

The Loudness of Sheer Silence

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1 Kings 19:11-13
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Cindy and Kelly Hoots are off celebrating their 10th wedding anniversary tonight, but Cindy gave me her blessing to share this story about the triplets. It's one of my favorite stories from our Circle.

On a Sunday about a year ago, when the boys were 3, our Scripture passage was the story of Jonah and the whale. Nancy did her usual, stellar job of making the ancient tale come alive for our kids. Later that night—and let me quote Cindy directly here—"The boys were settling down to sleep. And by that I mean talking loudly."

Will crowed proudly, "I'm Jonah!"

Connor piped up, "I'm the big fish!"

There was a long pause. And then Jack, resigned to his fate, sighed, "Well, I guess I'm God."

In the story as Jack heard it, Jonah was a superhero, the big fish was...well, a big fish. And God was a disembodied voice behind the scenes with a bit part.

Maybe the prophet Elijah in our passage tonight was a little like Jack—disappointed, perhaps, with the way God chose to show up. After all, the record of God's interventions in faith history up to that point was, well, pretty spectacular. A few highlights of the Divine's dramatic roles include:

- God opened the heavens and caused the great flood
- Appeared as flame in a burning bush that wasn't consumed
- Rained down plagues of frogs and gnats and boils on the Egyptians
- Ushered the Israelites to freedom as a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire at night
- Divided a great sea so they could walk across on dry land
- Delivered the Ten Commandments on Mt. Sinai amid thunder claps and lightning bolts and a trumpet blast so loud, "the people trembled"

God was a master of special effects—very skilled in getting people's attention. And Elijah himself had just cashed in on God's mastery in a showdown with King Ahab and the prophets of Ba'al on Mt. Carmel. Elijah had commanded the prophets to put a bull on wood on an altar, then call on their god, Ba'al, to set it on fire.

The prophets prayed and pleaded and cried and "limped around the altar they had made"—but nothing happened. Elijah mocked them, suggesting that maybe their god was off meditating, or relieving himself—or perhaps he had fallen asleep. The prophets raved on, with no response from their god.

Just to rub it in, Elijah dug a trench around his altar, laid the wood, put a bull on it—then told the people to throw four jars of water on it—three times—so that water dripped all over the altar and filled the trenches. He called on his God and—ta da!—flames consumed the altar and licked up all the water in the trench. Then Elijah killed all the prophets of Ba'al.

On the run from Ahab and his wife, Jezebel, Elijah was afraid—with good reason. After spending forty days in the Sinai wilderness, he found a cave in which to hide. But a voice told him, "Go stand on the mountain, the Holy One is going to pass by."

As Elijah was on top of Mt. Sinai, also known as Mt. Horeb, there came a wind so strong that it split mountains and broke rocks. Imagine how frightening that must have been. And the wind was followed by an earthquake. And the earthquake was followed by fire.

These were all natural phenomena that were equated with the awesome power of God. So it's not so surprising that Elijah would have expected divine power to manifest itself in these ways, with God's signature dramatic flair.

But there's a startling twist in the story. God was not in the wind...or the earthquake...or the fire. These were followed by "the sound of sheer silence"...and what has traditionally been translated as "the still, small voice" of God.



I'm deeply grateful to Mark Siler for offering our Taize service last Sunday. Faith communities go through different seasons, and my sense is that we're in a particularly heavy one right now. A lot of folks in this Circle are dealing with a variety of acute crises and chronic challenges—in health, in employment, in family needs.

I find these days that I often don't have words. That's hard to admit for someone who loves words and has made most of her living speaking them and arranging them on paper. The silences and quiet music of last Sunday night felt like healing balm to me.

I also find comfort these days in the promise of Romans 8: "The Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words." Sighs are sometimes all that we can utter. And silence sometimes speaks louder than words.

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and silence sometimes speaks louder than words.***

I think of Malala Yousufzai, the 14-year-old who was shot in the head 12 days ago on her way home from school in Pakistan. I've placed her picture on our altar tonight. A persistently outspoken advocate for education for girls, Malala began writing a blog for BBC about life under the Taliban when she was 11 years old. At that same young age, she was featured in a documentary; during the filming she broke down in tears after sharing her dream of becoming a doctor.

The Taliban has destroyed more than 200 schools for girls. Claiming responsibility for the attack on Malala, and vowing to target her again if she survives, a Taliban spokesman said of Malala's advocacy of female education: "This was a new chapter of obscenity, and we have to finish this chapter."

Malala is in a British hospital fighting an infection; she faces difficult surgery to reconstruct her skull and her jaw. She cannot speak; her airway, swollen by the bullet wound, is being kept open with a tracheotomy tube. But her silence speaks volumes—because courage cannot be silenced, and her witness has spread around the globe.



