

We live in a world of noise- not just sound but noise! A quiet time outside enjoying the sound of the birds and children playing is often drowned out by noisy vehicles with loud music or lawnmowers. While a world of sound is important and preferred, it seems at times, the opposite- even silence can be uncomfortable. Have you ever been asked, as a group experiment, to sit in silence for even two minutes? What about the time of "Silence" during our Call to Worship? Helpful or uncomfortable? It gets our attention, though.

Our Scripture readings for this morning find a thin but common link between the Old Testament Elijah story and the Gospel Lesson of Jesus' encounter with the man controlled by demons. Elijah experiences the violence of the wind, earthquake and fire followed by the sound of "sheer silence" and God's voice. The demoniac was uncontrollable- chains could not even constrain his wild and loud thrashing around- until Jesus quiet voice asked his name. In both instances, we find ear-piercing noise until the silence of God's whisper brought quiet.

I was reminded by the words of Elijah that as we read accounts of people in the Bible- those we consider heroes or unique since they are found in the Bible- it is easy to assume they are unusual people. Fortunately, with the exception of Christ, of course, that is not true. If those named in the Bible never stumbled, we would find it difficult to connect with them or learn from God's use of them. The Bible is an accounting of real people, such as Elijah- people who lose heart, who cave in, who also forget all about faith when they become overwhelmed by life circumstances. In this morning's Scripture from I Kings, we can be surprised by Elijah's fear and depression so deep he wanted to die. Even though Elijah had experienced the power of God over that of the idol, Baal, he panicked and ran when the opposition threatened. We can identify with an "Elijah" and also learn from God's response to him.

A bit of background in the previous chapter of I Kings is helpful- In the name of the God of Israel, Elijah warns the nation that a three year drought is coming. This warning is God's response to the country's continued worship of Baal under the leadership of King Ahab. Elijah was sent by God to meet Ahab and set up a challenge to determine whether Baal or God is the most powerful. Elijah instructs Ahab to line up the prophets of Baal, some 450 strong, and they are to build a sacrifice to Baal. They are then to call on Baal to send the fire to light that sacrifice. After hours of effort, I Kings 18: 29 states, "but there was no voice, no answer, and no response." When Elijah's turn comes, he repairs the altar of the Lord, places the same sacrifice on it, and then has the altar doused with water- not once but three times. In response to Elijah's call, I Kings 18: 38 states, the fire of the Lord fell and consumed the burnt offering, the wood, stones, dust and even licked up the water around the altar. In response to this obvious proof of God's power over Baal, the people of Israel fell on their faces and worshiped God.

Angry with this defeat, Queen Jezebel threatens Elijah's life. Elijah, weary from all this effort and fearing for his life, goes into the wilderness. There, after being fed by an angel of God, he journeyed for forty days to the mount of God- Mount Horeb. Once there, God came to him and asked, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" You can hear the frustration, weariness and depression in Elijah's voice as he responds, "I have been very zealous for the Lord, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away."

Elijah is told to go out and stand on the mountain, for the Lord is about to pass by. In doing so, Elijah experienced a great, strong, mountain shattering wind, an earthquake, and a fire- but the Lord was not in any of them. Then came, "a sound of sheer silence" and a voice asking again, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" Elijah responded with the same words as before. But God's response is direct, "Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus" followed by instructions for anointing new kings, and Elisha, his replacement. God also promises that all knees have not bowed to Baal- that there will be seven thousand faithful left in Israel. God was not in the dramatic wind, earthquake and fire but God was still with Elijah. God is not always in the dramatic, but often communicates best in the ordinary- in the sound of sheer silence.

That Elijah, known to us as a great prophet with a close connection with God, should have moments of thin faith reminds us that faith can wax and wane for any of us. Whether we do better faith-wise in happy times or feel more connected to God in the miserable moments, all of us have times when our faith is stronger than others. The emotional toll experienced at different times in our lives leaves us understanding that even Elijah was humanly vulnerable, in spite of his success with calling the Lord to burn the sacrifice. If we believe and search, we expect to find the presence of God in fierce storms, earthquakes and struggles of our lives. But God makes the Holy Presence known to Elijah in the silence, and then God speaks to him about the future- a plan already in place. In the tough times we too need to listen and look for God in different ways and find God's grace-filled embrace even in the small, quiet times. We are reminded not to wait for God to find a dramatic way to get our attention in order that our faith is renewed. We must be constant in our faith that God has a plan for us and be ready with an open heart to hear God even in what seems like silence.

