

A Sound of Sheer Silence

June 23, 2013

I am beginning my message this morning by reading a portion of the Old Testament scripture assigned in the lectionary to this morning. This is from 1st Kings Chapter 19, verses 8-15a,

Then the word of the Lord came to Elijah, saying, "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, but the Lord was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the 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. And the word of the Lord came to him.

Elijah went looking for the Lord, because Elijah had worries. He was concerned for his life; his enemies had him surrounded, so with no clear plan of escape, Elijah went looking for God. First, he looked for God in the tempest, in the howling hurricane, in the gale, the bellow, the blow... mountains were breaking, rocks were shattering, yet in the cacophony of crumbling, in the symphony of shattering God's voice was not heard! So Elijah kept looking, he kept listening, and the world began to shake, and the ground began to move, and in the mighty roar of earth rending rancor God's voice was not heard... so Elijah watched and listened, and smelled, smelled? smoke? is that smoke?! Heat, hot, fire! Yet in the billowing smoke, the burning ash, the howl of the blazing inferno God's voice was not heard! And after the storm, the quake, the fire, after all of the drama, Elijah could hear nothing at all... a sound of sheer silence.

Sheer silence. Is such a thing possible? What if you stepped out of the whirlwind of your life, what if your footing was so sound you could actually stand still, what if all of the fires in your life were no longer burning? What would that sound like? Would it be the sound of sheer silence? Maybe... though even if it was really quiet, I still bet I would be able to hear my heart beating, or my breathing, or something... but that's not really important. What is important is what silence brings with it. Silence encourages thoughtfulness. It inspires reflection. It encourages focus. A shared silence is an intimate thing; it is an extension of trust and an expression of comfort... "Silence is pure and holy. It draws people together because only those who are comfortable with each other can sit without speaking." Nicholas Sparks.

I think the story of Elijah's encounter with God is a really a story about welcoming. Extravagant welcoming. When I was poking around the Internet putting this sermon together, I found this example of an extravagant welcoming statement found in the bulletin of Our Lady of Lourdes Catholic Community in Daytona Beach, FL:

It reads: We extend a special welcome to those who are single, married, divorced, gay, filthy rich, dirt poor, yo no habla Ingles. We extend a special welcome to those who are crying new-borns, skinny as a rail or could afford to lose a few pounds.

We welcome you if you can sing like Andrea Bocelli or like our pastor who can't carry a note in a bucket. You're welcome here if you're "just browsing," just woke up or just got out of jail. We don't care if you're more Catholic than the Pope, or haven't been in church since little Joey's Baptism.

We extend a special welcome to those who are over 60 but not grown up yet, and to teenagers who are growing up too fast. We welcome soccer moms, NASCAR dads, starving artists, tree-huggers, latte-sippers, vegetarians, junk-food eaters. We welcome those who are in recovery or still addicted. We welcome you if you're having problems or you're down in the dumps or if you don't like "organized religion," we've been there too.

If you blew all your offering money at the dog track, you're welcome here. We offer a special welcome to those who think the earth is flat, work too hard, don't work, can't spell, or because grandma is in town and wanted to go to church.

We welcome those who are inked, pierced or both. We offer a special welcome to those who could use a prayer right now, had religion shoved down your throat as a kid or got lost in traffic and wound up here by mistake. We welcome tourists, seekers and doubters, bleeding hearts ... and you! "Jesus didn't turn people away, neither do we."

I endorse this welcoming statement. It's bold, it's funny, and it's refreshing. It is an extravagant welcome... one I hope we all extend to the folks around us... But that's not why I read it. Yes, I want us to think about how we welcome people... our welcome is an important part of our identity as a church... but this morning, I want you to think about how you welcome God.

Wait... what? How do I welcome God? Yep, that's right... what do you do to welcome God into your life? I just want you to think about it. For example, under what circumstances do you find yourself

talking to God? I don't want to over generalize here, but in my experience I think most of us likely go looking for God when we find ourselves in one of life's storms, or earthquakes, or fires... please God, please get me out of this jam... please God, help me, help my brother, help my neighbor, help the world... please God, I need you ...

We all do it. But the truth is, it's hard to have a conversation in the middle of a hurricane... It's hard to concentrate on what someone else is saying when the ground is falling out from below your feet... it's hard to welcome someone very well when your world is on fire...

So maybe we need to find a better time to welcome God. Maybe we need to think about this stuff before we find ourselves swallowed up in a natural disaster. (As an aside, aren't all disasters natural? What exactly would constitute an unnatural disaster? Would that be a disaster involving only synthetics? Plastics? A plastics disaster?) Anyway... this welcoming stuff should not be difficult. We know how to do this. Smile. Introduce yourself if you haven't already met. Ask God, how are you? Remember to share the conversation. Be a good listener. Act interested. Ask follow up questions. Remember God's name the next time you see one another. And don't feel you need to always fill the silence. God is not going anywhere. God has all the time in the world.

It is often the case that we project our hopes and expectations of God onto our lives. Elijah looked for God in the wind, earth, and fire because he expected God to be in those places. He expected God would look a certain way, act a certain way, and be a certain way. But it is not welcoming to be told you must change to fit into my world. God does not conform to human expectations. In fact our relationship with God is supposed work the other way around... we are supposed to conform ourselves to God's expectations.

So here are three tips for welcoming God into your life:

1. You have to make the first move. If you reach out to God I believe you will find God is already reaching out to you. But you have to make the call. Remember in last week's sermon I talked about our need to ask God for forgiveness. This is like that. There is a relationship just waiting for you to have with God, but you have to want it. You have to initiate it. You have to give it a shove before it will find motion.

2. Make time for your relationship with God. Develop a practice of prayer and do it every day until it is part of your routine. Like so much of life, this practice will be difficult at first. You will be pulling and twisting spiritual muscles you may not have even known you have. So be patient, but be deliberate. Don't wait for a crisis to make the call. Do it today. Find a quiet time, a quiet place and welcome God.

3. And finally, welcome God's children. As a parent, I can tell you there are few things as endearing as someone who takes care of my children. God feels the same way.

"Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?' "The King will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.'"

We are all brothers and sisters because we are all God's children. God is not a stranger, God is not a friend, God is family, so finding a way to welcome God into your life should not be too difficult. Ask and rd you will receive. Knock and the doorway will be open unto you. This is the Good News. Selah.