

Humanity's fascination with silence goes all the way back to our very roots. Greek philosophers and playwrights like Pythagoras, Plato, and Aeschylus had their own ideas and purposes for utilizing silences – such as Pythagoras's demand of new students that they stay completely silent for five years in or to learn how to listen before trying to teach or do philosophy. Roman stoics like Seneca and Marcus Aurelius spent significant time thinking about silence too – with Seneca complaining about the annoyance of background noise because, he believed, true focus requires escaping external

chaos for quiet places. The early Christian Desert Fathers – the Abbas – were monks dedicated their entire faith lives to *hesychia*, or inner stillness, finding the desert provided the best place for them to find it. Their belief behind the need for *hesychia* was that they believed reckless talk ruins the soul and that God is best met in quiet solitude.

Even today people travel from all over the world to Minneapolis, Minnesota, to experience the anechoic chamber at Orfield Laboratories – the world’s quietest room. Orfield’s anechoic chamber recently beat Microsoft’s record, measuring an

astonishing -24.9 decibels. Human hearing *starts* at zero – so the silence experienced in a place like Orfield’s anechoic chamber is something most ears have never experienced or dealt with.

No one has ever remained in Orfield’s anechoic chamber for more than 45 minutes until they found it to be too much to take.

Orfield’s anechoic chamber forces us to stop and think if the true absence of sound is something we can ever experience.

Steven Orfield, the founder of the lab, was quoted as saying, “When it’s quiet, ears will adapt.

The quieter the room, the more things you hear.”

He said that inside the anechoic chamber *YOU* become the sound. Visitors have reported hearing their own heartbeat, or the thump and rush of blood moving through blood vessels, or even the faint sound of their joints as they move. Many also say it’s disorienting, causing them to lose their balance and to experience feelings of being “unmoored” in reality, which is why no one has ever lasted more than 45 minutes.

Maybe this is why human beings are so fascinated with silence... and why it makes us so uncomfortable.

Stop talking for 15 seconds

That was 15 seconds of silence. How did it feel?

Today's passage finds the prophet Elijah on the run, holed up in a cave at the top of Mount Horeb (also known as Mount Sinai where the ten commandments were handed down to Moses). He's on the run because he's crossed queen Jezebel and she sent 300 of her religious zealots after him, who he has dispatched single handedly (like an epic

scene from an action movie), and when word gets back to her about it she's literally ordered his head on a platter.

Kishon wadi (where Elijah has dispatched of Jezebel's zealots) is about 300 miles as the crow flies from the mountain range where we find Mount Horeb. The text tells us it took him 40 days and 40 nights, but that's a biblical euphemism for "a really long time". If he traveled 20 miles per day, assuming he wasn't interrupted by having to hole up to avoid detection and get turned in, it would

have taken him weeks to make the journey. Most likely on foot.

Along the way, we learn from the verses in the texts before today's reading, that Elijah has been provided for by God along the way. There we find one of my favorite stories – when Elijah insists he can't go any further, that he's going to die right there on the spot and give up, and God tells him to go take a nap under a bush; where, then, God provides him with literal bread and water and an encouraging message through one of God's messengers. There's nothing to restore the soul like

a good old fashioned nap and a snack... but I digress.

By the time we find him in today's story Elijah has traveled all those hundreds of miles and climbed the treacherous way up to "the top" of Mount Horeb where he's found a cave to curl up in and sleep. God isn't *always* omniscient in the scriptures, and so in *this* story God questions Elijah saying, "what are *YOU* doing *HERE*?" Elijah tells God about his fight with Jezebel, he tells God how most everyone in Israel has turned against God to worship other Gods, and he tells God that it's really

hard being one of the last faithful people in God's promised land. That it seems like everyone wants him dead.

And God says to come out from the cave he's hiding in.

When Elijah stands out on the face of the mountain he encounters three incredible elemental forces that all represent power that's external to the human experience – a strong wind, an earthquake, and a fire. Hearing a story like this in the ancient world the story telling device is clear –

we, as listeners, are set up to believe God will be in one of these powerful events.

But that's not where God appears to Elijah.

The Common English Bible, the translation we read today, says that, "after the fire, there was a sound. Thin. Quiet." Other translations have referred to it as a whisper, or silence. And it's here, in the silence, where God examines Elijah again asking him, "Why are you here, Elijah?"

