
Hearing God in "Sheer Silence"

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"May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be always acceptable in your sight, O Lord our strength and our redeemer.' Amen" Ps.19.14

Well: "Just when a man thinks his fathering days are over, he becomes a grandfather.' (Cf. Edward H. Dreshnack, "Just about the time a woman thinks her work is done, she becomes a grandmother;" www.thinkexist.com).

So watch out, brother Wallace! You've just become a *father*. Of course I don't mean to undervalue that first milestone. But maybe neither one of us, as fathers or grandfathers, may ever again have a life of regular sleep. And by the way, nobody else may tell you this: after the first time you take your little one to have fun on a slide or a see-saw, or a swing-set or a merry-go-round" well, after that all your afternoons have been contracted out at the neighborhood playground. And now I realize I'm remembering more about childcare as a grandfather than I had forgotten in my earlier time as a father!

Of course I'm completely delighted that our three-year-old granddaughter, Ahmirah, joined us here in Atlanta a month ago. We brought her all the way back from Ghana, West Africa, where we had sent her as a one-year-old to be raised by her great-grandparents. That gives new meaning to the truism, "it takes an entire village to raise a child" not to say, "global village!" Now it's our turn, my beloved Vida, for you, and me to be active parents again" or maybe "hyperactive."

Among my rites of re-initiation, just a few weeks ago now, was our Cathedral Week of Wonder; our annual Vacation Bible School here at St. Philip's. After only a couple of weeks here in the states, our own preschooler, Ahmirah, spent a week learning to be very brave and Bible songs with our parish family of preschoolers and teenagers and adults. I even got to staff some of the events myself as a volunteer parent. Thank you, Mary Hunter, wherever you are, for coaching us through that "immersion experience!" Our theme this year was "the breath of God."

And on that note, I got to learn again the lesson that we heard today in our reading from 1st Kings: a lesson about the presence or absence of God not only in the form of breath but also in the wind, or in an earthquake, or in fire. But the great lesson, of course, is not to despair when you don't find God in "a great wind, or in earthquake, or in fire, for then it may be that after a sound of sheer silence,' we may hear God speak the words we need for the journey.

And maybe like a grandparent you just have to live long enough to get used to having God appear to you after the sound of sheer silence. "Just keep on living,' our elders used to tell us, "just keep on living, and you'll see" you'll see what I mean.' Well, now we have become the elders, some of us here, and today's scriptures provide our Bible school for how to be elders in this 21st century. Indeed we may be called to be elders not only for our own children and grandchildren, but for our entire global village. What would that look like?

Well it could look like the global network that you can find on the worldwide web, simply called, "The Elders." Their subtitle or one line mission statement is "independent global leaders working together for peace and human rights." It's chaired by Kofi Annan, and The Elders were convened in 2007 by Nelson Mandela, who is not an active member of the group but remains an Honorary Elder. The core group includes our own Jimmy Carter, and Mary Robinson, the first woman president of Ireland and former UN Commissioner for Human Rights.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu served for six years as Chair before stepping down in May 2013, and remains an Honorary Elder. The Burmese pro-democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi was also an Honorary Elder, until her election to the Burmese parliament in April 2012. You can find more about this council of global elders on the internet at www.theElders.org. But how about something closer to home; closer to us in the States and closer to us here in the South?

For a timely example, last week many African American communities observed the annual summer occurrence of "'Juneteenth.' How many of us remember what Juneteenth is? I forgot about it myself this year! And then I was reminded by the recent news stories about our government spying"" or not spying on the emails and cellphones"" of fellow Americans; targeting"" or not targeting in drone strikes"" our fellow Americans; curtailing"" or not curtailing"" the civil liberties of our fellow Americans.

And during all the debates and conspiracy theories, and the official denials or justifications, what I most experience is something like the sinister feeling you get when you suspect that your government has turned against you. Now, I'll admit, as an African American I may be hyper-sensitive to that feeling. In any case Juneteenth is a good antidote to feeling all that. Because it celebrates a time in our nation's collective experience when we committed to insure that freedom is the birthright and the civil right of all Americans.

Juneteenth is a holiday in the U.S. that commemorates the abolition of slavery for the last remaining population of enslaved persons in the state of Texas in 1865. Although President Lincoln's executive order had emancipated all enslaved persons held in Confederate states on January 1, 1863, Texas refused to comply with the act until forced to do so, two and a half years later, by Union General Gordon Granger and 2,000 federal troops acting in Galveston, Texas on June 19th. Thus the term combines the words, June and nineteenth to create the one word, "Juneteenth." And although originating in Texas, it is widely recognized as a state holiday or special day of observance in 42 of the United States. (www.wikipedia.org)

However in black communities it has become legendary for Juneteenth to represent all those summer days during the months after the Emancipation Proclamation that were required for the news of freedom to penetrate the South and reach Confederate states like Texas. In fact this image of freedom having a delayed impact on the south has assumed mythic proportions in black America; as if there occurred a news "'blackout"" pun intended; a blackout that prevented the good news of freedom having its sway in certain regions of the land.

Well, there's something like that suppression of good news happening in today's second reading from Galatians. But this blackout is one that the apostle ascribes to the freed persons themselves, complaining that they themselves are deliberately defying the good news that they are free indeed: "O foolish Galatians!" Paul begins the chapter that leads to today's reading: "Who has bewitched you?" (Gal. 3.1) And the power of that kind of witchcraft, so to speak, is that they would rather observe religious practices (the law) like ritual circumcision rather than the freedom from such laws that they have received by becoming Christians.

