

## THE SILENT VOICE

1 Kings 19:1 – 13

Sunday, June 23, 2013

There's a video that made the rounds on the Internet a couple of years ago of a group of monks up on a stage in front of an audience. The music for the Hallelujah chorus from Handel's *Messiah* comes on, and you're waiting for the monks to start singing. Well, many monks have taken a vow of silence and do not speak, so they wouldn't be able to *sing*, either. So *these* monks are standing there with big signs. And on each of their signs is a part of a word from the song. When the time comes when they would normally *sing* their part, they hold up their sign instead.

It's this really *bizarre* thing, and it comes across as kind of silly. But one of the things that it *does* is that it makes you realize how you get so *used* to something like a song, you think about it *one* way, until it *changes*, and then you focus on the *words* or the *meaning* of that song, and you end up seeing something *different* in it; thinking about it a *different* way. I have heard that *Hallelujah* chorus *dozens* of times in my life. The church I grew up in in Florida, the choir used to sing it every Christmas Eve. But I never knew what the *words were* until I saw that video with the monks.

Their *silence* helped me to *hear* the song in a *new way*.

When I was in seminary in Atlanta, there was this church that had a contemporary worship gathering on Tuesday nights, and it would draw around 2,000 high school and college-age young adults. My friends and I went pretty regularly. There was a band that played during worship

(drums, guitar), so it was pretty *loud*. And then the guy who preached each week would talk for about 45 minutes or so.

Well, this one night, as we're waiting for everything to get started, waiting for the band to start playing, the lights go down, and the worship space had big screens on each side. And these *words* start coming up on the screens. And we realized after a minute, that this was the *sermon* that night. Instead of the guy coming up and preaching, they did it all without *sound*. So we sat there in *silence* and *read* the message on those screens.

And at first it was really confusing and disconcerting and a little *frustrating*. It really threw us off. But then, what happened was, we realized that we had to focus a lot more than if he had just been up there speaking. The fact that we had to *read* the message, take it in for ourselves, rather than someone just *giving* it to us, it made us more attentive. Sometimes we get so caught up in *how* a preacher delivers the message (like whether they're exciting or energetic or whatever), but the silence helped us to focus on the message itself.

Sometimes we need *silence* in order to hear what's really being *said*.

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In Elijah's time the people of Israel have strayed away from God, and they are worshipping this foreign god, Baal. Baal has all these prophets who have led the people away from God. Elijah comes on the scene to call the people of Israel *back* to God. And what he *does* is, he *kills* all the prophets of Baal. Takes a sword and kills them all. Well, the queen hears about this, and she worships Baal, so she's very upset about it. And so she tells Elijah that she is going to kill *him*. Elijah *hears* this, and he's afraid, so he runs away, out into the wilderness.

When he's out in the wilderness, away from the busyness of the city; away from all the noise and commotion of killing prophets, an angel of God comes to him. The angel tells him to go to Mount Horeb, the place where God had given the law (the ten commandments) to Moses. And the angel gives Elijah food to strengthen him for the journey, because it's a *long way*. Elijah has to travel for forty days and forty nights (the same amount of time that Moses was up on the mountain receiving the law from God). The angel tells Elijah that God will meet him on this mountain, just like God did with Moses, and that God will *pass by him*, just like God did with Moses. All of this is meant to remind Elijah (and remind *us*) of the way that God revealed himself to Moses and communicated with Moses.

So Elijah gets to the mountain, and he's waiting for God to show up. Now, when God showed up for Moses, what happened? There was *thunder* and *lightning* and a big, loud trumpet blast. It was a huge, impressive spectacle! There was fire and the earth shook. So that's what Elijah is expecting as he is waiting for God to show up. I think that's what *all of us* might expect if *we* were waiting for God to show up. Some big, impressive, overwhelming spectacle.

There's a strong wind, so strong it's breaking the rocks on the mountain apart. And Elijah is like, "Okay, that's *got* to be God!" But, it says, the Lord wasn't *in* the wind.

Then there's an earthquake, and the whole mountain is shaking, like it did with Moses. So again, Elijah is like, "Okay, this *has* to be God!" But God wasn't in the earthquake.

Then there is a raging fire, like when God appeared to Moses before. And Elijah is thinking, "Okay, third time's a charm. This *has* to be God!" But God wasn't in the fire.

God wasn't in the big, impressive, noisy spectacles that Elijah was *used to* or *expected*. After the wind and the earthquake and the fire all died down, there was the sound of sheer *silence*. And *that* is when God *speaks* to Elijah. In the *silence*.

