*THUNDER IN THE MOUNTAINS, SILENCE IN THE SOUL*

! Kings 19:9-14

June 19, 2022

The multifaceted nature of God’s presence before human beings is demonstrated dramatically in this week’s text from 1 Kings. While the Old Testament editors have taken tremendous pains to set up a correlation between Moses and Elijah – it helps here to see the parallel if we know that Mt Horeb was the Northern Kingdom’s name for Mt Sinai—even with the correlation of Moses to Elijah, the experience of God is obviously way different for Elijah. If we were to try and neatly see the differences side by side, we might be tempted to conclude that there is a Torah of Moses and a Torah of Elijah – the Torah characterized by divine might and thundering mountains, and the Torah of the “still, small voice.” But the text itself, with its convoluted narrative, testifies that God is both. Moses’ experience of God was the genuine eternal truth about the Lord. Elijah’s experience of God as the genuine, eternal truth about the Lord. God is both inside and outside – in the mountains and the thunder, and in the quiet, interior of our souls. To Moses, God spoke through the mountains with a roar; to Elijah, God spoke in a cave, in a soul-centered whisper. It’s the same God, only appearing differently.

While the textual snarls in this week’s Old Testament story entice biblical scholars to try detangling the early and later strands of the tradition, the fact remains that the final editors preserved this repetitious, mixed-up mess because it spoke to a larger truth. Elijah’s first exchange with God in vv 9 and 10 allows the prophet to vent his anxiety and fears and his moral outrage at the injustices he has suffered.

Elijah appears to be in control of this encounter. He is the one with grievances to air. But even as it would seem Elijah has forced God into admitting to God’s lack of support or guidance, the theophany interrupts. Just as God may unexpectedly intrude into our own private caverns of doubt and fright and self-pity, the story of God’s visitation on the mountain breaks into Elijah’s complaining.

The God of all creation, the God of untamable, uncontrollable power and might, is felt in the thunder, the quaking earth, the searing flames. But while this is the God Elijah looked for to teach Israel and Jezebel and all the prophets of Baal --his enemies-- a lesson, it is not the God Elijah’s frightened self really needs. So God is purposefully not in all those easy images of power.

Still cowering in the darkness of his cave, Elijah now hears something different. From deep inside this cave, from deep inside his soul, Elijah hears a voice, small in size, yet great in strength. This voice pierces the shrillness of Elijah’s own self-accusations of failure and his despair. Wrapped in soothing silence, this interior word gives Elijah the courage to creep back outside of his cave sanctuary and once again face his God and his responsibilities.

It is easy for you and me to identify the voices of evil in our lives. The “demons” that assault our soul accuse us of being stupid, no-good, ugly, worthless, a bad parent, a bad child, a waster of our gifts, a failure. Yet while most of us would never deny the power of evil influences in our lives, we still tend to smile and shrug at the suggestion that we might enjoy the gift of angels guiding us along.

Demons are portrayed colloquially as powerful, immense, shrewd and cunning. Angels, when we consider them at all -- and now I’m dealing with angels in contemporary culture: T.V., film, even the comics -- are believed to be rather harmless, maybe even ineffectual and bumbling. There are helpful to the same degree that a five-year-old child “helps” his parents get dinner made or the car washed. Angels seem to be amusing and nice companions, but not very useful when it comes to getting the job done. Such is the image in popular culture.

Elijah’s experience suggests we rethink this image. Angels can be our personal still, small voices, whispering into our skittish souls the comforting truth of God’s power and God’s love for us. Angel voices do not accuse and condemn; they nurture and support. The silence that enfolds Elijah when he encounters his inner voice suggests that we, too, periodically need to seek silence in order to hear the whisper of angelic voices . . . the voices of God God’s self. There is a time when we need to, as Job would say, “lay a hand over our mouths.” While God does reveal the truth sometimes in the strong wind, sometimes in the way the very earth shakes under our feet, sometimes in the fire of uncontrolled energy and even danger, many times God is in the voce of gentle stillness. God seldom shouts. We shout. Our “demons” shout and attempt to deafen us to the angelic voices that are always present inside.

