

PASTORAL PRAYER

Gracious God over all creation, God of the wind, God of the storm, God of the jarring silence, we are your people. We seek to praise you in heart, in voice, in word, in deed...and in silence. The world is a heavy place, and it demonstrates many hard truths we do not want to acknowledge. Our lives are busy and yet ever so finite. Our lives leave us toiling and yet unfulfilled. We seek to find satisfaction in those places where success cannot provide us with much gratification. Finishing up our to-do lists is a momentary victory, but you call us to more. Walk with us, God, in those things that we have to accomplish and those things we have to set aside, to find what really matters, what really lasts, in the midst of so much noise. We lift all things to you and seek your presence, support, and guidance.

Holy One, we listen to the story of Elijah on the Mountain with wonder. Although we expect you in the noise, in the hurricanes, in the earthquakes, in the boisterous loud voices in our world. And yet, as we see so eloquently demonstrated in scripture, you were not found in any of those when you passed by Elijah; you were in the silence. Help us, gracious God, to find you in the uncomfortable silence and in the other places you present yourself. May we consistently challenge ourselves to find you where you choose to present yourself, not always in the places we want to expect. WE pray all these things in the name of Jesus Christ, the Lord of the Storm and of Silence, who taught us to pray as one people...

SERMON

Think about those times when you meet someone new. There are the standard questions you ask a person to get to know them...where he/she is from, what he/she does for a living, hobbies, and so forth. Then comes that time when you might be left alone together and the questions stop. Some can keep the conversation going, but some of us

don't have that gift. You get to that silence we call awkward. (quiet) Why is the silence so awkward? We each feel like we should know what to say, but we don't know what might be the best thing to do. I can't think of any new questions. When I do, I may ask them, only to have a one or two word answer. But does this or any silence need to be awkward?

We naturally define silence as a negative, not a positive. Silence is the lack of something...words, actions, productivity...when silence in itself may be a blessed thing. Scripture does not teach us that silence is empty. The noise of these passages is not where God resides. The noise of chaos is the true distraction. When the chaos subsides, God's presence comes. God speaks when there is only...silence. Let us look at the story of Elijah with these eyes, understanding what the story tells us, what silence means to us today, and how we can incorporate it more fully into our Christian living.

Our story from 1 Kings presents the prophet Elijah, who is literally freaking out because he believes he is the only faithful one left. He has been in a very crazy and hectic situation. He appeals to God, and God tells him to go stand on the mountain. God is about to pass by. So, Elijah waits and things start to happen. There is a great wind, a wind that destroyed rocks and tore down mountains. One would think this was the entrance of the Great Almighty...but it was not. Next there was an earthquake, a shaking of the mountain that probably put Elijah on his bottom. Now, this was the entrance of God, the Creator of the Universe...except not. God was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake came fire, incredibly hot fire. Here's where God probably comes in. I sense you might be getting the theme...no, God was not in the fire. God was not in any of these three. The fire gave way to deafening silence...sheer silence, as the scriptures call it. But it is not empty. When that happens, scripture says that Elijah covers his face; he knows that God is near. He averts his

eyes because popular belief at that time was that no one could see God and survive the experience. Only when Elijah accepted the silence does God finally speak.

Elijah had been through quite a lot, and he's probably overstating things when he says he is the only faithful one left. He's frantic; he's obsessive. He's not dealing with things well and seeks to reconnect with God to reorient. He needs to frankly chill out in order to deal with his situation well and thoughtfully. So what happens? He meets God in the silence, the absolute silence that reorients him. However, when he does, he finds the voice of God telling him what to do and where to go. The same is true with the first scripture story, about Jesus walking on water and calming the storm. Chaos everywhere. Only when the disciples realize where the focus must be...Jesus...do they find calm and repose. They truly find Jesus...and focus in the silence.

How many people like to sit alone in silence? Show of hands? No? It's true...we don't like silence. It's disruptive. We aren't comfortable. How much do we dislike silence? We can answer that with a recently released study. The study was quite simple but turned out to be...well, quite shocking. The participants sat alone in a quiet and empty room with two options. For fifteen minutes, you can either be in silence with your own thoughts or you can press a button that will give you a harmless but uncomfortable electric shock. According to an article on The Guardian, two-thirds of the men taking part in the study chose to shock themselves instead of being in silence. One man seemed so against the idea of silence that he shocked himself 190 times in that fifteen-minute period. Only ¼ of women chose to give themselves a shock. This study concluded that people would much rather give themselves electric shocks than sit alone in silence for even fifteen minutes. It sounds absurd, but it's true. Scientists found that age, income level, education level, and

how much people used their phones or social media didn't matter all that much. The simple conclusion is that we do not want to be alone with our thoughts. We hate it. Human beings have a problem sitting alone with themselves in silence...but why?

