

Dr. Tim McNinch
First Presbyterian Church, Columbus IN
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God is “Still” Speaking

It’s Transfiguration Sunday... and we read Mark’s account where Jesus essentially begins glowing while chatting up apparitions of Moses and Elijah on a mountain...

Mark’s account is visually dense, you might say, and full of symbolism. In particular, a divine voice on the mountain is reminiscent of God’s special authorization of a spokesperson:

- Moses had that kind of mountaintop authorization, and down came the Torah
- Elijah had a mountaintop authorization, and he was sent to anoint the next king of Israel
- With Jesus, the voice says: listen to him. He speaks for me...

What’s most curious to me, though, is that Jesus takes this whole paranormal, supernatural spectacle... and tells the witnesses to keep it under their hats. Why?

I think there’s something similar happening in the famous story Elijah’s mountaintop experience, and that’s where I want to focus most of my sermon this morning.

The story we read comes just after the dramatic standoff between Elijah and the prophets of Baal on Mt. Carmel... maybe you’ve heard this story... where the prophets of the Canaanite deity beg and plead and chant and perform self-mutilations to persuade their god Baal to send fire on the sacrifice they’ve offered, and all the while Elijah is standing next to his sacrifice, taunting them: maybe Baal is on vacation, or on an important call, or maybe he’s napping... Then, after Elijah soaks his own sacrifice with water and digs a trench around it, filling it with water like a moat, he prays a simple prayer and a bolt out of the blue (fire from the sky) burns up the sacrifice: the bull, the wood, the stone altar, the dirt on the ground, and even licks up the water out of the moat—demonstrating undeniably that the Lord God was the true God of Israel. The people of Israel, seeing all this go down, respond by reaffirming their allegiance to God and they mob the prophets of Baal and execute them.

For Elijah, the problem is that the king’s wife, Jezebel, was loyal to Baal; and all those prophets that were executed were her people. So despite everything, she does not have a change of heart. She puts a bounty on Elijah’s head, and he runs for his life.

And where does Elijah go? Out into the wilderness to a mountain—and not just any mountain: to Horeb, the mountain of God. You may remember this mountain (also known as Mt. Sinai) as the place where Moses encountered a burning bush and received his call to bring the people of Israel out of Egypt. Or later in Exodus, when the liberated Israelites encamped at this mountain and received the Torah that would guide their communal life in the promised land. When Israel arrived at the mountain, the presence of God was manifested there in fire and smoke and earthquake. But the moment at this mountain that is most relevant to Elijah’s story, and echoed

in it, is the episode where Moses finds himself up that mountain, complaining to God about the rebellion of Israel (Exod 33–34). And at the moment that Moses desperately needs reassurance of God’s control of the situation, he demands: show me your glory!

Then God hides Moses in a cave on Mt. Sinai, and passes by the opening for Moses to see. And as God passes, God declares God’s name and titles and resume, overwhelming Moses with the glory of God’s power and goodness. And when all is said and done, Moses comes down the mountain and he’s literally glowing. His face is so bright he has to wear a bag over his head so that people can be in his presence without sunglasses.

I think the legend of that ancient experience is what moved Elijah to flee to Horeb. Elijah has done so much in God’s name. He’s performed amazing miracles, praying to God and seeing God act with great power. He has confronted the prophets of a competitor God, Baal, and has triumphed. But even after all that, the leaders of Israel were still stubbornly rebelling and now they were trying to kill him. So, frustrated and frightened, Elijah has gone to the source, knocking on the front door of God’s own home, demanding an audience. Unmediated, unfiltered. Not just a prayer but a face-to-face answer, like Moses got. He goes to the same cave on the same mountain where Moses hid, and waits for God to pass by.

And God does show up, asking: Elijah, what are you doing here? And Elijah gives his rehearsed speech: I’ve done everything you asked, and they’re still trying to kill me. What gives?!