As we turn to the New Testament verses in Luke's gospel chapter 8, we note four instances of miracle stories recorded by Luke. Each account demonstrates that Jesus is bringing forth God's kingdom- Jesus' power over all things. We find Jesus' power over nature in verses 22-25- Jesus calming a storm; we find in today's scripture- verses 26-39- Jesus' power over demonic forces; we find Jesus' power over illness in verses 40-48 when he heals the woman

who had hemorrhaged for years; and then in verses 49-56- Jesus' power over death when he heals Jairus daughter. In a few verses, Luke shows through all of these how Jesus' power is demonstrated and is an important part of his ministry.

Our New Testament Scripture begins when Jesus arrives at the country of Gerasenes. As he steps ashore, he is met by a man violently possessed by demons. From all the signs, the man had obviously been ill for a very long time- he was naked and could no longer live safely in the village but lived among the tombs. To protect him from himself, and protect the villagers, the man had to be bound in chains- which in his violence, he could escape.

According to our Scripture, it seems Jesus immediately told the unclean spirits to come out of the man. The man fell down before Jesus and the demons shouted, "What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beg you, do not torment me!" Jesus asked him, "What is your name?" to which he replied, "Legion." It is apparent that the demons are in control of the man and are threatened by the very presence of Jesus- since they had already been commanded to leave the man. When the demons heard Jesus calling them by name, they were terrified and begged him not to send them to the abyss. The abyss is another name for hell or the place where nobody wants to go, not even demons.

Now, it just so happened that there was a herd of pigs nearby. The demons begged Jesus to drive them into the pigs instead of the abyss. But, by driving the demons into the pigs, the demons get precisely what they were trying to avoid. When the demons took over the pigs, the pigs stampeded over the hill. They ran headlong into the deep blue sea and were drowned in the abyss.

Some people, when they read this story, become sidetracked about the fate of the pigs or they are concerned about the loss of income to the owners, or they feel this action does not reflect very well on Jesus. Those kinds of questions push the meaning of the story in a direction other than what Luke intended. The important focus is on Jesus' power over the demons and the healing of a man long controlled by them.

Also importantly, the incident created quite a reaction with the townspeople, especially those in charge of the herd. They ran away and told everyone else. The townspeople who hurried out were not prepared to see this previously insane and violent man, whom they had feared, now sitting quietly, dressed and in his right mind listening to every word Jesus had to say.

So startled were the townspeople that they asked Jesus immediately to go away and leave them alone. Now that Jesus had come and stirred things up by healing the man, they didn't know what to make of it nor what to do about it. They could have rejoiced with the man and thanked Jesus for healing him. But they were not capable of dealing with this new healthy person in their midst. Their natural response was to reject this new foreign element that had

come into their lives, much as the human body sometimes is inclined to reject a transplanted organ. It required too much change on their part in order to handle this new person. It was easier to reject Jesus.

So, Jesus left. Understandably thankful, the man wanted to journey with Jesus and be part of his ministry. Instead, Jesus told him to remain in his village as a living example of the saving grace of Jesus. He was to live among his people so that they would never forget the healing power of Jesus. Beyond the example, he was to share- to tell others about his experience.

So often we are told we must follow Jesus, and then feel uncertain how to do that. We find ourselves struggling with the belief that responding may mean doing big things and God will give very distinct directions. Until that time we are content to wait and see. God told Elijah to go back to his homeland- that there WERE faithful people there and work to do. Jesus instructed the healed man to stay where he was as an example and a message of the power of Jesus. Often following Jesus means remaining right where we are. Our ministry may be in the here and now, at this time, in this place. God's plan works through us as it did through Elijah and the healed man. We can be confident of that but need always to be listening for God's whisper power.

One last thought- If our human fathers or those who have loved us as fathers were to beat on drums and shout in their loudest voices that they loved us and thought we were the greatest person God has made, I wonder if we might disbelieve or try to cover our ears. However, the whisper voice with which God addressed Elijah and as Jesus addressed the demoniac, is the gentle and more acceptable voice of love received as an example from our earthly fathers.
Amen

Karen Houtman 6/19/2022