

The Sound of Silence

1 Kings 19:9-18

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Elijah, God's powerful prophet, has suddenly become a man on the run. In the fiery contest on Mount Carmel, Elijah has shown that Yahweh is more powerful than the gods worshipped by King Ahab. Baal, Elijah has shown, is no God; he is an imposter, a joke. Yet Elijah's words, like all who speak truth to power, has resulted only in a price being put on his head. Challenging the king will not get you far in life, and so Elijah runs. Jezebel, King Ahab's wife, has made it clear that you never upstage a powerful man like her husband without paying a penalty. And so, Elijah runs, afraid for his life.

But Elijah runs not only out of fear, but from a deep sense of disappointment. He is disappointed by the circumstances of his life: he has been faithful, he has honored God, but at what cost? The thrilling cries of people cheering his success on Mount Carmel have faded into the sounds of armies pursuing him into the wilderness. Hoofbeats beat out the rhythmic pulses of his pursuers. Mt. Carmel demonstrated the raw intensity of Yahweh's presence—a presence so fiery it consumed wood dripping with water.

Yet even after all of that, the challenges do not end. After remaining faithful to his call, Elijah becomes a fugitive. He is disappointed and dejected. All of that work, and now things are worse than they have ever been.

You know the moments in life when you have been disappointed. You can name the times when you have run away like Elijah, bitter and dejected. The job we really wanted only to be turned down; the college we did not get into; the relationship that wasn't what we had hoped it would be; the dream that died on the vine. Pushing myself through the crowds at Dallas Fort Worth airport the other day, I remarked to myself how everything seemed to be falling into place. It didn't look that way: my flight had been delayed, the airline had switched its gate to another terminal, the lines were long. But everything was moving smoothly. I got to the gate for my next flight and presented my boarding pass. Instead of hearing that welcoming "ding," I heard a sound I had never heard before – the sound of rejection. My boarding pass wouldn't work.

It soon became apparent that the airline, realizing that my first flight had been delayed, had cancelled my connection even though I had made it to the gate in plenty of time. The gate

agent told me the airline had so thoughtfully rebooked me for the next flight – which, I learned, would take off in exactly 24 hours. Disappointment sets in so quickly.

She managed to come up with a solution: I could ride standby. I wouldn't get the extra comfy seat I had paid for, and would instead be squished into a middle seat next to a man who had the largest elbows I have ever seen. Because I knew what was waiting for me in California, I took the seat, but it came with a hefty amount of disappointment.

“Assuming that tomorrow will be the same as today,” writes Sister Joan Chittister, “is poor preparation for living. It equips us only for disappointment, or more likely, for shock. To live well, to be mentally healthy, we must realize that life is a work in process.”

Elijah runs after he discovers that challenges never stop. He runs from the place of certainty into the wilderness. As the sounds of victory fade, he is left with the silence of feeling alone and shattered. “I alone am left,” he tells God, which is not exactly true, but it is how he feels. He sinks into despair.

And, despite all he has witnessed and known and experienced of God, he finds himself in a funk. It is, plain and simple, a crisis of faith.

When we are disappointed by people, we wonder if we can ever trust them once more. When we are disappointed by situations, we want to run like Elijah, running until we are exhausted and depressed. When we are disappointed by God, we not only want to run, we may run further and harder than we have ever gone. We may scream, like Elijah, in the desert. We may fall exhausted, hungry, lonely, and anxious. We may want to crawl into a cave. Even the food the angels offer him is not enough to keep him from feeling depressed and rejected.

Elijah runs for days and days, finally entering a cave. Perhaps he hoped he could forget all about God.

Yet God does not forget about Elijah. Indeed, God does what God always seems to be doing: God goes in search of Elijah. And when God finds him, God asks, “What are you doing here?”

Elijah has been waiting for this moment. He has his response primed and ready to go. Instead of humbling himself before God, Elijah pushes back. He knows that he has done all that God has asked of him. He reminds God that he has become the last person standing, that he alone has been faithful. “I have been very zealous for the Lord, the God of hosts; for

the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your alters, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away.”

Elijah is angry, and he probably has a right to be. But something curious happens when rage bottles up within us. We fall prey to what psychologists call “cognitive distortions.” We begin listening to fears instead of hope. We recite our failures, so much so that this is the only sound we hear.

In thinking about my sister’s life, I’ve found myself thinking about influences on her life. She graduated from high school in 1968 – and much like Dustin Hoffman’s character in the “Graduate,” so much of her life was shaped by the realities of that time, including its music. I found a whole stack of Beatles trading cards that a girlfriend had given her in middle school. In bold writing it said, “Clifford (our brother) don’t look!” I found recordings of not only the Beatles, but others like Simon and Garfunkel. I found the “Sound of Silence.”

That song has an interesting history. It was written by Paul Simon when he was very young. He joined up with Art Garfunkel and recorded it for an album in 1964. The recording was an absolute failure, and the two of them parted ways.

But a producer did not give up on the recording. He found it, rearranged the music and added other instruments. He turned it into the song we know, the song we’ve heard for decades. It became an instant success, and led to Simon and Garfunkel being reunited.

Simon has said that the song is ultimately about people being unable to communicate with each other. And we know that to be true: silence is not only deafening, it is disorienting. Among the other disasters in Maui this week was the failure of Hawaii’s incredible alarm system. When the alarms did not go off, many people were caught in the winds of the wildfire. Yet not only is prolonged silence deadly, so is loud and uncontrolled sound. Long periods of both silence and noise diminish our capacity to think.

Here is where disappointment drives us. Led into a place where we can neither think straight nor even believe God is with us.

As you know, our dog is probably the best theologian in our house. Toby should have been named “Timex,” because he is acutely aware of the hours of the day. That especially includes his evening walk, which rolls around unnoticed by everyone except him. And he lets us know that it is time. What he challenges me to do is to pay attention to the noises of early evening. As we were walking one night, I paid close attention to the songs birds were singing, different species and varieties of songs that change with every turn in the street.

There's a boy shooting baskets, dogs barking in backyards, the sounds of lawn mowers and trimmers. Toby stops to sniff before walking further down the sidewalk. I think he's checking his email. I don't think I've ever paid this much attention to the sounds of our neighborhood: people talking quietly, water running through garden hoses, cars driving, with their tires rolling over the pavement. As I walk down the street, we leave our quiet neighborhood for a busier street there are more cars, with tires driving across grooved pavement. His ears pick up every sound. We end by returning back into our subdivision, with the sounds of cars fading and the singing of birds increasing.

So much of our lives are filled with a noisy playlist that does not bring us hope. That's what happened to Elijah: at his lowest, he watched the wind rush by, splitting rocks and shaking the mountains. He witnessed an earthquake, and then a wildfire. In each of these moments, in each of these loud and terrifying experiences, God was not present. Elijah would have expected that these were the places where his calling to serve and his hope would be revealed. After all, that is what had happened on Mt. Carmel.

But that is not the case. Instead, just as God came searching for Moses, just as God came searching for the people of Israel, just as God comes searching for you and for me, God's voice arrived in a sound so quiet and still it was barely noticeable.

God spoke in a whisper.

Within the sound of silence, God speaks words of calling and comfort to Elijah. God redirects the man on the run by reminding him he is never alone. In fact, that is the most compelling aspect of God's call: it is a reminder we exist in community.

The ringing in your ears, the ever-present playlists, the noises from the crowds, all these fade. And what remains is this promise: Go, return on your way, and do the work I have called you to do. Amen.