That's why Paul insists, in his letter to the Colossians, that Gentiles should "let no one condemn you in matters of food and drink or of observing festivals, new moons, or sabbaths. [For] these are only a shadow of what is to come, but the substance belongs to Christ" (Col. 2.16-17). So it's our common belonging to Christ that led the apostle to write one of the most celebrated passages in all the New Testament:

As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.

There is no longer Jew or [Gentile], there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. (Galatians 3.27-28; paraphrase mine).

That's our Christian birthright! That's our good news song! But in Galatians it's as if, having been set free from the divisions that alienate us from each other, we are now saying, "'No thank you, we'd rather be in bondage; captive to religious practices that keep us divided from one another"" dividing Jews from Gentiles, slaves from free persons, and men from women. We like it just fine this way!"

Remarkably there's an echo of this attitude in today's gospel where Jesus delivers a man possessed by demons. However, as in Paul's reprimand to the Galatians, his fellow citizens act as if they prefer him to be still bound in captivity. As the gospel says,

Then people came out to see what had happened, and when they came to Jesus, they found the man from whom the demons had gone sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed and in his right mind. And they were afraid.

Here we can only surmise that what they were afraid of was the advent of a new freedom in town—a freedom inaugurated in the one person they had counted on to be in bondage and to stay in bondage. So as the gospel continues we hear that:

Those who had seen it told ... how the one who had been possessed by demons had been healed.

Then all the people of the surrounding country of the Gerasenes asked Jesus to leave them; for they were seized with great fear. So he got into the boat and returned (Luke 8.35-37).

Unbelievable, but all-too-familiar, is this scenario of people preferring bondage to freedom—in this case someone else's bondage. Instead the apostle pleads with them in a later chapter of Galatians; in chapter 5:

For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery ... For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another (Galatians 5.1,13).

Wow! I can't think of anything more foreign to conventional wisdom in the 21st century than this Christian exhortation to "become slaves to one another." Who talks like that anymore? Where do we hear that kind of commandment anywhere else? Where do we hear the exhortation to that kind of freedom anywhere else?

And what would it mean for us to "become slaves to one another" in our time and place; in this new millennium? In the context of today's readings, it could only mean that we would enable rather than resist—the way the state government of Texas resisted in 1865—enable rather than resist each other's opportunities to experience freedom. We might even practice putting our own freedom at the disposal of others; using our own freedom as a way to leverage or advocate for the freedoms of others.

Now I won't presume to tell you how to apply this exhortation to the issues of the day. I may "fear to tread" in that territory, but leave it to you to decide how it applies to the issues of the day. Because there is one other theme that I want to hasten on to, that is highlighted in today's scriptures for me. It occurs in one of my favorite Psalms appointed for today, Psalm (42 and) 43, verses 5 and 6:

Why are you so full of heaviness, O my soul?
and why are you so disquieted within me?
Put your trust in God;
for I will yet give thanks to [God],
who is the help of my countenance, and my God (Psalm 43.5-6).

I imagine that this is the kind of prayer we could hear from all oppressed people of faith including our enslaved predecessors here in the South. But it is also the prayer that would be in heart and soul of Elijah in today's first reading. The reading begins by reminding us that Elijah had been so confident and victorious in the preceding story,

[when] he had killed all the prophets [of Baal] with the sword. Then Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah, saying, "So may the gods do to me, and more also, if I do not make your life like the life of one of them by this time tomorrow." Then he was afraid; he got up and fled for his life . .

(1 Kings 19.1-3).

So in today's reading we encounter a much diminished Elijah; not the prophet who called down fire from heaven to vindicate the sovereignty of the God of Israel against the false prophets. Now it is the prophet in flight for his own life who hears in his terror, after the great wind, earthquake, and fire, the "sound of sheer silence" (1 Kings 19.12).

Well, I believe that during the days following this story Elijah became the elder prophet whom we all revere. But more than that I have a conceit that he became the kind of elder whom we too here are called to become and to be. It's the kind of elder who has lived long enough and deeply enough to know that when you don't hear the voice of God in great winds or earthquakes or dramatic fires, then you need to persist and even expect to hear God in the sound of sheer silence. Indeed I declare that's what elders' wisdom is good for; for knowing that God is there in silence too, because we have tested it again and again and found it to be true.

As many of you know, in that connection, twenty-six years ago I lost my nine year-old daughter in a tragic car accident here in Atlanta. And now in the years since I have remarried again and, most recently, become the grandfather of not just one but two granddaughters. It's as if I have lived two or three lifetimes, but each cycle has taught me the confident wisdom in today's Psalm "the wisdom to pray as many of you have learned to pray; to say to your soul: "Whenever "you are full of heaviness, O my soul, and whenever you are so disquieted within me,'

Put your trust in God;
for I will yet give thanks to [God],
who is the help of my countenance, and my God (Psalm 43.5-6).

And if I were asked, "What is it we hear God say in the "sheer silence?" the answer could only be the answer for faith and to faith: "You hear what you need for the journey.'

It's on that final note that I ask us to pray together our Collect appointed for today that collects in this one prayer all of the wisdom of our scriptures and all the desires of our hearts. Let us pray together:

O Lord, make us have perpetual love and reverence for your holy Name, for you never fail to help and govern those whom you have set upon the sure foundation of your loving-kindness; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.