The novelist Italo Calvino has articulated this need for silent speech in his book *Mr. Palomar*: It says,

“In fact, silence can also be considered a kind of speech, since it is a rejection of the use to which others put words; but the meaning of this silence-speech lies in its interruptions of what is . . . actually said, giving a meaning to what is unsaid.”

Chaim Potok is one of my favorite novelists. His books, most famous of which may be *My Name is Asher Lev* and another called *The Chosen,* speak of the experience of a Hasidic youth making his faithful way in contemporary Brooklyn NY. Potok says in *The Chosen,* “My Father himself never talked to me, except when we studied together. He taught me with silence. He taught me to look into myself, to find my own strength, to walk around inside myself in company with my soul. When his people would ask him why he was so silent with his son, he would say to them that he did not like to talk, words are cruel, words play tricks, they distort what is in the heart. They conceal the heart. The heart speaks through silence.”

The heart speaking through silence, revealing love. I’ve had that experience. When I was on a church high school retreat, on the last night there was a dance, planned, no doubt to be happy with one another amongst our newly-found or remade friends. They moved the tables to the walls, and brought out a stereo, and started to play the music in this assembly space. Well, I was feeling melancholy and solitary and maybe a little sorry for myself for some adolescent reason, and left the group to sit on one of the tables of the outer ring of the room.

Not long after that, my friend Kevin, a year behind me in school, who also went from our Pasadena area High School to college at Whitman College in Walla Walla WA, as I had—anyway, Kevin came over to the table that I was sitting on, and hoisted himself up on it, too. We said nothing. Sat in quiet together. Just quiet. For a long time. Knowing those people were out there but here we were together. In silence.

Boy, if I can remember that at this remove, it shows that for me it was an earthshaking event of silent connection, and reaching out, even love.

It all depends on what you’re listening for. A Midwesterner from the farm was visiting his college roommate in New York city. Walking near Times Square one day, the farm boy suddenly remarked, “I hear a cricket.”

“You’re crazy,” his city friend replied. “It’s the noon rush hour, and in all of this traffic noise and bustling on the sidewalks you heard a cricket? C’mon, man!”

“No, I did hear a cricket,” the visitor insisted. Focusing more intently, he walked to the corner, crossed the busy avenue and looked all around. Finally he approached a shrub in a large cement planter. Digging beneath the cover mulch, he found his cricket.

His friend couldn’t believe what he had seen. But the friend from the farm said, “My ears are no different from yours. It simply depends on what you have learned to listen for. Here, let me show you.” He then reached into his pants pocket, pulled out a handful of change, and dropped the coins on the sidewalk. At the sound of the money hitting the pavement, every head along the crowded block turned.

“You see what I mean?” the visitor said, as he began picking what was left of his coins. “It all depends on what you are listening for.”

What we’re listening for. I want to go back to our text for a bit. The most memorable words of this entire text have undergone retranslation time and again. Now, besides the “still, small voice” of verse 12, that we remember from the King James Bible, or from our long experience with the old Revised Standard Version, there are interpretations that speak of a ‘low murmuring voice” (NEB), “a gentle whisper” (NIV), or most recently a “sheer silence”-- our translation in the NRSV. Poetic sensibilities notwithstanding, most of these variations are trying to convey the author’s dramatic contrast between the cacophony and fireworks of verse 11 (the thundering wind and the earthquake and the fire) and this new experience of God.

The NRSV translation which records only sheer silence, however, seems to miss the significance of God’s presence being made known through a *voice*, even an interior voice. As a prophet it was Elijah’s duty to speak the word of the Lord to the people. While it is by no means the only interpretation that could be made about this quiet theophany, this experience of the divine as a vital persistent, interior word is not only important, it’s eloquent.

Sir Paul Reeves prayed at the World Council of Churches’ Seventh Assembly in Canberra Australia:

God,

Grant me to be

Silent before you -

That I may hear you;

At rest in you –

That you may enter;

Empty before you –

that you may fill me.

Let me be still

And know you are my

God.

Amen.