

*A baptismal meditation delivered by the Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, senior minister at the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Pentecost 5, Proper 7, June 23, 2013, dedicated to Eddie Mykl Teyghan Anderson and Nihcollette Ann Paige Anderson on their baptismal day, to Dorothy Ringer (95) and John Zahn (94) who were laid to rest this week, to all LGBTQ men, women, teens and children who were created beautiful in the eyes of God, to all the men and women of my life who surrounded me with their love on June 23, 1985 and laid their hands upon me anointing me with the Holy Spirit, and always to the glory of God!*

## ***“Listening to the Whispers of God”\****

***I Kings 19:1-4, 8-15a; Luke 8:26-39***

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*Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.*

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Today’s reading from I Kings 19 takes us from a broom tree in the desert to a cave on Mt. Horeb. Having called upon God to slay the prophets of Baal on Mt. Carmel, the great prophet Elijah is now running for his life under the threat of death from Jezebel. There on the mountain, he receives a message. He is told to go to the mouth of the cave to witness the passing by of God’s presence. Although the wind tears the mountain apart, God is not in the wind. And an earthquake shatters the mountain, but we are told God is not in the earthquake. And after the quake, fire – but is not in the fire.

Finally, there is an eerie calm, literally “the sound of sheer silence.” We often hear this translated as the “still small voice of God.” The Hebrew words for “sound” and “silence” rarely come together – only one other place in Job 4:16. There we read that the “Whisper of God” is heard. But, “the sound of sheer silence” is our best interpretation.

In the sheer silence, Elijah has a God-with experience. Out of the silence, God directs his prophet. We have a vital takeaway in this encounter. Ours is to pay attention to God in the hidden and the ordinary; to listen to God in the sheer silence.

Sheer silence is not a comfortable place to be. Dallas Willard has written: “*Silence is frightening because it strips us as nothing else does, throwing us upon the stark realities of our life.*”

If we read and listen to the scriptures, God is silent a lot. While people are talking to God, talking about God and asking for answers from God, they rarely find themselves at peace in the silence of God. This is true in the scriptures and in our daily lives. We say we are a “God is Still Speaking” Church. But perhaps we should be a bit more humble about that motto. Perhaps we should pay attention to God’s talk and be more attentive as God listeners.

In her 1997 Lyman Beecher Lectures, Barbara Brown Taylor reflected on the silence of God. She discussed the writings of Hebrew scholar Richard Elliot Friedman, whose book, *The Disappearance of God* (which was re-released in 1997 as *The Hidden Face of God*) chronicles divine recession in the Hebrew Bible. Working his way from Genesis to the minor prophets – through all 39 books – Friedman paints a portrait of God who fades as he goes. Divine features that were distinct at the beginning of the story grow blurry as God withdraws, stepping back from human beings so that they have room to step forward.

After the Tower of Babel, when humans reach their pinnacle of chatter and self-projection (over and against the lifting up of God), God was never again made visible to all humankind. The people of Israel were extended special privileges that lasted throughout their

40 years in the wilderness, but once Moses saw God's backside on Mount Sinai, the period of visible, audible encounters with God began to come to an end. After the commandments were delivered, God never spoke directly to the people again. Moses the mediator wore a veil. The Ark of the Covenant was placed inside a tent. When Moses died, there was no one left on earth who had actually laid eyes on God.

As the biblical story goes on, God continues to retreat. God is "revealed" to Samuel in the temple (I Samuel 3:21). God "appears" to Solomon two times – once at Gibeon and again when the temple is completed in Jerusalem (I Kings 3:5, 9:2). After that, the verb of referring to God's presence in any way is retired from the Hebrew Bible. *"The people have prophets, kings, and temples to preoccupy them. Why do they need God?"* Friedman asks.

The last public miracle recorded in Hebrew Scripture is I Kings 18 when Elijah slays the prophets of Baal on Mt. Carmel. Hundreds of people are witnesses to this. But as we witness God in I Kings 19, God is moving into sheer silence as God's clearest revelation. And after I Kings 19, the profile of God grows smaller and smaller. The miracles of God are less and less. The final prophets see God in visions and dreams, but not in the daylight with their eyes open. Even angels are seen and heard from less and less. God is talked ABOUT, but the words of God and the acts of God are memories from the past. From the prophet Hezekiah to the Malachi, the silence of God grows louder and louder. God is not speaking at all. God has left all speech and all interactions completely in the hands of the humans.

This world engulfed in the sheer silence of God is the world into which Jesus is born. Jesus becomes the clearest revelation of God's presence since Mt. Sinai. In Jesus, God is made visible and audible again. Miracles follow, angels attend to his birth and his wilderness fasting. Wind and water follow his command. In him the word of God is translated back into acts of God. He is for many people their dream of God come true. In his presence the presence of his Father in heaven is made manifest, again. As his baptism, on the mountain of transfiguration, God is heard saying, **"This is my**

**Son, my beloved. Listen to him.”** But not everyone can see and hear this happening. John’s Gospel records God speaking from heaven as if there was thunder (12:29). But not everybody standing there hears God.

In Jesus, the intimacy of God’s voice and actions became real. He did not wave hands over water which parted for tens of thousands to pass through. He did not call forth plagues upon nations or lead an exodus against an oppressive overlord. He saved people’s lives one at a time, laid hands on their sick heads, rub mud on their blind eyes, evicted demons with a few loud words from his lips.

Fred Craddock says that the voice of God in Jesus Christ was not a shout. In him, the revelation of God comes as a whisper. In order to catch it, we must hush, lean forward and trust that what we hear is the voice of God. (Fred Craddock, *Preaching*, Abingdon Press, Nashville, TN., 1985, p. 57).

No matter what you think of this hidden and ever-increasingly silent God in Hebrew Scripture emerging as a “still speaking God” in the revelation of Christ, God presence changes, people’s encounters with God change, our experiences with God change – and all of this is not God’s fault. We have to take our place in line and admit that we have not always been attentive. We have not kept our ears open to hear God speaking. Again, we need to be humble about really hearing the “still speaking God.”

Listen for the whisper of God – in Jesus Christ – but also in nature, in daily life, in prayer. In these long days of summer, get up extra early and sit in silence Listen to the sheer silence (such as it is). Turn off all the background noise of your everyday life. Listen to the whisper of God.

Listening to God can begin in listening to the sound of life within each of us. The sound of God and God’s creation is pulsing in our bodies and our bones. Composer John Cage wrote years ago about his visit to Harvard where he spent some time in an anechoic chamber, a room with no echoes. Inside, his ears picked up two

distinct sounds – one high and one low. When he described them to the engineer, he discovered the high one was his nervous system in operation and the low one was his blood in circulation. He wrote afterwards, *“Until I die there will be sounds. And they will continue following my death. One need not fear about the future of music.”* (John Cage, *Silence*, Wesleyan University Press, Middletown, Ct., 1973, p. 8)

Remember that the God who keeps silence is the God beyond anyone’s control. In the cross and in the empty tomb, there is silence leading to life and there is God present in ways we cannot control. The most eloquent speakers turn to dust in such acts of love.

Listen. Listen to the whispers of God.

*“Be Still, be Still, be Still and know that I am God. Be still, be still, be still and know that I am God.”* Amen.

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\* This sermon draws significantly from the excellent work of Barbara Brown Taylor’s 1997 Lyman Beecher Lectures at Yale Divinity School, published as *When God is Silent*, Cowley Publications, Cambridge, MA, 1998.

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