

“Protection from Silence”
I Kings 19:1-15a, Luke 8:26-39
June 12, 2016
The Rev. Dr. Mark W. Jennings

“If we have courage to listen to the silence, that is when we may hear the voice of God”

I went to the funeral of a friend and colleague on Thursday. The Rev. Fred Cunningham was the former pastor of North Presbyterian Church in Kalamazoo and during my first ten years here, he was the stated clerk of the Presbytery of Lake Michigan. That means he gets to take notes at all the presbytery meetings, share his wisdom about how things should be run, and attend lots and lots of committees. Not my cup of tea, but Fred was really good at it. He was good at lots of other things as well. I had known that Fred was a spiritual director, but at his service an Episcopal priest stood up and shared about his relationship with Fred. He had asked Fred to be his spiritual director, a relationship that is very intimate, requires a lot of sharing and is usually between an older, wiser person and someone seeing spiritual grounding in their life. Fred told this fellow that instead of a spiritual director, he would agree to be his spiritual companion and that began a relationship that continued once a month for the next 25 years. They would meet and discuss their churches, their lives, where they perceived the Spirit of God was leading them and it was a fruitful relationship for both of them. Last year, as Fred's dementia began to become more and more pronounced, Fred felt that perhaps it was time to end their relationship because he couldn't really participate for much longer. But the fellow said he would like to continue to meet anyway. And so he would go over to Fred's house, sit on the porch, Fred's wife Jo would bring tea and they would sit in silence. And at the service he said, “And that's when the spiritual direction really began.” There in the silence.

I don't really get it. Silence and I have a difficult relationship. Some people crave silence. I keep wanting to fill it. Often I go into the house, and if I'm by myself, I turn on the TV news or music on Pandora so there is some noise to fill the silence. When I come to work at the church in the morning, I am often the first one here and it's very quiet. So I often turn on music even before I pray, just so I have some background noise. But lately I've been trying to cultivate the silence. I'm not too good at it

yet, but I'm growing in my appreciation of the silence. When the session meets every month we begin with a time of what is called "centering prayer." We try to mentally and spiritually put down all the things we have been pre-occupied with during the day; worries, joys, concerns, schedules, and we sit in silence and let our spirits unite with the Spirit of God and become present with each other and with God. So we sit in silence for a few minutes. Half the time I'm worrying about what will happen if someone comes in late and makes too much noise. Lately when we begin worship we try to center our hearts but sitting in silence for a time. We did that this morning, did it seem long to you?

A couple of weeks ago we read the story of Elijah and his contest with the priests of Baal on Mt. Carmel. That defeat of her priests caused the queen, Jezebel, to want to kill Elijah and so he flees south to the wilderness. There he thinks he is going to die. In fact, he is ready to die. He feels alone, depressed, abandoned by God, defeated by the queen, nothing left to live for. He feels like he is the only one left who still follows God. He's been a failure, so he lays down to die. But God has other plans for Elijah. God sends an angel to feed him. God gives him time to rest and feeds him again. Elijah then goes to Mt. Horeb which is another name for Mt. Sinai, the mountain where Moses and the people of Israel met with God and received the tablets of the law centuries before. Ready to hear from God, there is a great wind that causes Elijah to hide in the cave, and then there is an earthquake and then a great fire. But God is not in the wind or the earthquake or the fire. And then God speaks but his voice comes in a strange way. The words in Hebrew say that then came the "sound of fine silence" or the "sound of sheer silence." What does that mean? The sound of silence? How can you hear silence? One of the translations says that God's voice came in a "gentle whisper (NIV)", while the old King James says that God spoke in "a still, small voice." The words probably mean as close as one can get to silence and still hear a hushed sound. Sometimes we are so used to thinking that God speaks to us through the spectacular that we don't hear him when God speaks in ways that we can hear, in the hushed whisper of the times in our lives when we are ready to hear.

A few months ago, we made a challenge to the congregation during Holy Week to hold a prayer vigil

on Maundy Thursday into Good Friday. We remembered that when Jesus went to the Garden of Gethsemene on the night of his arrest he asked his disciples to stay awake with him while he prayed. But they fell asleep. So we challenged ourselves to have someone here praying all night long, in one-hour shifts, to stay awake with Jesus. People were to come into the sanctuary and sit in silence for an hour and pray. Does that sound hard to do? Since we had a staff person here all night, someone was here to open the door and welcome the pray-ers, and then to let them out when their hour was over. What we noticed however is that people looked significantly different when they left from when they came in. It was like the hour spent in silence had an effect on them, like they were changed somehow. Maybe a whole hour spent in prayer, speaking to God, had been important to them. Maybe an hour spent listening to God had been important. What ever happened, they were different. Changed.

I've read this story about Elijah many times, but there's something different that struck me about the story this time. When Elijah is warned that the Lord is about to pass by, he appears ready for God. Then comes the great wind, but God is not in the wind; and then an earthquake, but God is not in the earthquake; and then a fire, but God is not in the fire. Then comes 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. When he "heard it," the story says. He heard the hushed, almost silent voice of God. And he wrapped his face in his mantle, in his coat, he hid his face from God. This I understand. I get it that he hid from the silence. I do that. That's why I turn on music, or turn on the TV or pick up a book. Protection from the silence. Because if I sit there in the silence, God might speak to me, I might hear the hushed almost silent voice of God and I might be changed. Elijah didn't want to change, he wanted to be the Lone Ranger, the one faithful prophet of God. But the voice of God speaks to him and he hears it, hears God say that he is not alone but there are still seven thousand that Elijah can count on. The people of Gerasene were like that too. They were used to the madman living among the tombs. They weren't used to the silence. They were scared of it. I get that. Prayer is like that, if you listen as much as you speak, you may hear the voice of God in the silence.

Maybe that's why silence is scary, because we might hear something that changes us. When we sit in our house when no one else is home, do we listen to the silence? When we wake in the middle of the night and there are only the sounds of the house settling or the water softener running, do we listen to the silence? When we come early to church on a winter's morning and the blanket of snow gives a special muffling to any sound, do we listen to the silence? When someone you love passes away, have you ever sat by their graveside and listened to the silence? We've had silence this week if we have listened for it. Friends and community members who were here just a few days ago whose voices are now hushed. It has been my privilege this week on your behalf to sit with Chris and Sandra and Harold Gobble as they have held vigil at Paul's side in the hospital. Yesterday when I was there Chris had to step out and then Harold got a phone call from Sandra at home and for a few precious moments I was left alone with Paul as he slept. And I tried to listen in that quiet room, to listen to the silence. I resisted reaching for my cell phone, and instead I just sat. And I prayed. And I listened. What did I hear? I heard my friend breathing and moving, and I was grateful for that. We all are. I heard the nurses moving around outside the room and I was grateful for them and their care for Paul. We all are. And behind it all was silence. Did I listen to the silence? Did I hear the hushed almost silent voice of God? Did I hear God's spirit reassuring me of his love and care for Paul and for his family and for us and for the families who are struggling and grieving, and saying that even in the darkest times, there is nothing that can come between us and his love? Did I hear the hushed almost silent voice of God affirming that no matter what tragedies occur in our lives that God's spirit is among us and within us, giving us strength and inspiring us to take care of one another? Did I listen to the silence? Did I hear the hushed almost silent voice of God? Did I?

Let's pray silently.