

“When Silence Speaks”
1 Kings 19:1-15
Rev. Désirée H. Gold
First United Church of Christ
Northfield, Minnesota
Sunday, 12 August, 2018
Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost

Have you ever felt like you were just *done*? Like you were so tired that you were ready to give up? I know I have. Clinical depression can cause this, certainly, but sometimes the things going on in our lives can lead us to these dark spaces of hopelessness. Our situation in life gets to a point where we feel like we have *absolutely nothing left to give*. We're exhausted, we're worn out, we're *done*.

The prophet Elijah finds himself in such a place in this morning's scripture reading. In the chapter before this passage, he had just experienced great triumph, when he defeated the followers of Ba'al in a spectacular show of power from his God, Yahweh. But now that triumph is behind him, Jezebel is out to kill him, and he feels afraid and unappreciated. So he runs. He runs for a full day into the desolate wilderness, numbed by fear and desperation. He's exhausted, he's worn out, he's *done*.

He wants only to be *away*. Away from the memory of his earlier triumph, which has brought him nothing but trouble. Away from the threat of Jezebel, who intends to

kill him. Away from his painful, conflicted thoughts. His only plan is to wither away beneath that solitary broom tree, alone in his pain, for as long as it lasts. He is a short term hermit, running away from the world with no intention of sustaining himself. He is lost, in every meaning of the word.

Of course, it is not long before God pesters him with food, sending an angel to provide nourishment for his body, when his soul is so near death. Food has been first aid for broken souls since the beginning of time. We provide meals for one another during times of sickness and grief. Jesus fed his followers. And I am reminded of a close friend who *literally fed me* when I was in a place of personal crisis many years ago.

The angel fed him twice and sent him on a journey through that wilderness — figurative and literal — to Horeb, the mount of God. Broken as he was, I imagine Elijah being barely aware of his long journey, putting one foot in front of the other. He was just doing what he'd been told. Sure, he had a tiny bit more energy, but nothing about this scripture tells us that those two visits from the angel brought him sudden spiritual revival. This is not a Lazarus story. I imagine him going through the motions with the enthusiasm of a teenager. “Okay, fine, whatever.” Depression and desperation still gripped him; fear was still the loudest voice in his head.

...It is no surprise to me, then, that he does not experience God in the wind, or the earthquake, or the fire. These were loud, violent, magnificent events, but

loud, violent, and magnificent are *not likely to move* a man who has just come from chaos. Elijah had committed a murderous rampage against the priests of Ba'al, then had his own life threatened. When you're used to violence and noise, those things are not likely to get your attention.

Only silence and calm could reach him. The New Revised Standard translation of the Bible calls it "the sound of sheer silence." Only *that* could draw him out and connect him with God, because it was so unlike his recent life experience.

If you have ever experienced or perpetrated violence (and Elijah had done both), you will know that you become numb to it after a while. And if you are in a position where it is difficult to escape that violence, you will likely try to numb yourself to it. You may do this by using drugs or alcohol, listening to loud music, or numbing your brain with video games, TV, or social media. In your effort to shut out physical and emotional distress, you will numb yourself to the world. It is only when you find *silence*, perhaps combined with a little *nurture*, that you can experience any sense of clarity about yourself, about the world, or about God.

Sometimes the violence we experience is personal and vicious, the daily terror of domestic violence. Sometimes it is the danger of war. Sometimes it takes on the form of persecution, in racism, homophobia, sexism, and all the other "isms" of the world. And sometimes the "violence" we experience is simply the

daily onslaught of a life that feels exhausting, for one reason or another.

Like Elijah, many have found respite from the violence in their lives only when they are finally able to extricate themselves from their situation, stop numbing themselves, and face the deafening silence that is the presence of God. This is easier said than done, of course. In many cases, violence can be nearly impossible to escape, and actually reaching that point of sheer silence can take more energy than we have. But *it is a point worth reaching for.*

I have recently been educating myself on hermits, people around the world who remove themselves from society, in search of that “sound of sheer silence.” According to author Michael Finkel, hermits throughout history can generally be divided into three categories: “protestors, pilgrims, and pursuers.” In his words, “Protestors are hermits whose primary reason for leaving is hatred of what the world has become.”¹ In this group I would include a Japanese man I recently saw in a Youtube video.² Concern about environmental destruction and overall decline of Japanese culture led him to move to a deserted island, where he has lived for twenty years. But anyone who is running away from life as they know it could be considered a “protestor,” and this includes those who are able to escape the cycle of

¹ Finkel, Michael, *The Stranger in the Woods: The Extraordinary Story of the Last True Hermit* (New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 2017), pg. 79.

² “Japan’s Naked Island Hermit,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZBtBePnUOZU>, Accessed on 08-11-18.

violence in their lives and bring themselves to a place and time where their thoughts are no longer numbed and muddled by the agony of the violence they have experienced.

Pilgrims, or religious hermits, are by far the largest group, and those with whom history is most familiar. Jesus himself became a hermit from time to time, withdrawing to the wilderness for periods of prayer. Anchorite nuns and monks would incarcerate themselves for decades in towers or cages, devoting themselves to lives of solitary prayer. Other religious hermits would flee to mountain caves. In nearly every religion, segments of followers have left society, in order to devote themselves to that search for “the sound of sheer silence.”

Finally, there are the pursuers. Finkel describes these as a more modern form of hermit that “seeks out alone time for artistic freedom, scientific insight, or deeper self-understanding.”³ Among these ranks, we can include people like Henry David Thoreau, Charles Darwin, or Flannery O’Connor. Christopher Knight, the “North Pond Hermit” about whom Finkel writes, could be put in this category as well. For twenty-seven years, he lived outside in the woods of Maine, speaking only one word to another human being in those nearly three decades.

Of these three categories, I would consider Elijah a short term “protesting” hermit. He had no *long term*

³ Finkel, pg. 82.

plans for solitude. Indeed, he went into the wilderness to die. But separation from the violence in his life, combined with the nurturing act of being fed, combined with the sound of sheer silence outside the cave to which he retreated, joined to show him a greater purpose for his life.

Where can *you* find that “sound of sheer silence”? Whether you are attempting to escape violence, or chaos of another form, my prayer for you is that God will lead you out. When you find yourself exhausted, worn out, and just *done*, I pray that you will find respite. In the words of a great R.E.M. song, “When you’re sure you’ve had enough, well hang on.”⁴ If your soul is waiting for the Lord, as the Psalmist cries, may you find a sliver of hope in the midst of your darkness.⁵ And when you have made your escape, I pray that you will be released from the numbness of your pain and find clarity, and the presence of God, in the sound of silence.

Now let us pray.

⁴ Berry, Bill; Buck, Peter; Mills, Mike; Stipe, Michael. “Everybody Hurts.” *Automatic for the People*, R.E.M., Warner Bros., 1993, track 4.

⁵ Psalm 130:5 (NRSV)