

## AT THE ENTRANCE OF SILENCE

Sermon preached by The Rev. Barbara E. Davis

Sunday, August 16, 2009

Scripture: Matthew 14:22-33; 1 Kings 19:9-16

When you bike across the Manhattan Bridge, there is a long incline that never seems to end. Just after the scenery below changes from the Chinatown building tops to the East River, the arc of the bridge peaks to its height and suddenly you are level for a moment before plunging into Dumbo. If not for the chain-link fence, the Manhattan Bridge bike path could boast one of the most beautiful views of the East River, including the Williamsburg Bridge and the Mid-Manhattan skyline. It is particularly stunning in the morning, when the sun is rising.

Being a Brooklynite, that moment when I reach the level point of the Manhattan Bridge on my commute, it is my entry point home. Once I reach that place, I know that I'm close enough to home to withstand rain, sleet, snow, or wind. I can rely on momentum to carry me home. I usually stop pedaling and coast for a minute so I can enjoy the activity of the East River, which is normally bustling with boat traffic. Barges, tugboats, sailboats, there is always something moving on the river.

One afternoon this summer as I rode home from work just ahead of the rush hour traffic, I labored up the Manhattan Bridge and when I reached the spot where I begin to hurdle home I coasted for a moment and enjoyed the view. I was startled to see the East River completely free of any boat traffic. Between the Williamsburg Bridge and the Manhattan Bridge there was not a single boat of any kind on the water. I felt suspended in an unexpected pocket of silence.

Finding those places of silence in a city of eight million people is not easy, and when it comes, it often a surprise. As the parent of a toddler, I have also come to appreciate a definition of silence on a continuum. Sometimes just being able to have one conversation at a time brings the same rush of appreciation as a time of meditative silence. In our lives, silence tends to sneak up on us, rather than be woven into our day-to-day routine.

I have always felt a resonance with the descriptions of Jesus like the one we heard today from the beginning of the passage from Matthew's gospel, where Jesus dismisses the crowds and the disciples and goes off by himself to pray. Like Jesus, we most often seek silence away from where we do our living. Even though the disciples have left on a boat and the crowds have been dismissed, Jesus doesn't remain in that place to pray. Instead he walks. He walks up the mountain by himself and removed from where he was, he finds a place to pray. Even when silence comes upon us suddenly, entering silence requires additional movement from us, often physically and certainly emotionally.

It is likely that the gospel writers who took the time to note Jesus' pattern of entering into times of silence and prayer was telling the community something not only about Jesus, but about their own community as well. Members of our Sunday morning bible study often comment about how much they like the little details that the biblical writers include. This sentence about Jesus stepping away to pray and be in silence is that kind of detail. After all, these are stories about Jesus' life written forty to fifty years after his life, based on common and unique traditions. His

practice of entering into the silence of prayer must have been part of the common tradition passed along from the time of his life to times when the individual gospels were written.

This perspective leads us to consider not only the detail that he did something like walking up a mountain by himself to pray, but also that it held significance to the community of his followers. Entering into the silence, for prayer, for restoration, for reflection, may well have been an important practice for the early followers of Jesus. From the roots of the Jesus movement, whether it was grounding or uncomfortable, silence was a place to be sought out.

I won't pretend to know what Jesus was seeking in his times of silence and I won't surmise about what he might have felt. I do know from my own experience that entering into silence is not always very easy. I do not mean only that it is hard to find times of silence, I mean that sometimes in silence what we feel is difficult, and we rush back to the hustle of everyday life.

Recently, I stumbled across a book called "Listening Below the Noise." In it, the author, Anne D. LeClaire describes her experiences over time with the spiritual practice of silence. It began with an experiment in which she decided to spend an ordinary Monday into a day of silence. She then extended the practice to observe total silence the first and third Monday of every month; it is a practice she has observed for seventeen years. She admits quite accurately that "silence may hollow the empty space essential for something to enter, but what appears may not always be lovely."<sup>1</sup> She uses an illustration from a Calvin and Hobbes cartoon, where Hobbes says, "When you're confronted with the stillness of nature, you can even hear yourself think." Calvin responds, "this is making me nervous. Let's go in."<sup>2</sup>

Entering into silence may seem like simple desire for quiet and grounding, but the silence we enter into at any given time may have a momentum that is different than what we are prepared. Entering into silence, intentionally or unexpectedly, may not be what we intended or expected, but silence holds the potential for transformation.

A longer section from Anne LeClaire's book highlights the power of silence and transformation. She describes it:

My husband, Hillary broke into my musings. "You want anything?" he said. "Coffee? Tea?"

"Nothing," I said. "Thanks."

He got up to throw another log on the fire.

"Just so you remember," I said, "tomorrow's my silent day."

He took up the poker and shifted the logs, creating a meteor shower of sparks. I watched them flicker and die.

