

“The Sound of Silence”
1 Kings 19:1-15a

In George Bernard Shaw’s play on the life of Joan of Arc, the 15th century saint, there is a scene in which the archbishop and King Charles are interrogating Joan of Arc. The archbishop asks, “How do you know you are right?” Joan answers, “My voices.” The king interrupts: “Oh your voices, your voices. Why don’t the voices come to me, I’m the king, not you.” Joan responds: “They do come but you do not hear them.” How do we listen to the voice of God in our lives? How do we know when God is speaking to us? Of course there are obvious ways we hear God’s voice such as coming to church, listening to God through others, reading the Bible, being out in nature, helping someone in need, working for peace in the world, and listening to God in the events of our lives. Yet, in all of these ways we listen to God there is an inner quality that enables us to truly listen to God’s voice. This inner quality is our ability to have inner stillness. This is so essential to our ability to hear God’s voice that if we don’t have that inner stillness, all of the above activities become just that, activities! In his book, *Take Your Time: Finding Balance in a Hurried World*, Eknath Easwaran quotes another teacher by saying, “A mind that is fast is sick. A mind that is slow is sound. A mind that is still is divine.” He says that, “Imagine that the mind is a kind of television with thoughts constantly changing channels. In this case, though, the remote control device is out of our hands; the mind is changing channels on its own. Sometimes when a thought succeeds in holding our attention, the mind actually settles on a particular show. At other times, when speeded up, the mind is racing through split-second shots like a frantic rock music video.” This is the lesson which the prophet Elijah had to learn as part of his ministry as a prophet.

Elijah was running for his life from Jezebel. He was at the end of his rope. He had confronted King Ahab’s acts of injustice and unfaithfulness. He was one of the few voices who spoke up against the injustices of the king. But the price he had to pay was very high. Queen Jezebel was not going to rest until he was out of her way forever, that he was killed. Jezebel and Ahab used their power in Israel to promote their agendas of greed and control. Elijah had to travel from Jezreel to Beersheba. Beersheba was a special place. It was the same place where Hagar, Abraham’s slave wife, encountered God. She went there in her desperation for life. It is also where Jacob had a vision of God while he was running for his life after his brother Esau was ready to kill him. Beersheba is a place that seems to be a special place to run to when your life is in danger. This is the place where Elijah gets the call to go to Mount Horeb/Sinai and there he has a special encounter of God. If we look at all the traveling that Elijah had to do, we can see that he must have had enough time to quiet his mind, to quiet his fears and to be able to receive the gift of God’s Spirit again. This is what happened to Moses and the people Israel before. They had to wander in the desert for 40 years, indeed a very long time in order for them to receive the presence of God. All of this time taken for all of this travel was necessary for Elijah to be able to receive God’s presence, especially as God came to him not in the earthquake, not in the mighty wind, but in the sound of sheer silence. As he was fleeing for his life and as his whole life was in chaos Elijah had to learn about this inner stillness that allowed him to find God’s presence in the sound of sheer silence.

This was radical event for a prophet of God. We see Elijah being presented to us in many ways like Moses. Moses had to flee for his life and so did Elijah. God provides food for Moses and his people in the wilderness and God also provides food for Elijah. Moses and his people wander the desert for 40 years. Elijah spends 40 nights in the wilderness. The major difference in how God is presented to Elijah is so stark. Moses sees a burning bush, a major scene that can be detected by more than one sense. Elijah on the other hand stands on the same mountain, but has to learn to see God through the sound of sheer silence. Elijah had to reach deep within

himself to be quiet enough to pay attention to God in the silence. Elijah is like Moses in so many ways, yet Elijah's story calls us to a deeper commitment to our relationship with God. It is much easier to see God in thunder and lightning, in the great music of the church, in the eloquent words of a great preacher, in the warm embrace of a friend than to see God in the stillness of our hearts and minds. Yet, without that quality of stillness much can be lost in life. The whole ministry of the prophet Elijah hinged on his ability to stop and listen. It hinged on his inner stillness because that is what gave him the fuel to continue the mission. This inner quality of stillness is what gave him the ability to stand up to the destructive powers of his time and to speak the truth of God's love and justice.

