

Conversations with God: The Sound of Silence
1 Kings 19:4-13a 7/15/12

We continue our sermon series on conversations with God. This morning finds us in the ninth century b.c.e. with the prophet Elijah. I spared you the reading of the bloody account of Elijah's sacrificial contest with the prophet-priests of the competing god Baal; but I need to give a brief summary of this event that immediately preceded today's text to provide you with the context for understanding what God is up to with Elijah in the reading that you just heard.

Ahab was one of the many apostate kings of the Northern Kingdom. His queen, Jezebel, who was a Canaanite, brought with her her own gods, including the Canaanite high-god, Baal. Immediately preceding today's scripture reading, Elijah has provoked a confrontation between himself, the prophet of the God of Israel, and the 450 prophet-priests of Baal. The confrontation between the two gods has taken the form of a competition to see which god will send fire from heaven to consume a sacrificed bull. The priests of Baal spend all morning cajoling their god to make an appearance. The biblical text tells us tersely: ... "but there was no voice, no answer, and no response." (1 Kings 18:29b) Elijah has his bull drenched with water three times, and calls upon the God of Israel to send fire. Fire falls from heaven and consumes the bull. The multitude of assembled Israelites falls on their faces and proclaims the God of Israel to be the true god. What happens next is crucial for today's discussion: Elijah takes advantage of the situation and orders the slaughter of the 450 priests of Baal, which is readily accomplished. Queen Jezebel is enraged at the killing of her priests and makes a solemn vow to kill Elijah. Elijah flees for his life.

This brings us face-to-face with today's text. An angel of God feeds Elijah in the wilderness and orders him to journey to Mt. Horeb, another name for Mt. Sinai. Sheltering in a cave on the mountain, Elijah has a close encounter with God, described in the well-known passage where God turns out to be present not in a violent wind, not in a violent earthquake, and not in a violent fire. Quite surprisingly, God turns out to be present in the form of "a sound of sheer silence," as the New Revised Standard Version printed out in our bulletin has it, or in the form of "a still small voice," as more traditional translations have it.

Reading in the space between the lines, as many Jewish and Christian biblical scholars would encourage us to do, we get the sense that God is sick-and-tired of all the violence that has been and still is being carried out in God's name; we get the sense that God is sick-and-tired of all the mighty displays of power carried out in God's name; and that God is making an almost-formal announcement that God is not to be found in the violence of wind, earthquake, and fire, but in the shalom, in the blessing of "a still small voice." In other words, God is telling God's people that God is not to be found where they expect to find God -- namely, in various forms of violence, but that God is to be found where least expected, namely, in stillness, and smallness, and silence. Another way of putting this is to say that God is telling the people that the divine presence is to be found in their interior life, in an I-Thou

relationship with God that takes place in their hearts and then overflows into their lives. The people were not ready to hear this message from God, and continued in their violent ways and in their habit of projecting their violence onto God and then claiming that violence as part of God's nature and God's will. Many Christians still do this, finding more meaning in Elijah's slaughter of the priests of Baal, than in God's implied repudiation of Elijah's violence by revealing Godself to Elijah as "a sound of sheer silence," or "a still small voice."

In past sermons I have shared with you the interpretive principles of accommodation, consistency, and development; accommodation meaning that God condescends, as it were, to meet us where we're at; consistency meaning that God's nature doesn't change -- God has been, still is, and will continue to be love personified -- God's nature doesn't change, it is our understanding of God's nature that changes; and development meaning that over time our understanding of God's nature tends to get deeper and higher and broader. Today I would like to introduce a fourth interpretive principle, a principle that we can see at work in our scripture text for today. This principle is what I would call "biblical topography." Most of us have seen topographical maps which indicate higher and lower elevations for the purposes of backpacking and mountain climbing. Topography as an interpretive principle with regard to the Bible means that scripture texts are not all created equal; some are "higher" than others; and that where two or more texts seem to be in opposition or contradiction to each other, we go with the higher. The principle of biblical topography can be traced back to Jesus himself. He uses it on numerous occasions. A good example would be from the Sermon on the Mount, where Jesus states: "You have heard that it was said, 'you shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' but I say to you, love your enemies..."(Matthew 5:43-44a) Paraphrasing today's scripture reading according to biblical topography, we would have God saying to Elijah, and by extension, to us: "In the past you thought you found me in various forms of violence. Listen up. I am really to be found in the stillness of your heart when you are silent and let me softly speak with you."

In today's Bible text from the ninth century b.c.e. we find the beginning of the collapse of a vast system of theology that was a mistake. It was a mistake because it took our human addiction to violence and projected it onto God. With the exception of a brief three hundred year interval immediately after the ministry of Jesus, the Christian church has been living out the same mistake that Elijah made way back in 900 b.c.e.

