and still other people we might think we know,
because we see them on the news
and hear them all the time
and we voted for them
or against them,

all of them adding to the noise.

Volume, it seems, is the currency of power, and whoever is loudest is assumed to be the strongest. This message is reinforced over and over again:

in the news, in movies, in sports,
at work, on stage,
by politicians and CEOs and titans of entertainment.

Be big, be loud, make a splash, make a difference.

Yet “silence is golden,” the old saying goes. And sometimes we long for some golden silence. Oh, to have some quiet time, some peace and quiet, to be undisturbed by *those* people, those disturbers of the peace and noise polluters.

But how often is the noise not from others but from ourselves, not outside of us but rather within us? And our yearning for silence little more than our impatience with others we wish would just shut up already?

How rarely do we acknowledge that our *capacity* to give voice to our perspective and to make our point are signs of power and privilege? How rarely do we admit that some have so little power, and are so bereft of privilege? How rarely do we compassionately acknowledge that they live their whole lives being told, in effect, to shut up, their lives have no value? How rarely do we see that they have gotten nowhere by speaking softly, so they now realize that their only recourse is to use the language, and the volume, of noisy protest?

Because, really, volume and noise are sometimes not merely signs of strength. Instead, they can also be signs of a weakness. In different ways, they crank the volume as an attempt to wield power, to actualize or protect the self. In different ways and for different reasons, the noise may come:

from the victim of injustice,
or from the bully;
to advocate for healing change so that one is not kept weak,
or to enforce a status quo from which one has long benefited yet which
one fears will be dismantled and shared with others.

My friends, *these are different*. And it's important to recognize that they are different, especially in our noisy age, an age (it is now apparent) of protest, when the protesters can be (and are) those who continue to bear the burdens of a long history of racial discrimination, a history (it must be said) that is not *merely* history or *past* history but is as current as this morning, this very hour;

or the protesters can be (and are) a mob of white supremacists, neo-nazis, and members of the KKK, many of them armed, marching with torches, shouting out slogans that would make Hitler proud, giving the Nazi salute, and in all that converging on and surrounding (again, with torches) a church with ministers gathered to pray for peace. And then one of their own, emboldened, filled with hate, plows his car into a crowd of people gathered to stand against his hate, killing one, injuring many.

Again, these are not the same. These two forms of protest are not equivalent, nor are the reasons for the protest. And a desire for quiet, for some relief from the noise of life, should not blind us to the evils of racism, nor lull us into lazy views about the equal guilt of "many sides," nor lead us into blaming or resenting or judging the counter-protesters who gathered against the neo-Nazis. In the face of certain kinds of noise, the truly moral response is not silence but volume! To answer with silence the noisy slogans and violent tactics of hate-filled white supremacists is to give our tacit agreement to them. It's to say that they're okay.

My friends, racism and bigotry and hatred and violence and white supremacy are not okay.



So, it would be foolish to say that there is *no* power in noise. It seems that there is a lot of power in noise, even as such noisy power may arise from and be intermixed with powerlessness (real or perceived).

But, as Christians we must, and we can, affirm: it is not the only power there is. For us to seek and express power solely

in volume,
in bombast,
in aggression,
in explosions either literal or rhetorical,

is to be corrupted by an idolatry of noise.

Many today indeed worship such an idol. They seek God, and imagine that they have found their god, in the wind, in the earthquake, in the fire. But God is not in the fire. (Nor in the fury.)

We must learn to listen for God. We must learn how to hear God. And that requires us to listen differently than we may be accustomed. Because we tend to listen for God in the loud. But very often God speaks loudest in the quiet, or even in the silences.

It's kind of like in music. Good music is not all loud. There are also soft parts. Good music is, likewise, not continual sound, a constant and unbroken articulation of pitch and tone. There are usually a good number of silent spaces: some very short, some a bit longer. Musicians call them "rests," and they're there to give shape to the music. Without the spaces and gaps and rests, there would be no music. Only noise.

Listening for God this way, hearing God not just in the loud but in the quiet,

takes practice.
It takes prayer.
It takes worship.
It takes repentance.
It both requires and cultivates humility as well as patience.

And then we may find, to our surprise, and theirs as well, that God is speaking to us through others, in and around and behind what they say and what they do, or what they do not say and decline to do. Within the life of prayerful listening, we may often hear God in the spaces between what others are saying:

as they bless us,
and correct us,
and forgive us;
as they challenge us,
or fight us,
or wound us,
or ignore us.

All these things can become the occasion for hearing God, indirectly discerning what God is saying to us within or behind or over against these things.

And then, as we learn how to listen to God, and listen *for* God, paying attention to the quiet in which God may be speaking, we will not only become better at hearing God (and even obeying God). We will also become better able to pay attention to the quiet of others, or their noise (along with the fear-filled quiet that lies beneath their noise, or the yearning for

justice that animates their noise). We will hear their voices, truly listening as they shout or whisper, as they rejoice or as they mourn.

Beloved people of God: let's be a hearing people, listening to others, and above all listening to God.