

Holding on to Silence: Finding God in the quiet places of our lives

1 Kings 19:11-13

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This summer, I spent several days in Moab, Utah, exploring some of the most breathtaking landscapes in our country—Arches, Canyonlands, and Dead Horse Point. The land there is vast, ancient, and humbling. It reminded me of a trip I made to Jordan several years ago and the time I spent in Wadi Rum, a landscape T.E. Lawrence described as “vast, echoing, and God-like.” The landscapes of the American southwest are like that too.

The red rock formations rise like cathedrals against an endless blue sky. The colors shift with the light—from deep rust to amber to gold—so that the same landscape never looks quite the same twice.

But what struck me most wasn’t what I saw—it was what I didn’t hear.

The desert was silent. During the day, there were no insects buzzing, no birds calling, no wind rustling through trees. No hum of traffic, no voices, no background noise. And there were long stretches with little to no internet or cell service, which these days feels almost like a small miracle.

The silence wasn’t empty—it was full. It was so deep and pervasive that it began to reach inside me. It quieted my thoughts, my lists, my anxieties—the mental noise that usually hums just beneath the surface. Over time, I could feel something shifting—an internal stillness taking root.

And in that stillness, I began to understand what the Psalmist meant when he wrote, “Be still, and know that I am God.” And I thought of Elijah, standing on another mountain long ago, hearing God not in the wind or the earthquake or the fire, but in “a sound of sheer silence.”

Elijah in the Wilderness

When we meet Elijah in 1 Kings 19, he’s not standing triumphantly on Mount Carmel. He’s running for his life. Jezebel, the queen, has vowed to kill him after his prophetic confrontation with the prophets of Baal. And so Elijah flees into the wilderness—a man utterly spent.

He collapses under a broom tree and prays that he might die. “It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life.”

This is not a triumphant prophet; this is a man undone by exhaustion and fear.

And what does God do? God doesn’t chastise him. God sends an angel to let him rest, to feed him, to give him water. Twice the angel says, “Get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you.”

So strengthened by that food, Elijah journeys forty days and nights to Mount Horeb—the same mountain where Moses met God. And there, in the solitude of a cave, he waits.

Then comes the question that echoes through this story: “What are you doing here, Elijah?”

It's not condemnation—it's an invitation. God is inviting Elijah to tell the truth of his heart, to speak his fear, his fatigue, his loneliness. And Elijah does. "I have been very zealous for the Lord... I alone am left, and they are seeking my life."

He feels alone. He feels forgotten. He feels finished.

And God answers not with an argument, but with an experience.

God in the Silence

God tells Elijah, "Go out and stand on the mountain before the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by."

And then comes the drama.

A great wind tears through the mountains, splitting rocks—but the Lord is not in the wind.

Then an earthquake shakes the ground—but the Lord is not in the earthquake.

Then a fire blazes—but the Lord is not in the fire.

And after the fire—the sound of sheer silence.

The Hebrew is subtle—it can mean "a gentle whisper," or "a voice of thin, fine silence." It is sometimes translated, as in the King James, as the familiar, "still, small voice," but the sense is deeper than that. It's not just quiet—it's the kind of silence that seems to vibrate, to hum with presence. A silence that isn't empty but full—alive with God.

And that's when Elijah wraps his face in his cloak and steps out to the mouth of the cave, because he knows—that's where God is.

We tend to think of silence as absence. But in this story, silence is revelation. It's the medium through which Elijah finally perceives what all the noise had obscured: the reality of God's nearness.

Wind, earthquakes, and fire are the stuff of spectacle. They represent the ways we expect God to act—with power, with force, with obvious signs. And sometimes God does. But more often, God's presence comes quietly—beneath the noise, beyond the obvious, in the stillness where we finally stop talking long enough to listen.

God, who has spoken through thunder and flame, now comes in quietness. The silence is not absence—it's presence. It's not emptiness—it's fullness. It's the holy stillness where God meets Elijah in the deepest part of himself.

The same God who commands the winds and the seas now whispers—or rather, doesn't whisper at all. God's very presence fills the silence.

That's what Elijah needed. That's what we need.

The Courage to Be Still

Silence, especially this kind of silence, takes courage.

It's not just quiet in the room—it's quiet in the soul. And that kind of stillness can be hard to bear, because when the noise fades, we must face what's left: our fears, our grief, our questions, our doubts, the parts of ourselves we'd rather avoid.

Maybe that's why so many of us keep moving, keep scrolling, and keep filling every gap in the day with sound and stimulation. Noise becomes a shield against self-knowledge. But eventually, the noise wears us down. We grow spiritually tired, like Elijah

under the broom tree, because we've lost touch with the source that sustains and renews us.

Psalm 46:10 says, "Be still, and know that I am God."

It's not a gentle suggestion—it's a command. It's God's invitation to courage. To stop, to listen, to let go of control.

Being still requires faith—because it means releasing our grip on all the ways we try to manage life. It means admitting that God's work doesn't depend on our constant activity.

To "be still" is to trust that God is God—and we are not.