The good news is that there are signs that the vast edifice of Christian theology that is violent and has God demanding blood is beginning to crack and to collapse. Rob Bell's book *Love Wins* is one sign. The fact that millions of people around the world simply refuse to connect with churches that preach a violent God is another. The rediscovery of the fact that Jesus lived, breathed, and taught creative non-violence is a huge sign, as is the vitality of liberation theologies lived out by a broad spectrum of those who have been oppressed, often in the name of an oppressive god. Thus we have liberation theologies written by women in general, minority women in particular, South American Christians, Asian Christians, African Christians, gay Christians. The slow-motion collapse of racist, sexist, colonialist, militarist,

fundamentalist, and homophobic Christianity is something to be celebrated. From the ruins will arise a Christianity that has recommitted itself to living out the actual teachings of Jesus, especially in the areas of creative non-violence, love of neighbor and enemy, and a wildly inclusive diversity. Out of the ashes will come new life. So far we've been talking about the biblical and theological implications of our text for today. But our text includes some substantial personal implications as well. On a personal level, our text implies that precisely when and where we experience the collapse of anything dear to us -- the collapse of a false way of thinking and being, the collapse of our finances, the collapse of a cherished dream, the collapse of an important relationship, the collapse of our health, the collapse of the health of someone we love -- our text teaches us that precisely where and when we experience a collapse, precisely there and then, new life is waiting to be born, take root, and flourish. Out of the ashes will come new life. I found a powerful example of this principle of new life springing from collapse in the book *Chicken Soup for the Unsinkable Soul*.

Heidi Marotz writes:

Legs. We run, ski, climb mountains and swim without thinking much about them.

My husband Scott had used his legs to win downhill ski scholarships in college and climb to the top of the Grand Tetons in Jackson Hole, Wyoming. Then, without warning, during an unseasonably warm April, a tumor was discovered in Scott's spinal cord. We were told death or paralysis could be the end result.

Our children -- Chase, Jillian and Hayden -- ranged in age from seven to two. They didn't really understand all the 'bad stuff' that was going on -- but they were the biggest cheerleaders and the best teachers when Scott found out his life would go on but he was paralyzed from the rib cage down.

Adults sometimes get stuck looking at the things that are gone. I would think about the camping trips we'd never take, the mountains Scott would never climb and the fresh powder he'd never ski with his children.

Chase, Jillian and Hayden were too busy with the business of life to get bogged down with what their dad couldn't do. They stood on the pedals of his wheelchair and screamed with delight as he raced them down quiet hospital corridors.

The doctors said to prepare Scott for life in a wheelchair because if he thought he'd walk again -- and could not -- he would be depressed. The kids didn't listen to the doctors; they urged their dad to 'try to stand up.' I worried that Scott would fall down; the kids laughed with him when he fell and rolled on the grass. I cried but they urged him to 'try again.'

In the middle of all these changes in our lives, I took a drawing class at a local college. For a week, the instructor told us we couldn't draw things, we could only draw spaces between things. One day as I sat under a giant pine tree drawing the spaces between the branches, I began to see the world as Scott and the kids saw it. I didn't see the branches as obstacles that could stop a wheelchair from traveling across the lawn, I saw all the spaces that would allow wheelchairs, people and even small animals to sneak through. When I wasn't focused on the branches -- or the obstacles of life -- I gained

a new appreciation for all the spaces. Oddly enough, whether you draw the spaces or the branches, the picture looks pretty much the same; it's just how you see it that's different.

When I joined my family in looking for the 'spaces,' a new world opened up. It wasn't the same -- sometimes we were frustrated -- but it was always rewarding because we were working together. As we tried all these new adventures, Scott began to stand up and then walk with the use of a cane. He still has no feeling in his lower body and legs, he can't run or ride a bike, but he enjoys so many new experiences.

We learned you don't need feeling in your legs to fly a kite, play a board game, plant a tree, float in a mountain lake or attend a school program. Legs aren't needed to hug, bandage a cut or talk someone through a bad dream.

Some people see roadblocks; Scott has taught us roadblocks are only detours. Some people see branches; Scott and the kids see wide-open-spaces with room enough for all the love and hope a heart can bear.

I see a correlation -- a co-relation -- between this inspiring story and today's scripture text. The spaces that Heidi learned to draw echo the "sound of sheer silence" or the "still, small voice" of God's speech to us. Just as those spaces that Heidi drew were filled with possibility and new life, so are the spaces that God creates in our lives after a significant loss. Often the loss creates the space for God to sneak in and fill that space with a great surprise. We always need to remember that while illness and death and estrangement seem to be final words for us, they are never final words for God. God's final words are always health and life and fullness-of-relationship. We need to remember that when all is said-and-done love wins because God wins and God is love.

Amen.

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