And God responds: Go. Anoint the next king of Aram, anoint the next king of Israel, announcing the impending end of the current dynasties and the rise of new ones. And anoint your own successor, Elisha the prophet. And with classic Hebrew narrative minimalism, we don’t get to hear any of Elijah’s response. We are only told that he went on his way and sought out Elisha, apparently satisfied and reassured by the divine answer to his complaint.

But wait, there’s more. I left out the most famous part of the story—and I did it on purpose because it seems that what I just rehearsed is probably how this story originally went. But at some point as this Elijah tale circulated, one of its scribal interpreters enhanced the story by adding a scene. Did you notice that the divine question: What are you doing here, Elijah? And Elijah’s response: I did everything you said and now they’re trying to kill me... gets repeated in the story? It’s like a record-scratch moment, a hiccup in the story. Those narrative record scratches were often intentionally left by ancient scribes to signal that they’ve added something new between the repetitions. So, if that record-scratch repeat is such a signal: what has this early interpreter, this biblical authorial collaborator, added to the story?

Between Elijah’s complaints, and God’s new instructions, is a scene where (just like the scene in Exodus with Moses) God passes by the cave for Elijah to witness. And there’s the wind and earthquake and fire—just like the revelation of God’s power to the ancient Israelites in the wilderness at Mt. Sinai ... but this time... God’s *not* in the wind, and God is *not* in the earthquake, and God is *not* in the fire... Then Elijah hears something: not the booming declaration of God’s impressive resume, like Moses got. Instead, this scribe writes, after the wind and the earthquake

and the fire, there was a sound, or a voice (the Hebrew word can mean either)... quiet and thin, like a whisper.

And it's that still, small voice, that whisper thin voice, that picks up the conversation where we left off, asking again: What are you doing here, Elijah?

Do you see what our friend, the creative biblical scribe, has contributed here? It's a reframing of God's answer to Elijah. Not simply new marching orders, but a whole new way of speaking to him. Elijah, out of his mind with fear and dread, was knocking on God's door demanding to be reassured like Moses had been reassured. Do for me what you did for him! Authorize me like you authorized him! Make my face glow like you made his glow! Show Jezebel and everyone else that there is no question that I speak for you! She should have to shield her face when she speaks to me!

But for Elijah, God did not show up in the wind and earthquake and fire. God's response was barely even audible, it came in a whisper; it was the sound of silence (to borrow from Paul Simon). I suspect that our scribal friend was writing at a time when God's presence was difficult for the people of Israel to perceive, where despite a faithful remnant's best efforts, their political leaders had failed to protect them, and the people of Israel were right on the cusp of extinction. I'm sure many who knew the ancient traditions longed for God to show up again with dazzling plagues against their enemies, like the old days in Egypt, or to show up with fire and earthquake and displays of power like at Sinai when they received the Torah. But this scribe is suggesting something new: perhaps God's voice doesn't always come in power. And the absence of the flashy fireworks does not mean God is gone. Perhaps God can be perceived, perhaps God can be heard in the *absence* of all that jazz. In the negative space, in the stillness, the quiet, the silence. What God has to say to us might not come with pyrotechnics to confirm it.

Friends, I believe God is still speaking. And if we have trouble hearing it, it might be because God is "still" speaking; speaking in the stillness... and we rarely take the time to slow down, to quiet down, to still ourselves to listen. There is a lot of wind, and quaking, and fire in the world today, so much noise of violence and war and oppression and injustice and hate and political bombast. But let me tell you: God is not in that wind; God is not in that earthquake; God is not in that fire. God's whisper thin voice can be found in the stillness.

At the transfiguration of Jesus, up on a mountain, Mark tells us that there appeared with him Moses and Elijah. And they were talking with him. Isn't it curious that Mark includes that detail—not just the apparitions but that they were talking with Jesus. We don't hear what they said, we just see them chatting together... Don't you wonder what the three of them talked about?

