

Sermon – June 19, 2022
Pastor Dan Hollis
1 Kings 19:1-14

It may seem strange on music Sunday here at First Parish Church to be drawing from a piece of Scripture that centers on silence. “The sound of sheer silence.”

French musicologist Gisèle Brelet called silence the “faithful companion of music, which perpetually is born, dies and is born again.” To her, the “sound” of music was something that was *realized*—like you could hold it in your hand and “see” what it had become. Yet *silence* wasn’t just *emptiness* or lack or an ending of what was real. Silence in a piece of music was *potential*. It was infinite possibility and the freedom of creation. Without silence, music is only sound: constant, chaotic, and unyielding. But *with* silence, music finds its *order*. And from a moment of silence... you can build anything.

How many times have you been told throughout your life to “take a deep breath” before doing something? And it’s been good advice every time, right? And I’ve heard *Wendell* lecturing all of you in the *choir* when to take breaths on more than *one* occasion.

Then in Genesis, we see even *God* taking a full cosmic *day* to *rest* after creating the world, before starting on whatever new creative project would come next.

And sometimes, for all of us, the things going on around us get too crazy, too noisy, too relentless, or what we’re doing becomes too overwhelming or too much, and the best advice we can give ourselves is to “take a beat;” in the midst of the whirlwind to... find a measure of peace, the eye of the storm, and *in* that beat of silence, we find the power to do what needs to be done.

“Breath,” “rest,” “beat.” Those are all musical terms. I even slipped “measure” in there for anyone who was following along at home. Without *rests* in just the right places, the whole piece of music falls apart. And without silence... how can we appreciate the song?

Until today, the prophet Elijah thought *his* song was written. That the symphony of his story or the rock opera of his life was fully composed... and he relished conducting it.

There was the thunder of timpani, the lightning crash of cymbals, the wailing of a four hundred fifty-person choir... a true *epic* worthy of the God he sought to glorify. He would stride through this world bearing God’s word and smiting God’s enemies until that final round of applause. So many notes lay ahead of him and *nothing* could stop him from finishing the concert. “It’s 1979 and disco’s *never* gonna die!”

And then, suddenly, the tables turn, and it feels it's no longer "him against the world," but more like the whole *world's* against *him*. The queen wants him dead, and she's proven she has the power and the bloodthirst to get the job done. He is completely alone. To paraphrase a commentary I was reading on this passage, "overnight his triumph turned to ashes."

We all know that feeling, don't we? When the bottom falls out, everything stops, and suddenly in a very real way the universe is out to get us. Maybe we're abruptly laid off, and we don't know if we'll be able to put food on the table. Or maybe we find ourselves in the hospital with COVID, or with any number of lasting complications that can follow.

Maybe we come home to divorce papers, or a college rejection letter, or a leak in the ceiling that suddenly becomes more remodeling bills than we can handle right now.

Many of us here in this church at some point in our lives have faced the kind of moment Elijah was facing, when things come crashing down and we're surrounded by the chaos of a harsh, unforgiving world. We don't know what to do, we don't know how to react, we're scared, we're angry, and we have to *do* something but we don't know if we *can*.

And so we find Elijah this morning, far from civilization, out in the wilderness of the desert, beset on all sides. He says it himself; he might as well just die.

In time, God's provision *gets* Elijah to the dusty peak of Mount Horeb, another name for the very mountain where Moses compose-*ed* the Ten Commandments. And there, God asks *Elijah*, "What are you doing here?"

Elijah thinks he hears an implied, "Don't you have work to do somewhere *else*?" so he defends himself vehemently.

"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." Whether or not Elijah was *actually* the last upright person in Israel, in that moment he *felt* it was true, and that matters.

Nothing can help Elijah. He did his best, but, to misquote Forrest Gump... "stuff" happened. What Elijah needs, more than anything else right now, is the presence of God in his life.

And then something miraculous happened. Hidden in a cave, Elijah watched as an incredible wind, a great earthquake, and a terrible fire came down. The awe-inspiring drama and power and chaos and *noise* of God tore through that mountaintop... but that wasn't the miracle. The real miracle was what came next.

Those of you who are familiar with the King James Bible might remember the phrase “a still small voice.” This is the moment it comes from, *very poetically* translated from the Hebrew [kole dem-aw-maw’ daw-kaw’] *qol dmamah daqah*.

Normally the King James isn’t my translation of choice, but most modern versions... lose the poetry of that phrase. You get “a tiny whispering sound,” or “the sound of a light whisper,” or even “a soft murmuring sound.” My typical go-to translation—the NRSV—at least says, “a sound of sheer silence,” and that’s not bad, but I still don’t think it gets to the *heart* of what Elijah experienced in that moment following the wind and the earthquake and the firestorm.

I prefer Rabbi Mike Comins’ literal translation... the “voice of fragile silence.”

Here we’re not talking about actual words, like “a still small voice” implies. That comes later. And we’re not talking about the sound of breeze through rocks or the subtle murmur of settling sand. Elijah is in a very real sense being “spoken to” by absolute silence.

I love the image Rabbi Comins invokes, and I want to take a second to quote it directly. So for a moment, could you indulge me and close your eyes. Close your eyes and imagine *with* me.

“Not all silences are alike.

“Put in earplugs or enter a soundproof room and the silence is muggy and oppressive. Silence in a forested, mountain wilderness is rare. The wind howls, leaves rustle, birds chirp, insects buzz, creeks ‘sing.’ True silence, perhaps on a peak when the wind stops, is actually quite rare. It hits suddenly, with dramatic impact.

“In Israel’s deserts and the Sinai, where the wind is usually still for at least half the day, the silence is vastly different... wait for the wind to stop. This silence is total, yet light and natural—even embracing.

“And precious. The smallest movement of an insect or the slightest breeze registers audibly. You hear the ruffling of your sleeve, or the call of a raven miles away. This is desert silence. Easily disturbed. A fragile silence.”

You can open your eyes now.

In the face of all the chaos—both the chaos of his life and challenges, *and* the chaos of God’s tremendous display there atop the mountain—when Elijah could not find the presence of God *in* the chaos... he found it in the fragile silence. The *silence* had something to tell him.

And, long story short, he found the direction he needed. In that fragile silence he was able, eventually, to really hear the voice of God, and to start putting his life back together. On that mountain he found his purpose again, and he was able to figure out what he

needed to do to get back on track. He couldn't do that diving into cacophony and terror. He couldn't do it with knee-jerk reactions or violent flailings. And he couldn't do it going on the way he *had* been, without a breath, without a *rest* between measures. He found it... in a moment of silence.

So this music Sunday, as we contemplate the symphony of God's creation, and as we seek the next measure of the song of our life, let us listen for the voice of fragile silence. Let us seek out the rests, the breaths, the pregnant pauses. The silence that makes the notes stand out all the more. The calm in the eye of the storm where we can safely... take a *beat*, find our inspiration and our strength, and pen the next page of sheet music, with God—the Great Composer—guiding our hand.

When your life gets too *forte*—too loud—or too *fortissimo*—very loud... *make a rest*, and in that rest... seek God. For God you will find.

Thanks *be* to God. Amen.