

"The Sound of Silence"
By Sharon Hammill

I want to start today with a brief exercise. We are going to take 1 minute here and I will time us and we are going to be completely silent. Okay "ready, set, go".

How did that make you feel? You are already in church and in this church pretty much during the sermon you guys are quiet, it's Denise or I that are doing the talking, but there is not complete silence. I don't know about you, but silence makes me a little uncomfortable. What am I to do with myself in the silence? What do I think about? What do I listen for? Silence is a strange thing... and in our scripture lesson today, Elijah the prophet experienced God through the "sound of sheer silence" as one translation puts it. But what brought Elijah to that point? Let's explore our text...

I don't know how many of you know the story of Elijah. Elijah was a prophet during the time of King Ahab and Queen Jezebel. You see those in that southern kingdom of Judah were out there worshiping the gods of Baal. The gods of Baal had prophets and there was a contest between these prophets and Elijah to prove the validity of God. The contest was that they were to build an altar and whoever built their altar, asked their god to light the altar, and their god lit the altar, they won. Well of course Elijah was the winner and not only that he led these prophets to the river, drew his sword, and killed them all. (Henderson, p.1)

Which leads to our story today—for you see old Queen Jezebel was extremely upset. She was so upset that she was out to "kill him dead" as I once said in our Sunday School class. I don't know how else you kill...anyway she was out to get Elijah and the old boy is scared. So he is running away first to Beer-sheba and then to the wilderness where he stopped to rest under a broom tree. It was there under that tree that he asked God just to take his life. He laid down under the tree and fell asleep. Then an angel touched, told him to wake up and eat. So he ate and drank and then fell back asleep..he was awakened again and told to eat..which he did—for he needed strength for forty days and forty nights. After that he went to Horeb—where God gave Moses the Ten Commandments—and there he hid in a cave.

So now we have Elijah in a cave trying to hide out from that old Jezebel. Have you ever done something that wrong that you thought people were out to get you and all you wanted to do was hide so no one would find you? Well that was probably the case with Elijah..he feared what might happen to him. But did he hide from God? No..God asks him "What are you doing here, Elijah?" So he admits to God is hiding out so he will not be killed.

God then gives him an instruction to go to the mountain and stand because was about to pass him by. Then what happens next...there is a strong wind, an earthquake, and fire..and was God in any of these? Well no..Our scripture says after the fire a sound of sheer silence. But the next verse says "When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave." He heard God in the sound of sheer silence. God once again asked "What are doing here Elijah?" and once again he answered that he had killed the prophets of Baal and that he feared for his life. God then demands that he go back through the wilderness of Damascus and then he is to anoint Hazael as king over Aram."

So you might ask, what exactly does this story have to do with me? What is the message in the story? Elijah has become somewhat of a hero with the killing of the prophets but then when he gets Jezebel's threat that he too will be killed, he gets scared and discouraged. It is a story of being so fearful he wants God to strike him dead. He feels alone. God however takes care of him with food, finds him in the cave and reveals himself not in the grandeur of wind, earthquake, or fire but in the "sound of silence." Karl Allen Kuhn says "God may be found not only in wind, earthquake, and fire, the raw, elemental forces that shape the world as we see it. God can also be found mightily present in 'sheer silence'. In moments of crisis when evil threatens to overtake God's faithfulness and overshadow God's

provision, God is still there working and willing for the good of God's people. God's presence can be identifiable not only in moments of elemental power, but also in the silence" (SAMUEL pg 6)

So the message I would like for us to ponder today how do we find God in the sound of sheer silence? How do we encounter God? And I guess more importantly, do we take time encounter God, to find God in the "sound of silence?" These are tough questions. Several of my commentaries today express that we have trouble in this day and time finding divine revelation. We have trouble just sitting and listening for God. Let's face it gang, sometimes we have difficulty with just being silent. Our denominational motto is "God is Still Speaking" and if God is speaking, how do we encounter God through the sound of sheer silence? Rev. Dr. Homer Henderson, a UCC minister in California tells of experiences in his home state where he has actually encountered both earthquake and fire. He says: I live in Southern California, and I know something about earthquakes, wind, and fire. I was working in my front yard on a beautiful spring afternoon. Across the street a game was in progress on the high school soccer field. I could see the teams and hear the cheers of the crowd. Then the earth shook with a loud rumble. It sounded like a freight train. I was knocked to the ground. The soccer players and fans across the street became like a frozen frame in a movie, and there was sheer silence. Then neighbors began coming out of their homes. There were embraces and soft words of care. I noticed families leaving the soccer field holding hands, and I could hear a still, small, voice in that silence bite. Rev. Dr. Henderson goes on to tell about the fires that roared down the mountains and into communities. He said "the sound was awesome, like a crackling campfire amplified to the thousandth power, and it was punctuated and accompanied by sirens and water-dumping helicopters flying overhead. Then there was sheer silence. ...The silence was awesome. We talked quietly of holy things, what really matters, relationships, life's priorities and values. And I could hear a still small voice in that silence bite." (Day 1,pg 2) So in the roar of an earthquake or the sound of crackling fire Dr. Henderson said his community experienced "the sound of sheer silence." That is an awesome image.