February is Black History month... so let me bring to our attention another Moses and Elijah like the pair who talked with Jesus. You are probably familiar with the story of Harriet Tubman, aka "the Moses of her people," who after following the underground railroad to freedom from her enslavement in Maryland, returned multiple times to lead dozens of others to freedom in the north or in Canada, risking her own life over and over. What motivated her to go back into such

danger, after having made it (as she put it) to “heaven on earth”? One of Tubman’s coconspirators, the Quaker abolitionist Thomas Garrett, once wrote to a friend about her: “In truth I never met with any person, of any color, who had more confidence in the voice of God, as spoken direct to her soul. She has frequently told me that she talked with God, and he talked with her every day of her life, and she has declared to me that she felt no more fear of being arrested by her former master, or any other person, when in his immediate neighborhood, than she did in the State of New York, or Canada, for she said she never ventured only where God sent her, and her faith in a Supreme Power truly was great.”

<http://www.harriet-tubman.org/letter-by-thomas-garrett/>

Harriet Tubman was in tune with the whisper thin voice of God, speaking into her soul and guiding her to the promised land for her people. Like Moses, she cultivated a conversation with God that gave her confidence to pursue freedom for others in the face of great danger.

Or consider Martin Luther King, Jr., an Elijah-like prophetic voice who railed against the oppressive powers-that-be, who lived in constant threat to his and his family’s lives. King writes in his memoir about the Montgomery Bus Boycott, *Stride Toward Freedom* (124–125), “...

One night toward the end of January [1956; shortly after the Montgomery Bus Boycott] I settled into bed late, after a strenuous day. Coretta had already fallen asleep and just as I was about to doze off the telephone rang. An angry voice said, “Listen, [N-word], we’ve taken all we want from you; before next week you’ll be sorry you ever came to Montgomery.” I hung up, but I couldn’t sleep. It seemed that all of my fears had come down on me at once. I had reached the saturation point.

I got out of bed and began to walk the floor. Finally I went to the kitchen and heated a pot of coffee. I was ready to give up. With my cup of coffee sitting untouched before me I tried to think of a way to move out of the picture without appearing a coward. In this state of exhaustion, when my courage had all but gone, I decided to take my problem to God. With my head in my hands, I bowed over the kitchen table and prayed aloud. The words I spoke to God that midnight are still vivid in my memory [and BTW notice how much like Elijah’s complaint this prayer sounds]. “[Lord], I am here taking a stand for what I believe is right. But now I am afraid. The people are looking to me for leadership, and if I stand before them without strength and courage, they too will falter. I am at the end of my powers. I have nothing left. I’ve come to the point where I can’t face it alone.”

At that moment I experienced the presence of the Divine as I had never experienced Him before. It seemed as though I could hear the quiet assurance of an inner voice saying: “Stand up for righteousness, stand up for truth; and God will be at your side forever.” Almost at once my fears began to go. My uncertainty disappeared. I was ready to face anything. ...”

Like Elijah, the whisper of God’s voice... “the quiet assurance of an inner voice” as King put it, was exactly what he needed to march on.

As you picture the transfiguration of Jesus in your imagination, see him up on that mountain, chatting with Harriet Tubman on one side, and Martin Luther King on the other... Perhaps they are talking about their experiences of listening to God's reassuring voice. Maybe they're telling him that the glowing face and clothes are not what it's all about, the descended cloud, the fire and earthquake, are not what it's all about. Maybe they are teaching Jesus about the whisper thin voice that will give him the strength he needs to march on.

Mark doesn't tell us what Moses, Elijah, and Jesus talked about. But after the divine voice instructs the witnessing disciples to listen to Jesus, what is the very first thing out of Jesus's mouth?: *Don't* trumpet this experience. In fact, keep it to yourselves until after the resurrection. For the disciples too, there will be no coming down the mountain with glowing faces, no smoke, no fire, no wind or earthquake. Instead, Jesus and his companions came down the mountain and returned to their unshowy work of helping the sick, the poor, the marginalized. Such has been the way of Jesus to this day, *often* acting and speaking in the quiet, the unspectacular, those personal and intimate spaces of regular people's lives where without fanfare Jesus ushers in the reign of God. May we seek his presence and hear his whisper thin voice in those still spaces too.