

On Holy Silence

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St. Paul's Batesville
August 7, 2011
Eighth Sunday after Pentecost
Proper 14, Year A
1 Kings 19:9-18

+In the name of the Father and of the Son and of
the Holy Spirit. Amen.

As many of you know, I spent last week at Camp Mitchell (our diocesan church camp) with fourth, fifth, and sixth graders from around the diocese. Some things had changed from when I was a camper a decade ago. The cabins now have air conditioning, for one thing. Also, the little music pamphlets I remember from my youth were gone; the words to unfamiliar songs were taught using a projector screen, and the kids did a fine job of memorizing them before they were used in chapel.

Many things, however, had not changed, and I was pleased to see the camp traditions I cherished as a teenager still going strong. One of the most

important of these traditions, I've come to believe, has to do with the chapel. The beautiful Chapel of the Transfiguration is an open-air affair, which might seem a liability when one is attempting to encourage the reverence due a house of worship. There is, however, a lamppost on the path to the chapel, after which conversation and what we used to call "horsing around" is no longer permitted. I was moved to see how seriously the campers took this prohibition. There was a great deal less chatting and squirming in the chapel than one might expect from children. The kids maintained attention and prayerfulness and reverence in what deep-down they knew to be a holy place, a place set aside for the worship of Almighty God.

There is, of course, a reason why we ask the kids to be quiet as they enter the chapel, just as there is a reason that our tradition encourages quiet, private prayer rather than "catching up" with friends in the church before we begin the

liturgy on a Sunday morning. It's not that God is offended when we chat in His House. It is that we believe that God can speak to us most powerfully when there aren't as many distractions as usual.

We populate our lives with noise. I am as bad an offender as any in this regard. I listen to podcasts and music when I'm getting ready in the morning and when I'm driving. I've forced myself to stop watching television while eating dinner, instead sitting at the dining room table, but I still usually turn the radio on and listen to the news (which probably doesn't aid in digestion). Anyone who's spent much time around me knows that my phone is constantly alerting me to emails and text messages which these days are often important and time sensitive and require quick response, but which do tend to invade the silence that all of us need from time to time. I do not believe I am alone in being captive (to a certain extent) to the noisy world in which we live.

In this morning's Old Testament lesson, Elijah has retreated to Mount Horeb, which other biblical authors named Mount Sinai (the same place God had given the Law to Moses). He was seeking refuge from King Ahab and especially from Ahab's wife Jezebel who desired the death of the prophet for challenging and defeating the followers of the pagan god Baal in a sort of tournament of miracles.

We can assume, though, that Elijah was looking for more than just a hiding place. He had already found a safe haven in the wilderness, and despite his own melancholy (which led him to desire death from starvation), God's angels had ministered to him and kept him from falling prey to what today we might diagnose as major depression with suicidal tendencies. That Elijah made the long trek to Horeb—which we are told took him forty days and forty nights—suggests that he was looking for something more than a "hidey-hole". Rather, I believe he was seeking some kind of message from

God, and what better place to find such a message than at that very place in which God's greatest moment of self-disclosure up to that point (namely, the revelation of the Law to Moses) had occurred.

No doubt Elijah was hoping for a grand display of power. Moses had seen a burning bush on this mountain, and God had enclosed Horeb with clouds and fire while he communed with Moses at the summit. Elijah got what he was expecting in part: a wind strong enough to split rocks, a tremendous earthquake, and a firestorm. But in all these powerful signs, Elijah did not hear the message he desired from God. It was only after these apparently cataclysmic events that Elijah heard the still small voice of God, breaking through sheer silence.

And what does Elijah hear in that silence? It is not just a sense of calm or of affirmation. Elijah hears words of instruction. He gets his marching orders, as it were. He is told very

specifically to anoint Hazael as king of Aram (modern day Syria) and to anoint Jehu son of Nimshi as king of Israel and to anoint Elisha as his successor as God's prophet.

This is why quiet time with God is terribly important. We're not just out to feel God's calming presence in some abstruse sense. That is certainly a secondary benefit we can gain from prayer, but it's not the only reason we should listen in prayer as much as we talk. We need silence so that God can tell us what to do. He may tell us by giving us a sense of affirmation about some plans we mean to make or by implanting in our hearts feelings of unease about a course of action we ought not to take. He may even speak to us in discernible language as he did to Elijah. I know that's something we tend to discount as a little bit crazy, but (call me "pentecostalistic") I for one truly believe that God can speak and has spoken to some in a very literal sense.

However God chooses to speak to us, though, we have to give Him an opportunity. We have to carve out of our busy schedules moments for silence. I joke with our parish administrator, who is a far more contemplative Christian than I, that he can keep his centering prayer (which I've always found beyond difficult to get into) and I'll just pray the daily office. Even so, I find that simply letting myself into the church and kneeling silently for a half-hour or so before the Blessed Sacrament we keep in this Tabernacle on the Altar has done wonders for me in terms of getting a sense of what God is trying to tell me. If you want to do the same, please let me know and I'll make sure you can get into the church anytime, day or night, to avail yourself of the Holy Silence which this place affords.

If you'd rather not come here to do it, I encourage you to find a quiet place in your homes or in your work place or in the outdoors or

anywhere, to simply be quiet before God for a little bit of time every single day. If you really believe that you don't have fifteen or twenty minutes to do this, I encourage you to think again. Look at your day-planner and set some time aside. I put time for prayer into my calendar and my phone beeps at me and then I turn it off for half-hour and I'm quiet. I've found it's the only way I can stay honest with myself and God about praying as I should. However you manage to do it, if you try I think you'll find that God will speak to you in a manner more clear and compelling than if we wait for an earthquake or a burning bush before we pay attention. Whether God speaks to you with an honest-to-God voice or with a small but discernible murmur in your heart, He will speak and He will give you that which is needful to accomplish His perfect Will.

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