

# The Sound of Sheer Silence

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**I Kings 19:1-18**

**Matthew 17:1-13**

*“...and after the fire, the sound of sheer silence.”*

The question that comes to mind as we try to make sense of one of the strangest of stories in the gospels, the story of the Transfiguration, is a question having to do with how God communicates. In a word, God speaks! Yet even as God is known in the words of Scripture, what we often forget is that God is also hidden. “Later Protestant orthodoxy did incalculable damage,” according to Karl Barth, “with its doctrine of inspiration in which it did not accept the paradox that in scripture God’s Word is given to us in the concealment of true and authentic human words, when it removed the salutary barrier between scripture and revelation, when it adopted pagan ideas and made the authors of the Bible into the...pens...of the Holy Spirit, and thus found in the Bible an open and directly given revelation, as though this were not a contradiction in terms.” If you take nothing else away from our wrestling with the meaning of the transfiguration this morning, take this: “The holy that is obvious...is never the true holy.”

Given our less than stellar knowledge of Scripture in these latter days, we would do well to climb two other mountains this morning before we join the confused disciples on the Mount of Transfiguration, mountains that certainly were in the minds of the disciples as they tried to make sense of whatever God’s word was to them on that day they were led, by Jesus, up a high and holy mountain by themselves.

The first mountain for us to climb is the mountain in the wilderness of Sinai, though Moses alone is summoned to the summit. When the morning of the third day dawned after Moses’ ascent, there was “thunder and lightning as well as a thick cloud on the mountain, and a blast of a trumpet so loud that all the people who were in the camp trembled.” The Lord descended upon the mountain in fire, smoke went up like the smoke of a kiln, the whole mountain shook violently: “As the blast of the trumpet grew louder and louder,” we read, “Moses would speak and God would answer him in thunder.” To make a long story short, God spoke the law to Moses who, in turn, delivered the law to the people from out of what sounds, for all the world, like an active volcano or a tremendous thunderstorm!

The scene, in fact, is a theophany: an appearance of the living God that pushes language to its limit because human speech cannot contain the reality of this “massive intrusion” into human existence of God’s “awesome, ferocious power,” says Walter Brueggemann. The people are afraid. They tremble and stand at a distance and say to Moses, “You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, or we will die.”

What we miss on this mountain at the peril of mistaking the God of our own imagining for the God who communicates to us through the words of Scripture is simply this: God’s Word is always mediated, is communicated through the words and the witness of these flawed characters who are chosen not for their eloquence but for their obedience. This, it seems to me, is the constraint upon the church’s speech about God and upon a preacher. We are mediators not of our own feelings or experiences or inwardness, but of God’s address as it is both known and hidden in

the words of Scripture. We see through a mirror darkly because “the holy that is obvious...is never the true holy.”

The second mountain of the morning rises up out of a less known story that begins soon after the death of Solomon and so at the end of a long period in which the monarchy has mediated God’s conversation with Israel. No surprise that even Israel’s kings announced the speech of God that favored their politics. The priestly writings in the Bible tend to put words in the mouth of a God who is at the beck and call of those in power. Priests still being the keepers of the present order, it should come as no surprise that the direct speech of the gods invoked by the powerful on their own behalf is the speech of idols, of Baals in biblical speak.

God therefore begins to speak instead through prophets—the first being Elijah—sending them to proclaim God’s truth to the pretensions of human power. In fact when King Ahab sees Elijah coming to meet him, Ahab calls out “Is it you, you troubler of Israel?” With complete confidence, the king assembles the prophets of Baal [of his idols] on Mt. Carmel—all four hundred fifty of them--to best Elijah theologically. Strains of their beseeching from Mendelssohn’s *Elijah* ring in the ear as they cry: “‘O Baal, answer us!’ But there was no voice, no answer.” Then Elijah carefully repairs the alter of the Lord and prays, “O Lord, God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel...Answer me, O Lord, answer me so that this people may know that you, O Lord, are God, and that you have turned their hearts back.” God answers with a fire that consumes the water-doused offering.

