



In the Silence
Isaiah 55:6-10
Rev. Devon Earle
Washington Street UMC
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I have a confession to make...I don't like silence. When I take the Myers-Briggs personality test on the introvert-extrovert scale, I am almost as extroverted as you can get. So, when I began my time as a student at Duke Divinity School and found out that one of the requirements of a first-year student was to attend a silent retreat, you can imagine how I felt. I had practiced shorter periods of silence, but I think the longest that I had been intentionally been silent was 30 minutes during a centering prayer exercise which was hard for me. Now I was going to have to practice intentional silence for more than 24-hours and I had no idea how I was going to keep my mouth shut.

The weekend came for the silent retreat, and on a brisk fall Friday afternoon I gathered together with others from my class at a picturesque retreat center nearby. I sat down and shared a meal with my classmates, cramming in words while we still could, apprehensive about the hours that lay ahead. Then the chaplain of the divinity school invited us to gather in a circle. She invited us to write down all the burdens we were carrying and she said a prayer and asked us to rip those burdens into shreds, leaving them behind. We worshipped and shared communion together and then entered a time of silence.

I left the room silently and went out and laid on a grassy hill, leaving behind things that had held on to me for the first couple months of graduate school. I looked up and watched the stars and wrestled with the idea of not being able to talk for the evening and next day. But then a peace fell over me as I looked into the vastness of the sky and thought about the greatness of our God. I was alert to a new level of overstimulation and tiredness that had become a new normal for me as I had begun my time at seminary. I was suddenly thankful for this gift of being able to be silent with God. I didn't have to say anything. Just be still and know that God was there. And there I was silent, present with God who would be my companion for the next day.

After that retreat I wondered over and over again, why are we so uncomfortable with silence?

I bet many of you can relate to discomfort surrounding silence. We have all experienced that awkward silence that uncomfortable pause in a conversation that seems to lag on. Where you had been talking, and listening and then there is this silence that disrupts the flow of the conversation. And we suddenly get that feeling of anxiety, will they speak, what should I say, should I ask a question, how do I break this silence? And it is not only those pauses in conversations that feel awkward, other silences can feel uncomfortable as well. But silence is also important.

In our scripture reading from today, the prophet Elijah has been going and going and he is just about burnt out. Does that sound familiar to anyone? And then God says go up on the mountain because I am going to show up. So, Elijah goes up on the mountain and he doesn't

see God in the wind that is so strong that it is breaking rocks and splitting mountains. He doesn't see God in the fire or in the earthquake. He encounters God in a still small voice.

This "still small voice," is something that people have discussed, wondering what did it sound like, what was it. Some people think that the Hebrew word doesn't even refer to an audible noise so they translate it as sheer silence.

God was in the sound of sheer silence.

When was the last time you took time to be silent?

When my husband, Rob and I moved to Northern Virginia about two years ago, people warned us about the traffic. We thought that was going to be our biggest adjustment. But after a few months I came to realize that driving 4 miles could take 20 minutes or longer and I just calculated that into my travel times and learned patience. But what has been the biggest change has been living in a culture that is defined by busyness. A place where the first thing people ask you when they meet you is what do you do for a living and people work so much that it makes it seem like their value is defined by their profession.

Rob and I live right across the street from the Patent and Trademark Office, so our apartment windows look into people's office windows, and I can't count the number of times I have closed my blinds to go to sleep at night, while peering into someone's office where the lights are still on and the person is working.

And we know that with technology, we can be tempted to never stop working, checking our emails and voicemails on our cellphones after we get home from work.

I am reading a book by Alyssa Mastromonaco, a former White House Deputy Chief of Staff, who she sees this too. She reflects that "America is a nation of people who work a lot and of people who strive to work a lot. The best thing you can be, our culture tells us is "at the top of your field." You are supposed to have power, to be an executive with a cushy corner office and a lot of money and an assistant, a person who travels for business and takes working breakfasts, fork in one hand and cell phone in the other."¹

Does our schedule, our time, our life look like that of a person who wants to hear God's voice?

Our culture doesn't. It is not easy to take time apart for silence. There is nothing in Northern Virginia culture that supports us entering these times for "unproductive" being rather than frantic doing.

And sometimes we aren't very good at taking time for sitting in silence. Taking time to sit in silence, to intentionally be with God can feel vulnerable and even out of control. It can be scary and feel as if we could and should be doing something else.

Yet it is in that silence that Elijah realizes something so important. As Elijah is huddled in his cave, he speaks these words of despair, "I alone am left."² He is convinced of his unique status

¹ Mastromonaco, Alyssa. *Who Thought This Was a Good Idea? And Other Questions You Should Have Answers to When You Work in the White House*. P.130

² NRSV, 1 Kings 19:10

as the last remaining person of faith and believes that he must go at life alone, that it is now all up to him. Yet in that silence Elijah encounters that dynamic presence of God, which empowers him to trust in divine grace. God speaks to Elijah and Elijah is reassured that God goes with him and he is sent to go anoint others who will stand in faith with him.³

It's not that God never shows up in the wind, the earthquakes, or the fire, we know God does. And it's not up to us to make God "show up." But it is important that we make room in our lives to be intentionally aware, to listen, so that when God shows up we will notice.

In her book, *Sacred Rhythms* Ruth Haley Barton reflects, "in silence we choose to unplug not only from the constant stimulation of life in the company of others but also from our own addiction to noise, words and activity. It creates a space for listening to the knowings that go beyond words, and feeling no pressure at all to put the depths of the human soul into words. We enter into silence on the basis of our desire for God, and it becomes a place for being in God's presence."⁴

"Silence makes space" it creates a space within our lives for God to do a meaningful work inside of us.⁵

Even though it may feel like there isn't time for this space, this time set apart for God, people make room for it in their lives.

In France, there is the Taize community. Three times every day, bells call everyone to stop what they are doing and gather for a time of prayer. In the middle of each common prayer, there is a long period of silence, a time to be still and encounter God.

In the Gospels, we are reminded that silence was a regular discipline for Jesus. Jesus also often withdrew to secluded places and prayed. Jesus intentionally made space in the busyness of his life to listen to God.

Rob Bell, an author, speaker, and former pastor, asks this convicting question: "Do you really believe that God's voice is more interesting than the voices around you?"⁶

If we do, it is important to make space to listen for God's voice.

I know that all of us have things that call for our attention in life. Jobs to uphold, families to care for, deadlines to meet, to-do lists to complete. But I know that in the midst of the craziness of life, we can if we are intentional about it, find time, even if it is just a few minutes to step away. To be silent instead of watching a TV show, or surfing the internet or sitting on Facebook, to say no to one more obligation and instead take time to intentionally rest in God's presence, to listen and reflect on places where you have seen God move. Jesus did it, there are people in this world and this community who do it, take time to be still and know God. Take time to listen for a very important voice, God's voice.

Amen

³ Feasting on the Word, p.150.

⁴ Barton, Ruth. *Sacred Rhythms: Arranging our Lives for Spiritual Transformation*. P. 32-33.

⁵ Soul Shepherding, <http://www.soulshepherding.org/2005/08/solitude-and-silence/>.

⁶ Bell, Rob. *Nooma: Noise*.