How do we encounter God? Often times we say we encounter God through prayer. I will have to agree. That is our time to talk to God. To let him know what is on our mind and in our heart. We ask him for assistance, guidance, and sometimes even a miracle. How do we hear his answer? How do we see his hands working? How do we encounter those miracles? I have told this story probably in a sermon before, I know in my Sunday School class, that when my mom was terminally ill, our church prayed for her every Sunday. But she did not get better, she only got worse and then she died. I became angry with God. Why did God not heal her? Why did this good person have to die? Now I admit in my spiritual journey I was not where I am now. These were disturbing thoughts. My minister at the time told me that God's healing doesn't always come in the form of the person getting well but sometimes ends in the peaceful death that brings relief from suffering. That in itself is an answer to prayer. We also encounter God through the love and acts of others. Dennis Bratcher writes in his commentary of this text about the time when he was a seminary student with two small children. He says: " We were excited about the opportunity to serve God. But it did not go well. Nothing seemed to work right. A whole series of events totally beyond our control wrought havoc with our carefully made plans. What little money we had saved quickly disappeared. We tried everything we know but things got worse. Bills were unpaid and food ran low. We prayed. And we became discouraged. The day finally came when we had absolutely no food in the house, not a single scrap of anything. It was Sunday. How do you come home from church and tell your kids there is nothing to eat? As Linda and I walked to the car after church, we discussed what we do when we got home. We didn't have to decide. The entire back seat of our car was filled with groceries. We thanked God for the his providential care...He goes on to say, Did God put those groceries on that seat? No loving caring people from our congregation did. Was it a miracle? Oh, yes. Not one of those fireworks kind of miracles. Just God working through ordinary people who responded to Him. " (Bratcher, pg 3) So encountering God comes in different ways

to each of us. We as people of God, need to be one of those ordinary people on the lookout for ways that we might be an answer or even a miracle for someone in need.

Do we take the time to listen for that still small voice of God in the sound of sheer silence? Unfortunately folks, we are a generation that likes to keep busy. We have places to go, people to see, things to do. We are all about schedules and calendars and what our agendas are for each day. We have a time finding time to sit quietly and rest. We have difficulty sometimes even finding time to encounter God on a daily basis. I can be the first to admit I am guilty of all the above. With two jobs, children and grandchildren at home, church activities, and the occasional helping Ted, taking time to rest doesn't come easy in my life. I also have to confess that I have difficulty when I do have the opportunity to be by myself at home alone. I don't do "alone" very well. Barbara Brown Taylor, a retired Episcopal priest, writes "The first time I really tried (to keep the Sabbath) was the Sunday after my last Sunday as a parish minister. After more than twenty years of being in church on most Sunday mornings, I found myself suddenly faced with a whole day at home alone. I could not go to the church I resigned from. I did not want to go to church anywhere else. I thought about going to the grocery store, but I live in a small town where someone is bound to report that I had been seen buying cold cuts on my first Sunday morning away from church. So I stayed home instead where I confronted grave questions about my professional identity, my human worth, and my status before God. But I that only lasted about an hour. After that, I went out on the front porch and said morning prayer with the birds. Then I read until lunchtime. Then I made an egg sandwich. Then I took a nap. By the time the sun went down, I realized I just observed my first Sabbath in more than twenty years." (Taylor, pg 2) I find this an interesting observation from a veteran priest and very highly esteemed religious figure. The Bible says we should observe the Sabbath and keep it holy. We just have a difficult time doing that. Whereas when I was a young girl you could not go to the grocery store, shopping for clothes, or really do any kind of "commercial" thing, people get upset now when businesses are closed on Sunday. About the only thing you can't do on Sunday is buy a Chick Fila sandwich or go to Hobby Lobby. But as I said earlier, we have trouble taking a day of rest, sitting on the porch, watching the birds, reflecting on God's great creation and giving God thanks. We have trouble sitting there listening for God in "the sound of sheer silence." Barbara Brown Taylor goes on to say "If you decide to live on the fire God made inside of you instead, then it will not be long before some other things flare up as well. Most of us move fast enough during the week to outrun them, but if you slow down for a day, then all kinds of alarming things can happen. You can start crying without having the slightest idea why. You can start remembering what you loved about people who died before you were ten, along with things you did when you were eighteen that still send involuntary shivers up your back. " Trying to take time to rest and experience God in the rest is difficult. It makes us uncomfortable. We become bored if we have nothing to do. We become lonely if God is around. But we need it just as Elijah needed it in some way to regroup and re energize to go out to do God's work. So I challenge you to try to find some Sabbath time in your life to encounter that still small voice of God.

So our challenge is to find God in the silence. Even in the midst of the oil spill, where is that still small voice of God speaking? In our daily prayers, where and with whom is God using to answer those prayers? How can we be an answer to those in need of a miracle? And how can we become more attuned to God's still small voice as we go about our daily lives as we find the challenge of finding God in rest? So I ask you, do you hear God in the sound of silence? Amen

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