The people believe but Ahab’s Baal-believing wife Jezebel vows, in response, to kill Elijah, causing the prophet to flee in fear. He goes a day’s journey into the wilderness where he asks God to take his life. Instead he is fed and journeys forty days and forty nights to Mt. Horeb, the same mountain where Moses received the law. There God appears to the shaken prophet in a scene that some contend is meant to distinguish Elijah from Moses; others say is written to present Elijah as a second Moses. In either case, the theophany on the mountain in I Kings seems to negate the manner of God’s appearance in Exodus. “What are we to make of the fact that...the wind, the earthquake, the fire [of Exodus]—are mentioned and then rejected?” asks Jesuit theologian and literary critic Jack Miles. “It is out of the question that the ‘soft murmuring sound’ [the still small voice...the sound of sheer silence] is intended to signal gentleness.” In fact, the next scene involves God on the side of Israel in a bloody conflict with Syria. Still God’s communication has taken a significant turn.

At the sound s sheer silence. Elijah hides his face and listens. Sometimes I think this is as close as most of us ever come to hearing God’s speech. For Elijah, however, words follow the silence. “What are you doing here, Elijah?” demands an accusatory voice brimming with authority. Says Elijah: “I have been very zealous for the Lord, the God of Hosts.” He is “passionate and therefore endangered,” notes Brueggemann, having already spoken God’s truth to Ahab’s power. “I alone am left,” he says to God, “and they are seeking my life, to take it away.” We next expect to hear angelic words of comfort, the “fear not” so often spoken to God’s people in trouble. But God, in response, “shows no pity or sympathy for [Elijah]....The address to the prophet who is still licking his wounds is a massive imperative: ‘Go’. *Go back* to the conflict, *go back* to the trouble, *go back* to the risk.” Though I suspect Moses Hogan imagined the conflict between the prophets of Baal and Elijah when he so powerfully set the words of Elijah Rock to music, I imagine the speech of God rousing the disheartened prophet and commanding him to return to the fray. More than a mediator, Elijah enacts God’s speech in human history on behalf of God’s freedom and for the sake of God’s promised future.

And yet, as every true prophet soon knows, how partial and hidden, how broken and

feeble is God's word when apprehended through human action. Once called upon, most of the biblical prophets are wont to say that God must be mistaken in choosing them. I think the same could be said of voices that have turned out to be vehicles for God's speech since the closing of the canon: reluctant, but even more than reluctant, unwilling to claim that the words they have spoken against power in any given time coincide with the speech of the Creator of the heavens and the earth. As I think in recent times of Bonhoeffer, of King, of Tutu, of Mandela, at most they say it is here they must stand and can do no other, begging for God's mercy toward them in the same breath because "the holy that is obvious...is never the true holy."

"The witness of the prophets and apostles," says Barth, "which to our joy or sorrow makes it necessary for us to talk about God, is not to the effect that they...could talk about God, and that for this reason we too...should also try to do so. The prophets and apostles could no more talk about God than we can. Their witness, then, is: God has spoken." Therefore, began a preacher in the Book of Hebrews, "Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these latter days he has spoken to us by a Son."

The time has come to climb a third mountain. Peter, James and his brother John [the same who soon are unable to stay awake with him one hour], are summoned up the mountain where Jesus "was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white." It is a theophany! But what in the world is God saying what of God is hiding from our sight in this blinding light? I think it not by chance that the two characters who have previously come as close as any biblical characters have come to speaking directly with God appear to be talking with Jesus. Peter stammers like Moses before him, "Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah." Then, while Peter is still speaking, another bright light, in the form of a cloud, overshadows them and from the cloud, a voice says to the disciples, "This is my Son, my Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!"

Though Peter had just confessed Jesus to be the Messiah, the Son of the living God six days earlier and though he soon would deny that he ever knew him on the night of Jesus' arrest, on this mountain God speaks to Peter as God had spoken to Moses and to Elijah before him. Not in earthquake, wind, fire or even the sound of sheer silence, but hidden in the light that shone in the hearts of the apostles on the mountain of transfiguration was the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

God only knows what more this story means. For the help I cannot give myself, I turn in the end to an apostle of the early church, writing in Peter's name, who reminds me two millennia later of the limits of the words I may use when I dare to speak of God's Word and its meaning: "We did not follow cleverly devised myths when we make known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ," I read in I Peter, "but we had been eyewitnesses of his majesty. For he received honor and glory from God the Father when that voice was conveyed to him by the Majestic Glory saying, 'This is my Son, my beloved with whom I am well pleased,' We ourselves heard this voice come from heaven while we were with him on the holy mountain."

It is to that voice that you and I can only point, down in the valley, far from the thunder and lightning, unmoved by the earthquake and fire, hearing at most the sound of sheer silence. Yet it is to that voice alone that we must point in these latter days. How does God communicate save through the prophets and apostles who could no more talk about God than we can and yet whose witness on the mountain has become our witness: God has spoken! Thanks be to God.