

SOUNDS OF SHEER SILENCE

The other day I was driving home from New Haven, when I passed a sign advertising gas at only \$3.99. ONLY \$3.99? Who would have imagined such a thing a couple of years ago? But higher gas prices are probably here to stay. And with them things like staycations—where folks stay at home rather than travel for vacation.

It used to be that summer automatically meant getting out of town. Folks would head off to spend a week on the shore or ten days in the mountains. Or, they'd pile in their cars and take a cross country road trip, checking out the cities and countryside of our great land.

Author Sharon Fleming remembers such road trips from her childhood. Each year they'd take such a journey. . There is nothing like being in the back seat of a car to stir up sibling rivalries. But Sharon's parents had a method for coping. Back then, before iPods and Walkmans, in the car everybody had to listen to the same music. But, Sharon writes, "To keep the peace, we each took a turn choosing a cassette to play in the car tape deck. No one was allowed to complain or comment about another's choice."

It seems they each had distinctive tastes. Mom liked listening to hymns. Sharon always chose contemporary Christian music. Her younger brother liked rock. And her father? "Dad," she writes, always thought the best thing was a ninety minute tape . . . that was still blank!" ("Lite Fare," *Christian Reader*) Ah yes, blessed peace and quiet. The sounds of silence!

Silence was a rare commodity back then, and it seems even more rare today. Especially for folks with kids . But in truth it's hard to come by for anyone living in mainstream America. You go to the doctor's office, and a television blares an infomercial for health care products. You try to read a book while waiting for an airplane, and CNN blares overhead. Cell phones ring at all times, road crews work through the night jack hammering the highways and byways. It is a noisy world we live in.

Thomas Merton once wrote: "It is absurd to talk about interior silence when there is no exterior silence." (*Leadership*, II:3) But finding interior silence is essential for one's spiritual health and well being. To truly connect with God, to truly be able to hear God's voice, one must at least from time to time, be quiet. One must silence the inner voices and noise to make room for the still small voice of God. But that's hard to do when there is no outer silence.

Its one of the truths found in today's lesson from First Kings.

Elijah is considered by many to have been the greatest prophet of ancient Israel. He was known at times, as being a man of real courage, who spoke out against graft, greed and corruption in government. As a result he had powerful enemies, including the King, a man named Ahab, and his wife, Queen Jezebel.

After a handful of encounters, the King and Queen put a price on Elijah's head, and send out their troops to hunt him down. And so he flees for his life. He escapes into the desert looking for safety and refuge, hoping to hear a word of direction from God.

Finally he arrives at Mount Sinai; the very place Moses received the Ten Commandments. A logical place to look for God. There he is instructed to stand at the mouth of a cave, to wait for God to be made known.

And so he does.

But, despite being in the middle of the desert, it turns out to be a noisy place.

First there is a great wind storm, so great that it sends rocks skittering across the desert sands. But God is not seen or heard in the wind. Then there is an earthquake with its thunderous roar and its monstrous cracks. But God is not seen or heard in the earthquake. Then there is a fire, flames crackling, licking at the sky. But God is not seen or heard in the fire.

Finally, there is nothing left but silence. Sheer silence. And so Elijah stands wrapped in the quiet, as his heart and mind slow down, as stillness fills the air. And it is then that he is able to hear God speaking. He is able to hear God's voice when he is silent. When he is still. Outside and in.

And out of that silence comes a new sense of connection. A new sense of God's presence. A new burst of courage and hope. Not out of the noise, but out of the silence.

John Climacus was a 6th century hermit who lived in the desert. He once wrote: "The lover of silence draws close to God . . . and God enlightens him." (*The Ladder of Ascent*)

How do we know what God wants of us? How do we know God's will for our lives? By listening for the voice of God. And that can only happen when we are willing to be silent. As the Psalmist reminds us we are to "be still, and know that I am God." (46:10)

OK, you're saying, I get the point. Stop all the racket and listen for God! But preacher, I don't live in the desert! I'm not a hermit or a prophet! I'm a regular sort of guy! I dodge taxi cabs with blaring horns in Manhattan five days a week! I'm a run-of-the-mill mom, trying to keep

three kids, a dog and a husband happy, when they are all clamoring for my attention! I want to hear God—I want to listen for God—but my world is so incredibly noisy, my life is so very busy, that there's just no way!

I know. Fairfield County is a noisy place. Both externally, and with all that it prompts on the inside of us as well.

Theologian Tony Jones lives in a similar place, and struggles in a similar way to make time for silence: "Where I live," he writes, "silence takes an enormous amount of discipline and solitude takes even more. I'd like to do it at 5:30 AM, but my kids often get up about then. I'd like to try silence [late in the afternoon before dinner] . . . but my wife Julie calls that time with the kids 'the arsenic hours'—you either want to give arsenic or take it. I'd like to engage in a time of silence at 9:00 PM, reviewing the day, but that's the only time Julie gets to have adult conversation." (*The Sacred Way*, 43)

Sound familiar? For so many of us life is so full, so hectic, so noisy, that it seems there is no time for silence, no time for God to get a word in edgewise.

But as Jones, and others, have discovered, there is hope. For if we so choose we make time.

Think for a moment, how do you fit in your exercise routine? How do you make time to go to the doctor's for a check-up? How do you do anything that's important? You schedule an appointment. You write it down in your datebook or Blackberry. You carve out time and set it aside. Once a day, once a week, or even once a month, make an appointment with God. Write it down. Be specific. Set aside a time to go to the beach, or into the woods. Find a quiet corner at church or the public library. Take your Bible, or a pen and journal, or a favorite book of poetry, and then sit in silence. Make room for God.

Sisters and brothers, I know many of you feel like poor old Elijah. You feel like there's a price on your head. You feel like the troops called chaos and confusion have been sent out to track you down. I know you sometimes feel like that, because I do as well. But if you are wise, we will learn from this ancient prophet, and you will schedule time to head out for the desert, and stand on the mountain and wait in silence. It doesn't have to take much gas. You don't have to go too far. You just have to do it.

For when you do you will, like Elijah, discover rest, refreshment, and a new sense of direction. You may even hear the still, small voice of God.

Amen

John H. Danner

