

“Sound of Silence”

We are going to start with a song. Feel free to join in when you recognize it.

[Sing] “Hello darkness, my old friend
I’ve come to talk with you again
Because a vision softly creeping
Left its seeds while I was sleeping
And the vision that was planted in my brain
Still remains
Within the sound of silence”¹

That hit song makes some assumptions about silence. I think they are particularly modern cultural assumptions about silence. What would you say those assumptions are? [listen for negatives.] What is so negative about silence? [listen for empty, barren, solitary, alone...]. What in society or your personal life indicates these negatives? [Muzak, playing radio or TV at home as background sound, need for white noise to sleep or keep us company...]. It seems hard to escape sound in our culture. We will hear it in the traffic going by during this service or the sound of a mobile phone’s ringtone. If we are all quiet, we will hear the humming of the air conditioning or the blower for the organ. These sounds are so prevalent that we do not notice them unless we tune our ears to them.

The modernist composer John Cage wrote a piece called 4’ 33” (“Four Minutes Thirty-three Seconds”). The piece was conceived in 1954 as a composition in three movements. Ironically, there is really no way for the listener to tell when the three movements begin and end because the entire piece is silent. The piece is four minutes thirty-three seconds of silence. The musician or musicians take the stage and play nothing. Cage’s point was for us to become attuned to ambient sounds. We are sitting with ears ready to listen to music, but what we hear are the sounds of the building, machinery, traffic, breathing, and who knows else. Cage thought of it all as music. Our modern view of silence is negative, whether in practice or in Paul Simon’s dystopian dream. John Cage wanted to turn that on its head and have us listen to the sound in the silence.

In today’s reading from the First Book of Kings, we experience a story with a different aspect of sounds and silence. The great Jewish prophet Elijah had been in confrontation with Jezebel, the queen of Israel. She had even arranged an actual battle between her many prophets with their gods against Elijah and his one god YHWH. It was a battle to the death. Elijah and YHWH defeated the many prophets of Jezebel, and she was furious. She swore to hunt down Elijah and kill him. Thus, Elijah goes on the run into the wilderness.

He gets so tired of being a fugitive that he lies down under a bush and prepares to die. YHWH sends an angel to tend to him, and he is revived. He

¹ Paul Simon, “The Sound of Silence” released 1964.

flee into the mountains and onto Mount Horeb, the holy mountain of God. Horeb is the mountain where Moses was given the Ten Commandments. This mountain is also called Mount Sinai. The point for our story is that Elijah, knowingly or not, has fled to the mountain of YHWH. There is where we encounter him in today's reading.

Elijah has had it. He is depressed and weary. He does not want to be on the run from Jezebel and her army anymore. He does not want to be doing prophetic battle anymore. He wants to rest and be at peace. To do so he hides in a cave, but that does not put him out of the reach of God. God asks him what's going on. Elijah replies, "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."²

God's response is not to comfort Elijah or to tell him that God will see he prevails. Instead, God says, speaking of himself in the third person, "Go out and stand on the mountain before the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by." Then various weather events occur which one might think would indicate the passing of God. First, it was a wind so strong that it splits mountains and breaks rocks. Then there was an earthquake, which has the same destructive effect. Fire comes next, as so often happens after an earthquake. Yet, God was not present in any of these destructive events. God arrives in the "sound of sheer silence." The silence was not a negative experience. It was the signal that God was present. Elijah knew it, for he covered his face so as not to see God and went out to encounter the Lord.

As in this passage, silence is often considered to be a positive experience. Think of monks and nuns who live their lives in silence except for when they open their mouths to praise God. Confucius said, "Silence is a true friend who never betrays." Claude Debussy said, "Music is the silence between the notes." Epictetus wrote, "Keep silence for the most part, and speak only when you must, and then briefly." Then there is the old saw "Silence is golden."

In our noisy and cacophonous world, it is wise to cultivate silence. It gives us rest. It gives us freedom to think. It also gives us freedom not to think. It gives us a chance to be at peace. It also opens up our mind and heart to let the silent voice of God in. Elijah did not hear the voice of God in the fury of nature. He knew he could not hear the voice of God in all of that sound. It took the sound of sheer silence for God's voice to break through to him. If we keep our ears full of noise and our minds occupied with sound, we are blocking out the still small voice of God.

Years ago, I tried to share the concept of silent or contemplative prayer with this congregation. I am sure some were already aware of the practice and might have been practicing it on their own. However, there was one person who

² 1 Kings 19:10

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was annoyed by me writing about the practice. She wrote back that “we are not interested in silent prayer; we want to socialize and talk with each other at coffee hour.” It was disheartening for me. I am not opposed to coffee hour. I think it is wonderful for us to share time and conversation over coffee and treats. But there is a time for everything, as *Qoheleth* wrote in the Book of Ecclesiastes.

There is a time for silence, which is why we have time for silent prayer before worship services so that we can get our hearts in tune with the Divine. It is why we build a little silence into our services on Sunday and Wednesday. As the Trappist monk and champion of Centering Prayer Thomas Keating wrote, “Silence is God’s first language; everything else is a poor translation.”

Find a place for silence in your life. It could be with or without someone. It could be in a forest or a corner of your bedroom. It could be in a formal prayer space or on a bench in a park. However, you find that place of silence, allow it to calm your heart and mind. It will take practice, but it is worth it. Because silence is golden, and it is the first language of the God whom we love and who loves us limitlessly.