The Hebrew words here, when it says, "the sound of sheer silence," the Hebrew actually does something funny. The Hebrew words are *qol demamah daq*, and it's been translated a lot of different ways throughout the years, because no one is *exactly* sure what it means. *Qol* means, "a voice, sound, or noise." *Demamah* means, "whisper, calm, silence, or still." *Daq* means, "thin, small, fine, like dust." It gives us the picture of a very small, very quiet, light sound. Like the sound of someone *whispering* or *breathing*.

Two of the main ways this has been translated are, "a sound of sheer silence," like we have here, and, "a still, small voice." And people debate all the time which one of those is correct. Some say, "Elijah heard the sound of sheer silence." Others say, "No, it was the still, small voice of God."

Henry David Thoreau once said that, "In human intercourse, the tragedy begins, not when there is misunderstanding about *words*, but when *silence* is not understood."

**I think that you need the sound of sheer silence *in order to hear* the still, small voice of God.**

Sometimes we need *silence* in order to hear what's really being *said*.

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We live in a world where we are constantly bombarded by *sounds*. I heard the story of a man named Bernie Krause, who records nature sounds for movies and TV. He said that in 1968, in

order to get *one hour* of natural sound, uninterrupted by airplanes, cars, or anything else, he would have to record for about 15 hours. And today, in order to get that same one hour of uninterrupted sound, it takes him *2,000 hours* of recording.<sup>1</sup>

There is a steady hum of noise going on in our lives. The *television* is always on, whether we're watching it, or it's just on in the background. Radios in cars. Telephones and cell phones are always ringing. Voices talking, whether it's *us* or *someone else* doing the talking. The sounds of traffic, cars and trucks passing by. We are *constantly* surrounded by *noise*. Of course we have trouble hearing the still, small voice of God in our lives when there is all this other stuff drowning it out on a daily basis.

We are always looking for God in the big, impressive spectacles. Earthquakes and storms and big, booming voices from the sky. But *what if* God is already speaking *in you*, and you just can't hear it yet?

As the father of three kids under five, silence is hard to come by in our house. I have to be *intentional* about carving out time and creating space for silence.

I run in the mornings. And it *used* to be that when I ran, I would listen to music. This past winter, I had to stop doing that, because I was running so early in the morning, it was still *dark*, and I couldn't hear *cars* coming up if I had earphones in. So I started running in *silence*. And what I found was that I started hearing all sorts of *other* things. Birds, dogs, wind and water. The *rhythm* of my own *breath* and *feet hitting the pavement*. I started using that time to clear my

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<sup>1</sup> Rob Bell, *Nooma #5: Noise* (DVD)

head, so I could hear my own thoughts. I started using that time to *pray* and think through sermons or other things that I was dealing with at the time.

Same thing with driving. I used to play music all the time when I drove. But now I'll drive in complete silence, using that time to clear my head and reflect and talk to God and *listen*.

Elijah could not hear God's voice with all the commotion and noise going on around him. He needed to get away from it all. The *silence* made him more *attentive*, more *in tune* with the world around him. It helped him *focus* so that he could *hear something* that he otherwise *wouldn't have been able to hear*.

In this busy, noisy world in which we live, we need to be intentional about carving out time for *silence*. It's not going to happen by itself. More and more we have to be *deliberate* about creating space where we can clear our heads and *hear* what God might be saying to us.

It might be something as simple as a thought or an idea that comes to you. A word or a sentence that keeps repeating in your head and you just can't shake it. How do you know that's not the voice of God speaking to you? It might be the voice of God quietly speaking through a conversation with a friend. Chances are, it's not going to be Morgan Freeman's voice coming over the loudspeaker. *Could* happen, but probably not *likely*. It's a *still, small voice*, perhaps indistinguishable from your own thoughts. You have to silence everything else; *listen* for it. *Open yourself up* to it and allow yourself to be drawn in to a deeper awareness.

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Elijah shows us that God is *present* in the *silence*. Maybe for you that means that you need to carve out more times of silence in your life to *hear* the voice of God. Or maybe you are in a

*season* of silence in your life, where you feel like God has not been speaking for a *very long time*. Elijah reminds us that even when God is *quiet*, God is still *there*. We just have to learn to *listen in new ways*.

And we're going to do that right now in this time of prayer. Even if you don't get *any other silence* for the rest of this day, we're going to have some right now. We're going to take a minute and just be *silent*. Because what we need in prayer is not to hear *me* speak, but to hear *God* speak. So clear your head, open yourself up, and *listen...*