

## Silence is God's First Language

Saint Paul's Cathedral

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*Gracious God,*

*Let these words be more than words and give us the spirit of Jesus.*

*Amen.*

Our readings today are full of drama. Elijah is on the run with Jezebel and Ahab on his tail, intent on murder. They've already wiped out all the other prophets. Elijah races out into the wilderness and quickly begins to wish he were indeed dead. He grabs a bit of sustenance and continues traveling. Forty days and forty nights - sound familiar? Noah in the ark, Jesus in the desert – you get the idea; not an easy time. He ends up in a cave on Mount Horeb and there is instantly upbraided by God – “What are you doing here?” There's no rest for this prophet – the queen wants him slain and God pushes him back into danger.

Today's gospel is equally intense. We meet a man with legions of demons, naked, living among the dead, screaming in torment, able to break chains and shackles. The demons, meeting Jesus face-to-face, negotiate their release. They know he has power over them. He liberates the man and the demons immediately take up residence in a herd of swine. They then drown themselves. This disturbs the local populace and, no doubt, doesn't make the swine herder very happy. All are terrified by all they've just experienced; they respectfully request that Jesus keep moving.

So we have great drama this morning and a bit of a problem. The bizarre details just recounted could cause us to miss the most important element in these narratives and that has to do with the stillness of God. Yes, Elijah is in a heap of trouble. Yes, God goads him to keep moving forward. And yes, God assures him that he is protected, that God is with him – not by a great wind that splits mountains, not by an earthquake, not by fire, but in sheer silence (a “still small voice” in other translations). It's the silence of God that allows Elijah to respond to the divine presence in his moment of distress.

The same holds true regarding the gospel. Yes, the possessed one is fearsome but, after his healing, his inner storm is stilled. “The people came out to see what had happened, and when they came to Jesus, they found the man from whom the demons had gone sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed and in his right mind.” He is attentive, gentle, respectful, expectant, and very quiet.

These lessons say something important about life in Christ. Tumult and inner noise often obscure the nearness of God. We may think that God is absent when we're scared or struggling but scripture tells us that God may be both very close and very quiet. If we don't sense God's presence then it may simply be that we're too stirred up to feel it. We may look for God in the wind or the earthquake or the fire, in the big events of life, in the drama, while God stands before us in silence. We may be like the demon-possessed man, flailing about wildly, while healing is available to us in the One who engages gently and in a quiet spirit of love.

Silence is God's first language – that's the title of a workshop on contemplative prayer and a good way to frame today's message. Silence is God's first language. On our retreat in Santa Barbara two weeks ago several members of our group went down to visit the Poor Clares, a convent full of women given over entirely to silence and stillness. They live an enclosed life, they are literally self-contained, never leaving the house or their prayers except in special circumstances. Not many could or should do that but we are taken by their witness. They remind us that the noise of life can make it hard to hear the inaudible voice of God. They invite us to slow down, be quiet, and listen. If you try it and all you hear is silence don't be disappointed. Following Elijah's lead, you might wrap your face in your mantle and stand at the edge of your cave - God could be very near.

Now, before I lead us into the cul-de-sac of quietism, let me also note that in both stories action follows encounter. Elijah goes to the edge of his cave and, following the silence, gets his marching orders. The possessed and liberated man, after listening quietly, wants to fall in with Jesus and go with him to the next town. Jesus refuses but does encourage him to stay put and proclaim the good news. "The man from whom the demons had gone begged that he might be with him; but Jesus sent him away, saying, 'Return to your home and declare how much God has done for you.' So he went away, proclaiming throughout the city how much Jesus had done for him."

So, once again, we return to the theme of sacred rhythm, the yin and yang of Christianity. Encounter and action. Stillness and movement. Silence and proclamation. When we finally hear God's silent voice it's often a word that invites inner peace and outward response. And here's this week's case study: in our Anglican calendar we just celebrated the life of Evelyn Underhill. Underhill is most commonly noted as the author of the essential book on mysticism. Because of this, people tend to think of her as a quietist, as someone removed from the world, as someone chiefly interested in the cycle of inward purification, illumination and union with God.

Nothing could be further from the truth. Instead, Underhill frequently quoted Saint Theresa: "to give our Lord perfect service, Martha and Mary must combine." Mary, you'll recall, sat at the feet of Jesus, soaking in every word. Martha, her sister, bustled about, making sure Jesus and his friends had all they needed to be comfortable. That, combined, is the image of the Christian life Underhill upheld throughout her life. Her mornings were given to study and writing, and her afternoons to visiting the poor or offering spiritual direction to seekers. She was an active retreat leader and teacher. She even worked in naval intelligence (Africa division) during WWI – she became an ardent pacifist just prior to WWII.

I mention all this simply to remind you of the shape of the spiritual path. I'm also inviting you to reflect on the shape of your life in Christ. Are you well-aligned? Are the inner and outer lives balanced? Are you listening for God in silence and acting for God in the world? As we move into the lazier season of summer, will you consciously create time to be still and sit in the presence of God? Then, moving from a place of serenity and peace, will you do something, large or small, to bless the world?

If you are willing, then please do both with a light touch. Do both with some humor and humility. Above all else, don't be grim. What is worse than grim religious people? About half of what's wrong with the world can be directly tied to them. I'm serious about that. Instead, be of good cheer. As Saint Paul reminds us, in Christ Jesus we are all children

of God through faith, Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise. That's worth celebrating – in fact, our joy might rival that of the liberated man in today's gospel.

Good cheer certainly marked the life of Evelyn Underhill. The Christian life was not grim for her but vivid, alive, full of possibility. She was keenly interested in every part of life, not just that part narrowly defined as spiritual. She loved people. She was gentle with those who came to her for direction. She expressed a horror of "pushing souls about" - not interested. Moving from silence to action, she was simply available to help people grow at God's pace and according to God's purpose, not hers. That's not a bad template for any of us or for all of us. May we be as free and as trusting, today and in the warm and easy months still to come. Amen.