

Wesley United Methodist Church

February 21, 2021

Listening to God

To Find Your Space

So I Can Hear God

Scripture: 1 Kings 19:11-13

Mark 1:35

Sometimes we just need to get away from the noise and the distractions. That can be especially true when we are trying to hear the God speaking to us. Elijah was surprised to hear God in a “still small voice” when he retreated to a cave. He expected to experience God in a big wind, an earthquake or a fire.

Now that’s not unexpected. Elsewhere in scripture we find God speaking through a whirlwind in the book of Job, an earthquake in Exodus, thunder in several locations and even some combination of the two. It seems that in scripture, when God really wants to get someone’s attention, the voice of God is described as occurring in some dramatic manifestation of nature.

But here, God’s message for Elijah was one of comfort, of peace, of mercy. It was also one of setting Elijah straight. Elijah had been told that Jezebel, the wife of King Ahab was looking to kill him. He ran into the wilderness and collapsed in exhaustion. God sent an angel to feed him and then sent him to Horab where he took shelter in a cave. There God appeared to Elijah not in an earthquake, wind, or fire, but in a still small voice, or gentle whisper.

Elijah’s complaint was that so many had turned away from God and he thought he was the only faithful one left. God’s presence in a gentle whisper is meant to comfort Elijah, but also to bring him back to reality and to give him his marching orders. God’s presence in a gentle whisper also reminds us that what seems like God’s silence does not mean that God is inactive. By the way, if you’ve ever thought that, you’re not the only one. In Psalm 44, the psalmist, thinking that God isn’t responding to the needs of his people, cries out, “Wake up! Why are you sleeping, Lord?”ⁱ

The reality is that God is not limited to one method of communicating with us, even though we might have our own preferred methods that we would like God to use. Sometimes when I’m struggling with a tough decision, I have been known to wonder

why God doesn't simply use a bright neon light to get my attention and make things clear. By the way, through the years I have experienced God's presence in many different ways, but so far, God has never used a bright neon light to get my attention – or if so, then I missed it.

However, it is my belief, and is supported by Scripture and Tradition that God often does speak to us in the quiet places. I suspect this is less about God's ability to speak to us than it is about our ability to listen and be open to God.

This has been somewhat of a source of disagreement throughout the history of the church between what we might call contemplatives and activists. Some believe that the only way to communicate with God, and the highest calling for Christians is to go off and live a life of solitude, separated from the distractions of the world. The monastic writer and mystic, Bernard of Clairvaux used the story of Mary and Martha in Luke's Gospel to stress what he referred to as the "total disjunction of contemplative life and the active life."ⁱⁱ

John Calvin on the other hand rejected the life of contemplation and threw his support behind action and hard work. Although in his commentary on the Gospels he did note that the story of Mary and Martha is simply about knowing the difference between when to listen and when to work.ⁱⁱⁱ

I think that it's not an "either/or" but a "both/and". I would partially agree with Calvin that part of it is knowing the "difference between when to listen and when to work". I believe that both are crucial to our faith journey. I think that Jesus, as usual, is a wonderful model of this. In the very brief Gospel reading, we heard that Jesus went off by himself to a deserted place where he could be alone in prayer.

No one could ever argue that Jesus was not active. In fact, just before this verse, he had spent many hours healing people. Many more were waiting the next morning for him to heal them, but he told his disciples that they needed to go to other villages so that he could teach, because that is why he had come. Throughout the Gospels we see times when Jesus prays while he is with others, but there are also numerous times when he goes off by himself to pray. This was so important to him and it became so obvious to those who followed him that at some point they also asked him to teach them to pray.

I believe that we can learn from Jesus. It is important for us to spend time alone with God. Our opening song reminds us of this – a time when we can “find the quiet center in the crowded life we lead.” Even in COVID, it often seems that we are leading busy lives. Things that we did easily before, often take longer. Being busy has become the norm for many of us. Have you noticed that when you ask someone how they are doing, frequently the response is something like, “I’m really busy.” Somehow being busy has become almost a badge of honor, a way to prove to ourselves or others that people depend upon us; it’s become a way to assure ourselves that we are important.

People depended upon Jesus, but he was never so busy that he didn’t take time to go off by himself and pray. He was never so busy that he didn’t take time to find the quiet center and spend time with God. I know that when I am dealing with a difficult question, it is really important for me to step away from the demands of life and spend time alone with God. It’s important to become quiet enough that God can speak into my soul and heart in ways that are not necessarily as open when I’m running around in a crazy manner.

We need time both to be active, and to be quiet and be alone with God. Just as we need daily food to nourish our bodies, our spiritual lives need to be nourished by time spent with God when we can focus only on God and what God is saying to us.

During this Lenten season, we are being intentional about looking at ways that we can be more intentional about listening to God. One of our core values, here at Wesley, is to “Grow in faith together, regardless of where we as individuals are today, and model it as disciples of Christ.” As we travel through the Lenten season, we recognize that we are all in different places in our faith journey, but because it is a journey, we can all continue to walk along that path.

In my devotional time a couple of days ago, I read a meditation called by Steven Charleston called “Inch by Inch”. In it, he offered thoughts that I think are helpful for us on this journey. He reminds us that people of faith grow “inch by inch, choice by choice, one act of love at a time.” He notes that, “Simply, you begin to grow in spiritual awareness and understanding.”^{iv}

During this Lenten season, I want to invite all of us to commit to growing in our faith “inch by inch”, being willing to try a couple of ways of listening to God that may be different than what we have been doing. Consider giving them a try and see if God speaks to you through one or more of them.

Today especially I want to invite us to think about the places that can be sacred spaces for us, places where we can be still and listen to God. For me, one of those places is beside any body of water. If I am alone by the ocean, I am always amazed by the waves and the realization that those waves continue whether I’m there or not. It puts me in awe of God’s creation and soon I find myself tentatively singing songs of praise to God.

During warm weather, I love to sit outside in the early morning or early evening and just be with God in the silence of nature. Some people set up a chair in their home where they sit when talking with or listening to God. Some people find that sacred space or time when they go for an early morning walk or run. The places where we can be still and listen to God are limited only by our imagination.

Let us pray:

Our loving God, you call us to come away from the busyness of our lives and to be still and listen to you, to sit in your presence and simply be open to you. Help us in the coming days and weeks of this Lenten season to be intentional about slowing down and listening to you. Guide us to those sacred spaces where we can be present, and where we can listen to you. Amen.

ⁱ Psalm 44:23 CEB

ⁱⁱ [The Contemplative and Active Lives are One | Mark Longhurst \(patheos.com\)](https://patheos.com/2014/03/16/the-contemplative-and-active-lives-are-one/)

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid

^{iv} Charleston, Steven Ladder to the Light, p.49