The challenge for us today is to find ways we can access this mental stillness in our everyday life. This mental stillness is not a call to retreat from the world. It is not a call to stop everything and join the hidden life of a monastery or become a hermit. That is certainly not what happened to Elijah. It is a call to practice this stillness as we go about all of life. This kind of stillness can carry us through the ups and downs of life and the struggles for justice and peace. In his book *God Has a Dream*, Desmond Tutu writes, "Dear Child of God, all of us are meant to be contemplatives. Frequently we assume that this is reserved for some rare monastic life, lived by special people who alone have been called by God. But the truth of the matter is that each one of us is meant to have that space inside where we can hear God's voice. God is available to all of us. God says, 'Be still and know that I am God.' Each one of us wants and needs to give ourselves space for quiet. We can hear God's voice most clearly when we are quiet, uncluttered, undistracted –when we are still. Be still, be quiet, and then you begin to see with the eyes of the heart."

Yet, this does not mean that everyone who sits quietly in their home is able to do this. This deeper stillness is a different quality from not having any words or noises around us. This inner stillness is about learning to let go of our roles, our joys, concerns, worries, grudges, angers, hurts, memories and just learn to be. There are ways we train ourselves to get into this inner stillness. It is like when we were little children and we had this quality of inner peace about us where we were able to play and enjoy whatever we were doing without having to worry about the next thing or the thing that happened two days ago. As adults we have to relearn this quality but this time with more maturity, this time with training ourselves to be in touch with our hearts.

This is not as hard as it sounds. What it takes is unlearning some of our cultural practices. There is an illusion that being busy or thinking about an issue a lot can really produce fruit and that it is the only way to be. Doing a lot and thinking a lot have their places in our lives. Yet they have to be balanced with some inner stillness. If all that we do all the time is think or work our way through life, there is not much room for God's creative energy to work in our lives. In their book, *The Breakout Principle*, Herbert Benson and William Proctor share why our best ideas come when we are not thinking. They have discovered through their research what they call "The Breakout Principle" which "refers to a powerful mind-body impulse that severs prior mental patterns and -even in times of stress or emotional trauma- opens an inner door to a host of personal benefits including: greater mental acuity, enhanced creativity, increased job productivity, maximal athletic performance, spiritual development... Learning to activate this trigger can also provide you with what superior athletes call the physiology of zoning, or getting in the zone." To illustrate their point, the authors tell the story about a man by the name of Jason who was facing the challenge of his career. A leading management consultant he was asked by a big corporation to help them in their chief executive search. There were so many choices and no clear way of knowing which one to pick. Opinions on the board of directors varied. Stockholders were divided into factions. Jason reached a point of not knowing what to do. He said, "I want a shazzam, a brilliant way out of my pickle." That is when Jason said to himself,

“No more pros and cons. The time’s arrived for needlepoint.” Needlepoint was Jason’s favorite way to escape the day’s frustrations. Needlepoint was also Jason’s way of thinking outside the box and coming up with million dollar solutions. So that day he left the office building, settled down in his hotel room, and pulled out his latest needlepoint canvas. Jason learned in his career that after doing all the hard work of research, he needed to listen to something deeper. He had to learn to still his mind and his soul. How do we still our minds and hearts every day?

There is also another illusion that we have to deal with when learning to cultivate inner stillness and that is the idea that if we take time to be quiet we will be bored or become ineffective. So, we always have to remind ourselves that our time with God in silence does not have to be boring and it in fact makes us more attuned to the joy of living. In his book, *Morning B.R.E.W.*, Kirk Byron Jones shares one of the ways he starts his day. You will find this in your bulletin. He calls us to a simple practice he calls BREW:

Be Still - Be still- take a few moments to empty your mind for 5 minutes. If a thought comes wave it off. Don’t fight with it.

Receive God’s Love - Use your imagination to see yourself that you are underneath a waterfall. Morning dips. Jumping into the ocean of God’s love.

Embrace myself, others and creation

Welcome the morning or the moment

This kind of practice is not supposed to be drudgery on our time and life. It is not supposed to induce guilt in us when we don’t do it. As Kirk Byron Jones puts it, “If we don’t take this kind of time to be still, we deprive the world from seeing us at our best and creative selves.” There are many ways to open our days to God.

I would like to conclude our time together with a simple prayer that can help us find some stillness. Maybe this is something that you can do by yourself even for a few minutes a day to help you find that deep stillness.

I will be using the words of Psalm 46:10, “Be still and know that I am God.” If your mind starts wondering at this time, it is okay, no need to feel any guilt. Just gently go back to the prayer. First, I would like to invite you to close your eyes and sit comfortably breathing in and out. We close our eyes so that we are able to let go of the distractions and let these words of scripture help you rest into God’s presence. I will repeat the phrase but making it shorter each time and give you some time to allow these words to rest in your soul.

“Be still and know that I am God

Be still and know that I am

Be still and know that

Be still and know

Be still

Be”

Amen.