"You know," he said, "when you started this whole business, I didn't like it."

Not exactly a state secret. Nearly every first and third Monday he'd mutter how inconvenient my silence was. And even on the days when he didn't openly complain, he'd hit me with questions that couldn't be answered by a nod or shake of the head. *What time did Hope say she was coming home? Where did Chris say he was going today? What did you say you're doing tomorrow morning? When is my dentist appointment?*

I understood his frustration. It was not only my own life that was put on hold during the days I did not speak, it was *our* life. We were accustomed to the easy companionship of

conversation; we relied on each other's availability. In addition to our individual work and a full social schedule, we shared a small business.

Hillary turned back to the fire. "Not only don't I like it, but I get irritated when the rental agents call," he said and continued to poke at the logs. "Or our bank, or accountant. Or when we need to make a decision about something and you can't talk."

"So what are you saying?" I asked. "Are you asking me not to do it anymore?"

He turned toward me. "I just wanted to tell you," he said. "After a while, your silent days have taught me something I needed to learn."

"What's that?"

He smiled. "Most things just aren't that important."<sup>3</sup>

Identifying what is important in our lives is one of our most frequent spiritual activities. Silence does not immediately identify those necessities, but the process of repeatedly entering into silence can bring significant change, even if it makes us nervous.

One of the most transformative moments of silence in scripture is contained in the narrative about Elijah that we heard this morning from 1 Kings. Elijah had been in a heated conflict with the King Ahab of Israel over the worship of other Gods, particularly a god called Baal. Ahab was part of the Omri dynasty that ruled over Israel in the 800's Before the Common Era.<sup>4</sup> It was a time of prosperity for Israel, after a rebuilding period that had followed the division of the northern and southern kingdoms. "International prestige" and "internal prosperity"<sup>5</sup> marked economic and political life, but spiritual life was not so grand. The writer of 1 Kings says that "Ahab son of Omri did evil in the sight of the Lord more than all who were before him."<sup>6</sup>

Ahab made more than a few mistakes, the biblical author would sight the first mistake being related to his choice of a partner, for in marrying the daughter of King Ethbaal of the Sidonians,<sup>7</sup> Ahab introduced Israel to Jezebel, a woman whose reputation would long out-live her. Hollywood may have one version of Jezebel, but her persona in 1 Kings shows conviction to her own gods, namely Baal, and a ruthless temper in purging Israel of those who would deny her or Ahab this practice.

Elijah had been the flashpoint of this conflict, and our narrative finds him on the run, exhausted, and feeling completely alone in his own convictions. Like most prophets, his traveling was typically determined by direction from the divine, but as fear and exhaustion overtake him, he flees of his own accord to a place where he hopes he might find solace. When we meet him in the cave in verse 9, he has been traveling for forty days and forty nights to this spot on Mount Horeb.

In the silence, the word of the Lord comes to him in the form of a question: "What are you doing here, Elijah?" Elijah's frustrations, pain, and loneliness pours out, "I have been 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."

The Lord said, 'Go out and stand on the mountain before the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by.' Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord

was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence. When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. Then there came a voice to him that said, ‘What are you doing here, Elijah?’

At the entrance of the cave, Elijah encounters God in the form of silence. It is a description where silence is defined as more powerful than all the forces of nature. This silence embodies the presence of God and all the transformative power of the divine. It is no accident that the Lord asks Elijah the same question before and after the silence. And it is no accident that Elijah’s response is exactly the same. Elijah has entered the silence exhausted, frustrated and afraid for his life, and he leaves the silence exhausted but transformed in an unexpected way.

The silence does not remove Elijah’s pain or anger or erase his exhaustion. It does not build a protective fortress around him or fill him with more energy and zealotry for his work. Instead a new way to relate to his fatigue and frustration emerges. For Elijah, the transformation of his encounter with silence is simply the knowledge that his voice is heard in the silence, and he need no longer work at what is no-longer life-giving. The work will continue on with others taking up the mantle. For Elijah the presence of God in the form of silence gives him permission to identify what is most important to him.

We are left to ponder our own impressions and transformations in silence. As we encounter the ways we are split open and shook to our very core and scorched by the brokenness of the world, we stand at the threshold of silence, we will know when we have entered fully into it when the question comes to us, “what am I doing here?”

<sup>1</sup> LeClaire, Anne D., Listening Below the Noise: A Meditation on the Practice of Silence. (Harper Collins, NY: 2009), p. 43.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, p. 48.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, selections, p. 74-76.

<sup>4</sup> Miller, J. Maxwell and John H. Hayes, A History of Ancient Israel and Judah. (The Westminster Press, Philadelphia, PA: 1986), p. 220.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> I Kings 16:30 (NRSV)

<sup>7</sup> I Kings 16:31 (NRSV)