

A Voice of Sheer Silence

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1 Kings 19:9-12 — 19:9 Elijah came to a cave, and spent the night there. Then the word of the LORD came to him, saying, “What are you doing here, Elijah?” 19:10 He answered, “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.” 19:11 God said, “Go out and stand on the mountain before the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by.” Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake; 19:12 and after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire; and after the fire a voice of sheer silence.

“What are you doing here, Elijah?” The Hebrew prophet has just spent the night in a cave on Mount Horeb—which is another name for Mount Sinai, where Moses received the Ten Commandments hundreds of years earlier. On this mountain, God asks Elijah, “What are you doing here?”, and the great prophet Elijah basically says, “I’m running away. I’m giving up.” Let’s back-track a bit to see what exactly he is running away from.

He’s a prophet in the Northern Kingdom of Israel, and he’s been exhorting the Israelites—and especially the powerful among them—to live in obedience to God’s word, to be the faithful people that God has called them to be. The king of Israel at this time is Ahab, and Ahab’s wife is Jezebel, and Jezebel, who is not an Israelite, is known for worshipping a Canaanite deity named Baal, instead of the Israelite deity Yahweh, the Lord. In 1 Kings, we’re told that because of how widespread Baal worship was among the Israelites, the Lord brought a 3-year drought upon the land. And in the third year, God tells Elijah to present himself to Ahab and to propose a divine showdown. “Bring all of the prophets of Baal,” Elijah says, “and I’ll bring myself, and we’ll call upon our gods, and we’ll see what happens.”

So, in 1 Kings 18, there’s an epic face-off between 450 prophets of Baal and Elijah on Mount Carmel. As the story goes, two bulls are put on two separate altars with wood underneath, but there’s no flint, no fire. Elijah challenges Baal’s prophets to pray that their god will use his power to light the fire on his own, and they pray for hours, with no result. Then Elijah, who is something of a showman, walks up to his altar, dumps *buckets* of water on the bull there, and then prays, with a crowd of Israelites assembled, “Answer me, O Lord, answer me, so that this people may know that you, O Lord, are God, and that you have turned their hearts back to you.” Then suddenly, fire falls from the sky and consumes the sacrifice. The crowd of witnesses fall on their faces to worship the Lord, Elijah orders that all of Baal’s prophets be killed, and a rainstorm comes, ending the 3-year drought.

Quite a spectacular story, right? But it's only ten verses later that Elijah is hiding in a cave and telling God, "I'm giving up." So, what happened? Well, King Ahab told Jezebel what went down on Mount Carmel, how Elijah had all of Baal's prophets killed, and so the queen sends a messenger to Elijah, and the message is this: "So may the gods do to me, and more also, if I do not make your life like the life of one of them by this time tomorrow." If any of you watch TV shows like *Scandal* or *How To Get Away With Murder* or *Jane the Virgin*, I feel like this kind of drama would fit right in. Elijah is scared to death of Queen Jezebel's threat, so he flees into the wilderness, and on the heels of this great spiritual victory at Mount Carmel, Elijah feels abandoned. Depression sets in, and in the desert, he asks God to let him die.

But God doesn't. An angel comes to Elijah, nourishes him with food and drink, and gives him strength—not to go back to Israel and to face Jezebel, but to go further into the wilderness. For many days, God guides Elijah through the wilderness all the way to Mount Horeb—which everyone knows is where God appeared to Moses, and so everyone thinks of it as the holiest of mountains. For an ancient Israelite, if you were going to encounter the presence of God anywhere, this would be the place—which brings us back to God asking Elijah, in this cave on Mount Horeb, "What are you doing here?" And after Elijah says that he fears for his life and he feels abandoned, God says, "Come out of the cave, for I, the Lord, am about to pass by."

And suddenly, a great wind arises, so strong that it's breaking rocks into pieces before Elijah's eyes...but then the wind dies down, and Elijah realizes that God was not in the wind. Then suddenly, an earthquake strikes, rumbling the ground underneath Elijah's feet...but then the earthquake ends, and Elijah realizes that God was not in the earthquake. Then fire starts shooting down from heaven, the same hot, consuming fire that Elijah has just witnessed on Mount Carmel...but then the fire fizzles out, and Elijah realizes that God was not in the fire. And only after all of this does Elijah hear a voice of sheer silence—and *that* is the Lord passing by.

