

Looking for God in All the Wrong Places

I Kings 19:9-13

Next Sunday morning at this time, Wendy and I plan to be on a remote island in the middle of Lake Champlain near the Canadian border. We've rented an old stone cottage, built in the 1700s, and owned by a family named Fitch—though, to our knowledge, no relation to anyone in this area. We will be outside of cellphone range with no Internet services, alone with our two dogs, hoping to enjoy some rest and relaxation.

I admit, we won't be attending church, but that doesn't mean we won't experience the presence of God. Truth be told, as many of you will attest, it sometimes is easier for us to acquire a fresh sense of the divine Spirit out in wilderness places our lives occasionally take us than in the weekly routines of Sunday morning worship. We will look for God in the clouds that skirt the skies overhead, in the breezes that refresh us on a hot summer afternoon day, in the sounds of waves lapping the shoreline of this majestic lake, and in the solitude and silence of a peaceful northern night. Whether or not God will actually meet us in those places is yet to be seen. But right now it seems like a perfect place for us to be spiritually renewed.

I'm sure you will agree, vacations are a necessary and all too infrequent gift of time. The activity of our lives, the pressure of deadlines and duties, the exhaustion of keeping up with the schedules of various family members, and the ongoing generation of busyness drains even the most hardy and spiritually fortified among us. It's difficult to keep up the frenetic pace some of us live with without it

detrimentally impacting our health and emotional wellbeing. It's most evident when we get overly stressed and abnormally irritable.

So time away—a break from the daily schedule, a fast from the normal routine, a period to nourish our spirits and souls—is necessary to reacquaint ourselves with the elementary tempo of life. If we are smart about it, our vacation will be a time of rest and renewal—good for the body and a blessing for the soul. If we're not, then we'll return home as tired and anxious for relief as we were when we left.

Quiet times of retreat are, of course, easier for some personality types than for others. Introverts naturally gravitate toward solitude and silence, which are viewed as the refreshing relief in a desert of endless activity that drains them and parches their souls. Extraverts, on the other hand, typically see sedate settings as boring and unproductive, as for them renewal consists of reconnecting with people they haven't seen or doing something they haven't had time for. Refreshment for them means engaging loved ones and friends or doing some activity that is stimulating and memorable.

When introverts and extraverts live in the same household, vacation needs may differ significantly; one wants to visit relatives, the other needs to escape from them! When your vacation is limited to a week or so, it's not easy to satisfy both sets of needs competing for the gift of time.

Yet, even for extraverts, a time to quiet down, to relax with no activity, to search the world around them silently, is of benefit. Why? Because we tend to address psychological needs and fill spiritual voids within us by occupying ourselves with things external.

Extraverts, as much as anybody, benefit from periods of self-reflection and rest, even though they are less oriented to it and rarely comfortable with it. Activity gives them a sense of purpose, but it can be as addictive as a narcotic.

In a similar way, noise itself can be addictive—both the noise that is channeled through our ears, and the noise that fills up the space of our lives —the buzz and whirl of activity which clutters up our minds and spirits. We become convinced that if we do something with every moment of our time, if we can point to the things that we have accomplished, if we can cite all the people who have benefited from our energy and skill, then it's obvious that we have lived our lives purposefully and productively. Time has not been wasted. No one can accuse us of that. Sometimes it is easier to accept ourselves if we can demonstrate our value through productivity—that we have done something worthwhile. So we avoid being still. Some may even be intimidated by silence.

All I have to do is test it. How long could we sit here in this sanctuary with absolute silence? Theoretically, silence should be a natural part of our religious life in our search for God. But, practically speaking, it really isn't. Look at what we do. If there's a pause in our worship, we notice it immediately and wonder what's gone wrong (i.e., where's the pastor? Who missed their cue?). We're accustomed to movement and flow; perhaps we're even looking for God in noisy and busy activities—in singing, in spoken word, in fellowship, in active service of one type or another. Clearly, at Noank we have no intentions of being a Quaker Meeting House; we don't easily or collectively find God in times of sheer and utter silence.

That's why after a minute or so of quiet, it feels strange; we get restless, nervous, or anxious; somebody coughs, others whisper; we twitch—we may even want to get up and leave figuring that this is a complete waste of our time. That's what silence does for many of us—it disturbs us, it makes us uncomfortable. We may even feel vulnerable in a silent setting—disarmed by silence, instead of empowered by it. And that leaves many of us avoiding periods of silence altogether.

