



“Speaking in the Silence”

a sermon by

Rev. Katie Crowe

First Presbyterian Church
Charlotte, North Carolina

October 26, 2005

Looking deep into the memory of the Hebrew Scriptures for God's Word to us today, we turn our attention this afternoon to Elijah. We find Elijah running for his life. He has just killed all the false prophets of the pagan god Baal, and is now running from queen Jezebel who has vowed to kill him in her fury. It is here that we begin in the 19th chapter of 1 Kings, verses 1-14.

"Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done, and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword. Then Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah, saying, "So may the gods do to me, and more also, if I do not make your life like the life of one of them by this time tomorrow." Then he was afraid; he got up and fled for his life, and came to Beersheba, which belongs to Judah; he left his servant there. But he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a solitary broom tree. He asked that he might die: "It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors." Then he lay down under the broom tree and fell asleep. Suddenly an angel touched him and said to him, "Get up and eat." He looked, and there at his head was a cake baked on hot stones, and a jar of water. He ate and drank, and lay down again. The angel of the Lord came a second time, touched him, and said, "Get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you." He got up, and ate and drank; then he went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights to Horeb the mount of God. At that place he came to a cave, and spent the night there. Then the word of the Lord came to him, saying, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" He answered, "I have been very zealous for the Lord, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away." God said, "Go out and stand on the mountain before the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by."

Now there was a great wind, so strong that 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, and after the earthquake a fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence. When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. Then there came a voice that said, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" He answered, "I have been very zealous for the Lord, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed you prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away."

In the ancient mind, there were any number of ways that God would present his awesome self to the people and express his desires to individuals and the world. God spoke a strong word about sin to Noah when he flooded the earth. He spoke to Moses in a blazing bush. For the Psalmist, the Lord revealed his will and holy presence to the people through the quaking of kingdoms and the desolation of famine when he was displeased or, if God wanted to offer a more congratulatory note for good behavior, through the bounty of an abundant harvest. In Exodus when God sought to influence the direction of a people or a king, he sent a plague of locusts to harden their hearts. God calls attention to himself in dramatic and powerful ways. And in the chapter before this reading, we see God's persuasive and undeniable Word at work once again in a scene filled with high drama. Elijah and the prophets of the deity Baal- a standoff between two gods vying for the allegiance of the people that is finally resolved when Elijah prays to God who then reigns a blaze of fire down from heaven to consume the offering that Elijah had meticulously prepared. Once again offering an undeniable, unmistakable Word to the people about his nature

and will that could not be overlooked if they tried. The people were accustomed to looking for the presence of God in spectacular displays of power and listening for his voice within them.

The front page of the “Week in Review” section of the New York Times two weeks ago would suggest that things haven’t changed so much in a few thousand years when a full-page article titled ‘Doomsday- the latest word, if not the last,’ detailed that many believe the famine, earthquakes, and hurricanes of late are the newest edition of God’s Word to the people, with God’s presence in the form of judgment within them. And while we may not quite realize it, we, too, so often look to the most obvious places of success or failure or drama in our lives, our work, or our world to reveal God’s Word to us. Giving them the power of God’s voice, and allowing them to direct our steps or reveal God’s presence, pleasure, or discontent. But while our text today proves that God may most certainly be in the midst of these things, there also another, often overlooked if not altogether forgotten way.

When we encounter Elijah in our text, he is certainly growing weary of the drama. He says, “I have been very zealous for the Lord, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away.” There has been a lot of noise in Elijah’s life lately. He is exhausted and seeking direction and so he goes seeking God when God tells him, “Go out and stand on the mountain before the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by.” Now there was a great wind, so strong that 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, and after the earthquake a fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence. When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave.” ‘After the fire a sound of sheer silence.’