We do our best to have a TV on or some other noise; we often aren't watching it: it's just to have something going on in the background. Heck, I always have music going on when I'm composing my sermons or doing other work around the office. I don't claim to be doing well here either...but it's something we must face. One possibility is that silence means that something isn't getting done, not to mention sitting alone in in that silence. We're taught that to sit in silence means that we aren't getting things done, and as good productive people, that can't be allowed. It's a bankrupt line of thinking.

We also don't like silence because we have to just deal with our own thoughts. I don't remember who coined it, but this is a helpful way of putting it: we need as much noise on the outside to stick with the noise on the inside. We need just as much noise on the outside to stick with the noise on the inside. And boy, do we have a lot of noise on the inside: voices telling us what we need to be, telling us where to go, what to do in order to be successful. The noise outside distracts us from the noise on the inside, and in order to be fully with God, we can't be distracted by the noise on the outside. God must be fully present on the outside and the inside with us to have communion with God. It takes work.

Let's bring it back to us right now. We encountered silence this morning and will do so again. I imagine many of you were jarred when there was no music during offering and silent prayer time. Some of you, I imagine, might have been frustrated with the silence. It can be frustrating. The problem is not the lack of music; it is how we respond to the lack of music. However, I hope you take that on that recognition of frustration as recognizing a

place you can grow with God. It can be really helpful to shut off what's happening outside to really understand what's happening on the inside. Think of how we try to put God in our lives without realizing it. We want God to be in the areas where we are comfortable, in the loudness, in the music, in the busy-ness of life or slip God in when we don't have something pressing. It's almost as if we tell God, "Hey, just keep up with me and my schedule!" But sometimes God is telling us to come where God is: away from the noise, away from where we think God should be. That can often be in the quiet, in the sheer silence, where we have no external distractions and deal with the internal distractions. Just as in the story of Elijah, the silence was an uncomfortable place, but that is where God was to be found. It wasn't where Elijah wanted God to be but where God chose to come. Sometimes we will need to be left to the silence, for we may think God is where we want God to be but that's just us. We'll continue this trend as we come to the communion table, as I have asked Connie not to play music during that time. Perhaps this is a new way that we can connect with our Creator by approaching the communion table in silence and open hearts.

The silence is a way to check ourselves before we wreck ourselves. Like Elijah or the disciples, when we stop, we see that we are easily jarred by life around us. Things have lost perspective, and we are wrapped up in the difficulties of things that can be rectified. We are comfortable being uncomfortable in the noise of life, from the inside and on the outside. This is not faithfulness; this does not come from God. We have lost contact with our Creator and that power. In the silence, we find the difficulty of coming face-to-face with ourselves, who we really are and how we really relate to God. There are no drive-by prayers here. There are no promises to spend time with God later. We set aside to-do lists. We set aside what we think needs to be done and we set aside the external noise. There is

no external distraction; we set aside everything that pulls us away from who we are and that God is right in front of us and deal with the internal noise. We find just God and just us. It may sound like a big ask, when we have all these things to do. But, we can never lose sight of the fact that the Christian life should be a big ask in this way and many more.

There was the wind, the earthquake, and the fire, but then there was the silence. When Elijah encountered God, God was not in the first three. God can be in the noise sometimes, but more often, God is in the silence, away from the distractions of life. The silence need not be awkward, but it means that we look at life with new eyes. We love the distractions, because they often take us away from the hard questions and the truly hard tasks. I challenge you, in the days and weeks to come, to spend more time in simple silence to be in prayer or just to sit with God. Sometimes prayer doesn't require words; we just have our attention on God. Give yourselves to God in this completely counter-cultural but meaningful way. Breathe deeply, clear your thoughts, and listen for God. God doesn't require the productivity that we want; sometimes all God requires (quiet)...is to give all of our selves and our attention. Amen and Amen.