The Challenge of Our Noise

That's a hard lesson in our time. We live in an attention economy—an entire system designed to keep us restless. Every headline, every notification, every advertisement competes for our attention. Stillness runs counter to all of that.

Even our prayers can become noisy—lists of requests, words piled on words, as though we could fill the silence with our own devotion. But sometimes the holiest prayer is simply to sit in silence and wait, to let the Spirit intercede with sighs too deep for words.

We resist silence, but our souls long for it. Without it, we lose the capacity to hear God—or even to hear ourselves.

When the Psalmist writes, "Be still, and know that I am God," that word "know" doesn't mean just intellectual awareness. It means to experience, to perceive deeply. It's knowledge that comes not from thought but from encounter.

And the way to that encounter is through stillness—the courage to sit in the quiet long enough for God to do what words cannot.

The Desert as Teacher

That's what the desert taught me. Its silence didn't feel like emptiness—it felt like invitation. Over time, it quieted not only the world around me, but the world within me. I began to sense that creation itself lives by a rhythm of silence and speech, rest and renewal.

We see this in the very first book of the Bible, in Genesis, chapter one, the spirit of God hovers over the waters of chaos before God speaks light into being. Then God steps back, sees the light, and declares it good, before continuing with the next act of creation. Silence and speech. Rest and renewal.

The desert is not lifeless—it's alive in hidden ways. You don't always see movement, but life is there, waiting for the cool of the night and the rare rain, rooted deeply in the soil.

In the same way, when we practice stillness, we're not doing nothing—we're allowing roots to grow deeper. We're drawing from a hidden well.

And that's how renewal happens—not by constant striving, but by returning to that still point at the center of all things, where God's presence quietly sustains us.

Finding the Still Point

The truth is, most of us won't find ourselves on a literal mountain like Elijah, or in a desert like Moab. But we can still create spaces of silence in our lives—small, sacred pauses that remind us of who we are and whose we are.

It might be just five minutes each morning before you check your phone or tablet.

It might be a walk in the neighborhood without headphones, listening to the world as it is.

It might be a few deep breaths before a difficult conversation, or a moment of quiet at the dinner table to say thanks before eating.

These simple acts of stillness reorient us. They remind us that God is not only in the wind and fire—the dramatic and obvious moments—but also in the quiet undercurrent of daily life.

In a world addicted to noise, silence becomes a form of resistance. It's how we reclaim our attention. It's how we recover our humanity. It's how we make room for God.

Silence That Sends Us Back

Notice what happens next in Elijah's story. After he encounters God in the silence, God asks him again, "What are you doing here, Elijah?"

It's the same question as before, but now it lands differently. Elijah's circumstances haven't changed—Jezebel is still the queen; his mission is still dangerous—but Elijah has changed.

The silence has done its work. He's no longer speaking from panic but from presence. No longer from despair but from renewed clarity.

And God sends him back—not to hide, but to act, to anoint new leaders, to continue his prophetic mission.

That's important. Silence doesn't end in withdrawal—it leads to engagement. The purpose of stillness isn't to escape the world; it's to return to it centered, grounded, and whole.

Elijah goes back into the noise of his world carrying the silence of God within him. That's our call, too.

The Courage to Carry Silence

It takes courage to step into silence—and maybe even more courage to carry that silence back into a noisy world.

Because when we are still, we begin to hear not just God's voice but the truth of our lives—the people we've hurt, the things we've avoided, the ways God is calling us to change. Silence reveals, but it also heals.

It's in the quiet that God reminds us:

- You are not alone.
- You are not lost.
- You are not defined by your busyness.
- You are not the sum of your achievements or failures.
- You are loved.

That is what Elijah discovered on the mountain, and what the Psalmist affirms: “Be still, and know that I am God.”

God is not absent from the storm, but God’s peace runs deeper than the storm. God is not the noise of our striving, but the calm that holds it all together.

And that peace—when we find it, when we dwell in it—becomes a gift we can carry into the world.

Holding on to Silence

When I left the desert, I told myself I wanted to hold on to that silence. To carry it back into the noise of daily life.

It hasn’t been easy. The noise always returns—the responsibilities, the news cycle, the endless flow of things demanding our attention. But every so often, I catch myself remembering the quiet of Moab—the stillness that sank deeper than sound—and I try again to listen.

I think that’s what this story calls us to do. Not to escape the world, but to find the stillness of God within it. To trust that even in our busiest moments, there remains a center that does not move—a still point around which all things turn.

In his poem, “Burnt Norton,” T. S. Eliot wrote: “At the still point of the turning world. Neither flesh nor fleshless; Neither from nor towards; at the still point, there the dance is.”

At that still point, where the wind ceases and the noise fades, God is there. Not in the wind, not in the earthquake, not in the fire—but in the sound of sheer silence.

So may we find the courage to be still.

May we quiet the noise long enough to hear God’s voice.

May we rest in the assurance that, even when we cannot hear or see or feel it, God’s presence is nearer than our breath.

And when we, like Elijah, rise again to face the world—its demands, its distractions, its noise—may we carry with us the silence of the mountain, the stillness of the desert, the peace of the One who says, “Be still, and know that I am God.”