The two most common ways of translating this Hebrew phrase here are "a still small voice" and "a sound of sheer silence." I took the liberty of combining them: a voice of sheer silence. But there's ambiguity in the text here. What did Elijah hear, or did he hear *anything*? Was it a voice, or was it silence? Personally, I like this ambiguity: for many of us, I think it matches our experience of trying to hear God speak. How many of us have thought that God might be speaking to our hearts, thought we heard something, but then wondered, *Did I really hear that? Was that God's voice, or was that silence?* Elijah doesn't necessarily know, either. What he does know is that God passed by, and God came not in something big, but in something small.

For most of us, when we think of "an act of God," we think of something grand, something massive. It could be awesome or awful, but it should be something that staggers us humans—building up big things, tearing down big things, working miracles, healing a nation, healing a loved one. After all, if our God is a big God, then we'd expect this God to do big things. And God does. But God also does small things, friends. God's presence is not always flashy or extraordinary or catastrophic; often, God's presence is simple and still; often, God's voice is soft.

When I lived in Jordan, at a boarding school for Deaf children, I worked one-on-one with a 12-year-old Deaf-Blind boy named Hazem, and while he was usually a calm and cheerful kid, Hazem occasionally suffered from fits of rage. To describe the experience, I'd like to share a poem that I wrote about it while I was living there:

on my knees
eyes wide open
looking into yours
which see nothing
my eyes speak
“i love you”
“calm down”
my eyes fall
on deaf ears
it strikes again
whatever it is
you scream
thrash
strike
bite
yourself
every part
of your being
becomes tense
love is now force
three bodies intervening
mine also interceding
as it strikes
we bind
it halts
we wait
it strikes
we bind
it halts
we wait
it lasts one hour
strikes every five minutes
each time a new bruise
on you or on us
each time drops of blood
either yours or ours
my eyes scream “STOP!”
but my eyes fall.

One evening, I was escorting Hazem from the school's Deaf-Blind unit to the chapel for a worship service. We were halfway between the two places when I saw the beginning signs of one of Hazem's spells—heavy breathing, sweating, tensing up. When this happens in the Deaf-Blind unit, we can go to a padded area, where there are lots of pillows to soften the impact, as Hazem slams his body against the wall or on the ground, but at this moment he and I are outside on a concrete sidewalk, and I have no idea how I'm going to keep Hazem safe.

In that moment, I see Dinneke walking a few yards away. Dinneke is a 70-year-old Swiss woman who has lived at this school for decades. In the year that I lived there, I think that I saw her six times. She is chronically ill, very weak, and hardly ever leaves her apartment on the school's grounds. But on this night, she was coming to chapel, walking slowly, head bowed. She hears Hazem, looks up, and says to me, "What's wrong?" I say that he's starting to have one of those fits. She knows what I'm talking about. Dinneke may not leave her apartment often, but she knows everything there is to know about this place. To my surprise, she walks towards us, and to my horror, she stands directly in front of Hazem, no more than a foot away, and puts her frail hand on his sweaty forehead. Now I know that with one swing of his arm, Hazem could kill this woman, and Dinneke knows this too. "Oh Lord," she begins to pray, no louder than a whisper, "please protect Hazem. Take away whatever this is, and help him to live a good life. Amen." And within a few seconds, Hazem's breathing slowed down, his body loosened up, and we went to worship in the chapel.

Now, I consider this a big act of God. But it came through a still small voice. And the miracle of the act was simply the sound of silence. It wasn't a miracle that gave Hazem physiological sight or hearing, nor was it a miracle that permanently ended those fits of rage. But it was God passing by. Friends, even as we believe in a big God, who can and who does do big things (as we remember when we come to this table), let us be open to God's still small voice, to God's sound of sheer silence. Amen.