The Christian mystic and theologian, Howard Thurman, as part of his book of devotional reflections *Meditations of the Heart* once wrote,

“There is very great virtue in the cultivation of silence, and strength to be found in using it as a door to God. Such a door opens within. When I have quieted down I *must* spend some time in self-examination in the Presence of God.” He goes on to write, “it means lifting up a part of one’s self and turning it over and over... Every period of prayer should provide for an experience of self-examination in the presence of God.”

Just like in the anechoic chamber where, in such deep silence, people heard their own hearts beating or their blood flowing or the sound their joints

make when they move – the silence Elijah experiences forces him to adjust in such a way that he can't help but experience God... from within his own self.

God is as close to him in that moment as breathing. As close as the beating of his heart. As essential to his progress as the functioning of his joints.

When God asks Elijah, “Why are you here?” the call is coming from *inside the house*.

It's in that moment God tells Elijah he's gotta go back into the thick of things. That he's got more

work to do in his role as the prophet... and that the work won't be easy. God asks Elijah to go back so that the proper leaders can be put in place, and so that Elijah can anoint his successor. That Elijah's work is almost done. But all of this only comes when God meets Elijah in such a silence, such a whisper, as to turn Elijah *inward* to examine himself and to take inventory of who he is... and who he means to be with God's help.

What's also striking here is that God's appearance to Elijah didn't depend on his being at Mount Horeb. If all it took was a time of silence to

be able to turn inward in self-examination and prayerful reflection this could have happened anywhere along the journey, or even before the long and treacherous journey took place. Elijah went out of his way to find something that was near to him the whole time.

Howard Thurman goes on to write, “There may be, very directly following this phase of prayer, a time of thanksgiving... Suddenly I may become aware that that which I thought was the sheer result of my own effort came my way *despite* my effort... I see clearly, if but for a fleeting moment,

that much, much has come my way as a normal part of my dependency, without my being aware of it.

As I said earlier, God has provided to Elijah all along this journey to Mount Horeb, and even in his life as the prophet before then. But even more than that; to this point Elijah has become so wrapped up in his role as the prophet, so bogged down by the responsibility and weight of his position, that he's forgotten who it is he serves and how he was called to his work in the first place. As if he *himself* rose to the role of prophet – rather than being *placed there* by God. The great “follow through” of the life of a

prophet is to remain connected to the part that every prophet has included in their story throughout scripture – their calling by God.

Howard Thurman concludes his devotion on Silence as a Door to God by writing, “The very roots of my own pride lie exposed to the scrutiny of God, and if I can bear it over and over again, the very will to pride of that kind may be destroyed in me; yes, destroyed by the sheer love of God. Perhaps, it is always true that the test of my thanksgiving is the humility which it inspires... Self-examination –

thanksgiving – humility – let us experience them in our quiet time in the presence of God.”

Friends, what we learn today from Elijah’s story on the mountain top is that when we’re looking for God we don’t have to go far. When we’re looking for God we don’t have to go hunting for big signs and flashy miracles. When we’re looking for God we don’t have to look *anywhere*... except within our own hearts.

Because that’s where God resides with us.

Sometimes life humbles us, and that’s when we see it. Sometimes we have incredible moments of

spiritual clarity, and that's when we see it.

Sometimes it's a little bit of both... but we can also see it as a regular daily practice we take the time and faith to try. When we create quiet our ears will listen for something new, and our Spirits do the same. In a world that gets louder and louder every day that becomes more and more important to remember. It's easy to get swept up in all that's scary, all that's worrisome, and all that's troubling – and it's also easy to fall into the trap that we are each individually responsible for changing what's

wrong with the world... but that's not how God intends for us to live.

As part of God's instructions to Elijah God tells him that there are still faithful people in Israel, people who, like Elijah, are called by God to live faithfully. God says, "I have preserved those who remain in Israel, totaling seven thousand"

Elijah – after all this self-examination and reflection in God's presence, after the humility it brings and the difficulty of his new charge... he has a *community* to go back to. To work with. Where everyone will support one another in a common

cause remembering who brought them into being
and who brought them together.

You don't have to go searching around the
world for this stuff, and it isn't the stuff of comic
books or ancient legends. It's just right here. Right
now. In you and in me... and we have the chance to
explore it together in beloved community. Amen.