I think of our beloved Circle of Mercy member Wiley Dobbs, who has lived on Georgia's death row for 38 years and whose candle burns on our altar every week. I visited him a couple of weeks ago—a week after the first anniversary of the execution of Troy Davis, who had been like a son to Wiley.

Visiting has become more complicated since a change in prison policy. Wiley and I are no longer able to sit side by side. We have to be on opposite sides of a glass wall, shouting through phones that work only

marginally well, amid a loud crowd in a cement-block room all struggling to be heard by their loved ones on the other side of the glass.

Ten days before our visit, a friend on Wiley's cellblock died of a stroke. For the first time ever, it occurred to Wiley that he could die of natural causes—every other friend he's lost there has been killed by the state. He shared his great sorrow that for several days no one claimed his friend's body, and the state didn't want to have to pay to bury him.

"This is hard to bring up," Wiley said to me, "but it's too important to just make assumptions." He needed to know that I, and this Circle, will take care of him when he dies. We talked about his wishes. He told me about the cemetery by the Tennessee border near Chickamauga, Georgia, where his mother is buried, and how to find it. "You used to be able to ask anybody around there where the black cemetery was," he explained, "but they've let a few white folks in, so they don't call it that anymore."

I wished for a quiet room where we could have this very tender and important conversation. But we had what we had. Circumstances meant that we could speak only the most necessary words. But much was communicated in the silences and exchanged glances.



I think of my dear friend Lydia Wylie-Kellermann from Detroit, who I'm glad to say will be visiting here next weekend. I had the great joy and honor of being part of her marriage to her partner, Erinn, a year ago, and I hope to be present for the birth of their baby in March.

This Thursday, October 25th, is Onion Day. You probably didn't know that. It's an annual tradition invented by Lydia's younger sister, Lucy, when she was seven years old, soon after she heard the diagnosis of their mother Jeanie's deadly brain cancer. Young Lucy decided that, amid all the sadness and fear, there needed to be something to celebrate.

I was in their home in October 2005 for Jeanie's last Onion Day, about two months before she died. We all sat expectantly around the dining room table for the annual ritual, knowing that the winner would be the person who came closest to guessing the number of layers in the onion we passed around—and that the one left holding the last piece of onion was obligated to make everyone else laugh. An average onion contains 20 to 25 layers—well attested by copious data collected from seven years of Onion Day celebrations to that point.

Her daughters encouraged Jeanie to guess first. Though the exact numbers have slipped my mind, I remember that it went something like this. Jeanie guessed that the onion had three layers. Lydia smiled sweetly at her Mom and guessed that the onion had 274 layers. Lucy went next, guessing 526. We continued around the table, with their dad Bill's guess coming in at 832 and mine at about 1,287. Then we passed the onion around, each peeling away a layer—22 in all—until we were all weeping and laughing at the same time. Jeanie—the winner by far—was triumphant on her last Onion Day.

Then came the presents. Lydia gave each of us a jar filled with small stones, which I've also placed on our altar tonight. Though they've faded over time, written on them are words such as smile, hug, and tears. Lydia offered them with a note that said, "When the time comes when we have no words, may these words surround us all and may our love and prayers be carried through them."

Jeanie was indeed running out of words—and time. As we all sat at breakfast the next morning eating our oatmeal, she started a sentence and then lost her train of thought—a common occurrence in those last weeks. In frustration, she declared, "I'm having trouble finishing my..." We all waited expectantly ... patiently ... for her to say "sentences." Long pause. And then she said "cereal."

Jeanie laughed. We all laughed. Heartily. Laughter sustained that beautiful family through their tragic loss. Even on the worst days, they were able to laugh. And when they ran out of words in the end, they communicated their love with tender glances and touches.

My sisters and I experienced the same when Alzheimer's claimed our mother's speech. Those of us who have had the privilege of caring for the dying know how much gets communicated in the silences, where we can hear the voice of God and speak our love without words.

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I'm prone to look for God in the earthquakes... and the fires...and the tornadoes. I'm learning to slow down and hear God in the silence. Maybe I'll get there by the time I run out of words at the end of my life.

I leave you tonight with two short poems from two of my favorite poets. The first is "The Peace of Wild Things," by Wendell Berry. The second is "Praying," by Mary Oliver. I'll leave some silence between them for us to listen to the "still, small voice" that speaks to quieted hearts.

The Peace of Wild Things

When despair for the world grows in me
and I wake in the night at the least sound
in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be,
I go and lie down where the wood drake
rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.

I come into the peace of wild things
who do not tax their lives with forethought
of grief. I come into the presence of still water.

And I feel above me the day-blind stars
waiting with their light. For a time
I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.

Praying

It doesn't have to be
the blue iris, it could be
weeds in a vacant lot, or a few
small stones; just pay attention, then patch
a few words together and don't try
to make them elaborate, this isn't
a contest but the doorway
into thanks, and a silence in which
another voice may speak.