

Jon Hauerwas – The Power of Silence – June 26, 2016
1 Kings 19:4-12 and Luke 8:26-39

In our first lesson this morning, Elijah experiences what I might call sensory overload following a series of unusual, supernatural events. In the desert, he falls asleep beneath a tree only to be awoken by an angel who tells him to “get up and eat.” Next, he sees the kinds of things that one would never expect to find in a dry, arid place. For “there by his head was a cake of bread and a jar of water.”

Elijah was hungry and thirsty and thus had no trouble doing as he was told. Then, strengthened by the food, he travelled for forty days and forty nights until he reached Horeb, the mountain of God. 40 days and 40 nights. Do you recall any other place in the Bible where you have heard this phrase?

- This is the same length of time as the great flood in Genesis.
- And the same amount of time that Moses spent on the very same mountain. Horeb is where he, too, would have a dramatic encounter with God.
- Forty is the number of days that Jesus was tempted by Satan in the wilderness.
- And forty years is the length of time that Moses is said to have led his people through the wilderness following the Exodus from Egypt and pursuit of the Promised Land.

Forty in the Bible merely means “a really long time.” Which is just another way of saying that Elijah had plenty of time to listen. Plenty of time to pray. Plenty of time for silence. Teresa of Calcutta once said that “God speaks in the silence of the heart. Listening is the beginning of prayer.”

And yet, some people are terribly uncomfortable with silence. Like children who fear what might be lurking in the dark, they long for distraction. Any distraction will do. Work. Television. Sports. Shopping. They say that we all have our vices. But, I wonder how many of these are born of necessity and how many serve merely as a temporary relief from the silence.

It seems to me that when our senses are stifled, our imaginations take over. Just imagine again that child in the dark. For some, this is a welcomed respite. Finally, they can breathe deeply and enjoy the soothing balm of silence. They are at ease. Emotionally and spiritually centered. Mindful in meditation. Home at last.

While for others, the silence brings no relief. At night, they toss anxiously, lost in worry about words misspoken, tasks unfinished, hopes and dreams unfulfilled, grief unmet, and a steady wave of daily guilt. For them, silence is more of a burden than a balm.

So back to Elijah. After a forty-day listening campaign on the mountain of God, the prophet is faced with more sensory overload. This time, it comes in the form of God's voice, followed by a powerful wind which rips apart the mountain, and an earthquake, and a fire. On each occasion, the Bible is quick to say that God was not in the destruction. And then, finally, after all of the noise, after all of the chaos, after all of the terror, God is found in the sound of sheer silence.

What is the closest that you have ever come to the sound of sheer silence? It's hard for me to imagine. When the birds stop chirping. When the clock stops ticking. When the sound of our busyness ceases. What, then, is left, when sensory overload is replaced by sensory deprivation?

I suggested earlier that sensory deprivation is one pathway to imagination. And so, we are left to imagine the powerful reality of encountering God. In our New Testament lesson this morning, Jesus stands at the intersection of the secular and divine worlds, much like Elijah on the mountain of God. Only Jesus' reach extends beyond the Hebrews to the Gentile people of Garasene.

We know that these are Gentiles because we are introduced to a herd of swine. These animals, as you may know, were deemed unclean for the Israelites. They were not to eat them. Nor were they to be involved with their processing or their tanning.

Before moving to Akron, I previously lived in Bellingham, in the northwestern corner of Washington state. Bellingham is known for its urban hipsters and locally sources foods. It's not uncommon to see chickens running loose beside \$500,000 homes in the middle of the city. When we first moved to Bellingham, we lived beside one of these urban hipsters. He kept goats, chickens, rabbits, and countless other things during our time there. Once, he brought in an enormous pig and I thought, "you've got to be kidding me."

The overwhelming majority of homes in Bellingham do not have air conditioning. Instead, the air is cooled by the Pacific coastal breeze. Everyone simply leaves their windows open during the summer. When the pig moved in next door, the stench was overwhelming. There were no laws against keeping a pig in the city. But, within a week, the pig had nipped at a small, neighborhood child and was carted off to a new home. Following my limited experience with swine, I don't even care to imagine the noise, smell, and filth associated with a whole herd of them.

Next, and in addition to the pigs, we find in Luke's Gospel a description of a so called demoniac. That's another way of describing someone who is said to be possessed by demons. Here's the biblical depiction of him, which likely would have sent most of us reeling in the opposite direction.

When Jesus stepped ashore in the region of the Garasenes, "he was met by a demon-possessed man from the town. For a long time the man had not worn clothes or lived in a house, but had lived in the tombs. When he saw Jesus, he cried out and fell at his feet."

When I was serving as a hospital chaplain as part of my preparation for the ministry, I followed a patient to the psych ward, passing a number of people along the way who made me more than a bit uncomfortable. These are the folks that society often discards. People whose lives are filled with sensory overload. Strange, unexplainable voices. Fits of anger. Severe depression. Self-harm. The easiest solution is to lock them away where most of us won't be bothered, and the same was true in Jesus' day. In those days, psych patients were believed to be demon possessed. And, having supposedly brought the ill upon themselves, were often isolated and shackled – two responses, of course, which would only intensify any underlying psychotic symptoms and episodes.

Jesus is not intimidated. Instead, he responds compassionately by relieving the man of his symptoms. And immediately following Jesus' intervention, the man is found sitting at Jesus feet and in his right mind. Arguably, this man is the first disciple among the Garasenes. Freed of his symptoms and grateful for his newfound freedom, the man is a willing and able evangelist.

So what, then, is the power of silence? And what are these passages calling us to do? We have this juxtaposition of silence and listening, and the call to evangelize. To serve as agents of peace, and hope, and reconciliation. I have to imagine that it is in the silence when we finally find our voices.

May it be so and all thanks be to God both now and forever. Amen.