Yet, our spirits cannot manage well when we are so continuously in motion with action and reaction. There's a reason Psalm 46 chides us with these words: "Be still, and know that I am God"—that Yahweh, the great "I AM", is God! Being still is a necessary remedy for an overactive lifestyle and an anxious spirit. The discipline of silence is what can quiet our hearts long enough to let go of our hyperactive minds and spirits, in order to regain direction for our lives from the Spirit, instead of our clamoring to be in control of them ourselves. Stillness allows us to rest, relax, and let go of tension and stress; silence allows us to think more deeply, to respond with much greater awareness and clarity, and to eventually take actions that are far more deliberate, purposeful, and meaningful. Silence is a gift for the spirit to help us be conscious of what is really going on around us—that which beckons to be heard and watched.

T.S. Eliot, in his poem, *Ash Wednesday*, wrote: "Where shall the world be found, where will the word resound? Not here, there is not enough silence." This, I believe, was what the prophet Elijah discovered in his own experience of fretfulness, recorded in this brief

episode in I Kings. Until he discovered silence, he was looking for God in all the wrong places.

The drama of the story is almost too distant and complicated for us to grasp without an extended introduction. But for our purposes this morning, suffice it to say, Elijah was very anxious over being virtually isolated against the ruling powers of his time and apprehensive because Queen Jezebel, in particular, sent her henchmen to track him down and kill Elijah for his severe critique of her leadership. He fled the country out of desperation and wandered like his forebears in the Negev region of the Sinai Peninsula. As we pick up the story, in a spirit of resignation, Elijah was struggling with despair, enough to give up his life altogether. Nothing was going right; everyone has rejected him and his counsel. Thus, Elijah was a lost soul, questioning his purpose in life and value to God when so many were against him.

According to the story, Elijah escaped to Mount Horeb and cowered in a cave. He bitterly complained to the Lord over the state of his life and his great disappointment for going so long without a meaningful sign of support from God. “I have been very zealous for the Lord, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away.”

In times like these, you need a Savior, as the old Gospel song claims. Elijah, however, needed to be saved from himself and his fears. In his fretfulness, he lost all sense of the divine Presence in his life. He was searching for God, but in all the wrong places. Would the Lord be revealed as an overwhelming power that would rise in the

nick of time to defeat the enemies? Would the Spirit's presence be evident in a mighty wind, or a devastating earthquake, or as all-consuming fire from heaven? The answer was no; Elijah would not find the presence of God in those dramatic, powerful religious clichés.

Instead, God would become real to him in a rather “underwhelming,” not overwhelming, fashion. The Divine Presence would be discovered in a context of complete and utter silence—sheer silence—not the way Elijah and anyone in trouble wants God to act, but in a still, small voice that was barely discernible from the sheer silence of the moment. Not only was that unexpected for Elijah and for Israel to encounter the presence of God in that manner, it was impossible to discern without creating the setting of utter, sheer silence—both externally and internally.

Elijah needed the silence to quiet down his own inner noise—his anxiety, his stress, his worry, his sense of dread—those cursed “what-ifs”—as much as he needed to escape the outer noise of threats that could easily alarm and distract him. The cave provided both shelter and perspective by shutting him off from the world around and within him. The silent setting was his salvation from feelings of powerlessness, uncertainty, confusion, frustration, anger, bitterness—all the feelings wrapped up in his anguished complaints over the vulnerable condition of his life. Until he could quiet down enough to stop listening to those chattering voices—all the noise of his anxious spirit—he would not be able to hear the still, small voice of God who would answer him and interrupt his sense of isolation and depression. Until he was silent within himself, he would miss the faithful presence of God, who would not let him go.

As a rule, it's hard to ever discern God's presence, support, and direction until we quiet down the inner noise within us and find the quiet center. How can we know God unless we can become still enough to listen? As T. S. Eliot put it, "Where shall the world be found, where will the word resound? Not here, there is not enough silence."

You and I need periods of silence in our lives in order to hear God and find our spiritual center. My question to you is, can you find it in a private space, a place of rest, where you are alone with your thoughts and aware of God's presence in sheer silence? Can you deliberately create such a space for self-reflection in your busy life? How much we need the silence within and the stillness of a spiritual sanctuary in Nature or in a meetinghouse, to provide us an opportunity to quiet down long enough to gain insight, assurance, and direction from our God! "Be still, and know that I am God!"

So, friends, should you have time for a break before the summer is over, heed this word of advice. Don't look for God or spiritual renewal in all the wrong places. Don't get hyperactive; don't fret! Don't be in panic or afraid, even if life is in an uproar and the mountains shake in the heart of the sea. Instead, be still. Be quiet. Be silent. Work through your sense of restlessness until you are comfortable with a silent heart and at peace.

May we all find our places of stillness, find our spaces for silence, and seek the confidence and peace we require for these times, in order to regain our spiritual equilibrium. And in so doing, may these opportunities create the encounters where we will actually

sense the voice of God speaking to us in our quieted hearts, for that is precisely what will renew our weary souls.

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