Sheer silence. Literally translated from the Hebrew, it is ‘a sound of fine silence.’ While there are many variations on the word silent, this is the same sound of silence heard in Eden by Adam and Eve, “They heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze”. A silence explained by Adam to God, “I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid...” (Gen. 3:10). It is the same word used when God spoke to Moses on the very same mountain on which Elijah now stands, when his voice was like the sound of distant rolling thunder. This is the same sound of sheer silence that the Psalmist describes when he says “He made the storm be still, and the waves of the sea were hushed.” (Ps. 107). It is the silence that is in the calm after the storm. The rolling thunder of God’s quiet power high on a mountaintop. Silent footsteps in the cool of the evening breeze in humanity’s first home. It is in the stillness of silence that Elijah encountered God. Not in the earthquake, not in the storm. But in the silence

You remember this word, silence, don’t you? It means something like the absence of sound. It will soon become unrecognizable to us and is at risk of becoming as obsolete for our children as the record player. And what a tremendous loss this is. Do we even remember what this powerful sound can do for us? How good it can be? That there is virtue in the call of the Lord to ‘be still and know that I am God?’ When we seek God so often in the noise and chaos of politics, in the power and wonders of the world, we so often forget to carve space for silence to listen for his Word in the one place we know we can always find it- right within our hearts. That seat of the Holy Spirit- God’s voice within us and moving around us even now. Speaking,

silencing, sustaining, and revealing himself and his Word time and again in each and every moment.

I was reminded of what Elijah heard in that sound of fine, sheer silence in the hospital one morning. I was the chaplain on-call when a knock came on our office door at about 7am. I opened the door to find a weary-looking man standing before me. His eyes were tired and his hat was in his hands. "Chaplain, could you do me a favor?" He asked. "My daughter is in the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit. She wasn't doing so well, born 4 months early but we just found out that now, by the grace of God, she has turned a corner and one day she'll be coming home with us when we leave here for a change. I was wondering if you would just go up there and say a prayer for her?" Well, it had been a busy night and I was pretty tired. I couldn't see why I had to go up four floors and all the way to the other end of the building when I could say a perfectly effective prayer right there in the office. But I told him I'd be happy to go and headed to the unit.

It was quiet on the floor. An hour until shift change for the nurses so everyone was at their station doing paperwork- a few smiled and nodded as I passed by. I walked into a room filled with medicines and machines and found her bed- one of three- a hard plastic dome enclosed a surface covered only by a small square blanket on which rested an even smaller baby girl. Pink and puckery, eyes closed, she squirmed ever so slightly. Accessorized by wires and tubes taped to her chest and arms, monitoring every breath and heartbeat. I was going to talk to her, but immediately the silence of the room closed in around me. A rare and precious treat in the hospital. And so I began to pray in my heart, not wanting to break the sound of that silence. I offered petitions for her doctors, for her roommates, her parents and for her. Prayers for healing and strength. Prayers that God would be present. Would surround her with love. Prayers that she would be filled with the Holy Spirit. That God would make himself known. And then I just stood there- heart and mind quiet though there was no 'Amen'- eyes closed- savoring the silence. And then a strange thing happened. Slowly the silence around us began to be transformed- to feel like it was no longer empty, but was somehow alive and filling the room like a warm embrace. Lightness and energy came over me and I felt I could somehow breathe easier, and a wave of peace seemed to wash over the place. All of a sudden the silence was broken- the heart monitor beside the bed panicked and loud chirps and bells filled the room while buzzers began to sound in the station outside. I opened my mouth to call for help when a nurse came rushing in, surveyed the scene, and quickly pushed a few buttons, quieting the agitated machines. She turned and, perhaps seeing that I had just about had my own cardiac event, put her hand on my shoulder and smiled. "Don't worry, Chaplain." She said. "She always gets excited when she hears someone speaking to her." Someone was surely speaking- but the entire time I hadn't voiced a word.

That baby girl and Elijah can tell you that God does not only speak in the earthquakes and floods, in famine and firestorms that occur in our world and in our lives. He is also present and speaks in silence. It seems strange to say we can hear the sound of silence when we're not talking about Simon and Garfunkle. But just listen to how loud it can be...that sound of silence... Strange isn't it? A foreign sound to our tender ears and minds and hearts that are so used to being so full of noise that the absence of it is almost deafening. But as powerful as this sound is- how much more powerful is God's voice within it if we will only stop and listen? If we will carve space in our day to turn away from the storms and greet the unique Word that will only be heard by being still. For a quiet space is not to be confused with a quiet God. Remember that silent

night, holy night when Christ was born? Or the graveyard that stood still alongside the empty tomb? All is silent- and God's presence fills the world. Why not take just a few moments and listen...?