

“Apart from the Noise”

Rev. Ken McGarry at The First Congregational Church in Stoneham, Massachusetts
June 29, 2022 – Seventh Sunday of Easter
1 Kings 19:1-15a; Luke 8:26-39

There is a lot of noise in our world. Some of it is very loud -- very, very loud -- like the meteor that exploded over Russia in 2013, which produced 180 decibels of sound. For context, consider that humans find anything over 140 decibels, louder than a rock concert and exploding fireworks, to be painful. Also making 180 dB of sound, like the exploding meteor, is the loudest of all animals, the blue whale. Louder than this was the Saturn V rocket engine at liftoff, which produced 203 dB of sound. Louder still was the explosion of the AN602 hydrogen bomb, or the Tsar Bomba, tested by the Soviet Union in 1961, that produced 224 dB of sound. The loudest sound recorded was made in 1883 by the eruption of Krakatoa, a volcanic island between Java and Sumatra in Indonesia, which unleashed four times the energy of the Tsar Bomba, producing tsunamis that killed over 36,000 people and making over 310 decibels of sound, enough to rupture the eardrums of sailors 40 miles away and be heard by people as far away as 3,000 miles!

Loud sounds such as these are amazing and awe-inspiring, and they are so powerful that they are downright damaging if you're close enough to them. Many people throughout time have been so struck by the awesome power of loudness, they have considered the Divine to dwell within them or to be the source of them. However, In today's lesson from the book of 1 Kings, we learn that God does not always dwell within the great noisemakers -- in the mighty wind, earthquake, or fire -- but that God comes to us and speaks to us in the sheer silence.

Elijah, the main character of today's story, experienced God not in the loudness, but in the silence, after fleeing from the terrible noise of opposition. He was running away from Jezebel, the foreign-born wife of Israel's wicked king Ahab, who sought to kill Elijah, the prophet of Yahweh, just as she had done the other prophets of Yahweh. Jezebel sought to end the worship of Yahweh in Israel and to have the people worship instead Ba'al and Asherah. She supported and the prophets of Ba'al and Asherah, many of whom had been destroyed by Elijah, and so she was out to get him.

Fleeing from Jezebel, Elijah headed south, out of Israel, beyond Judah, first to Beer-sheba into the wilderness of the Negev, and on to then to Mt. Horeb, or Sinai, where, centuries before, Moses had an encounter with God. Like Moses, Elijah spent 40 days and nights without food or water while he waited to experience God on the mountain, which he did, but not in the usual, noisy signs of God's presence -- the windstorm, earthquake, and raging fire -- but in the sheer silence.

After experiencing God in the silence, and being strengthened by this experience, God commissioned Elijah to head north, returning to his people, to confront Ahab and Jezebel and to anoint new leaders for Israel, just as Moses had been strengthened by his experience of God on the mountain before being sent by God to confront Pharaoh in Egypt. Elijah, like Moses before him, retreated from the noise of opposition and experienced God on the mountain, just so that he could be strengthened to carry out his calling to speak God's truth to the people and their leaders and to face all who would oppose God and God's message.

There is a word of wisdom for us in our noisy world, in which we so often seek to experience God and God's truth for us not in silence, but in the loud, noisy, flashy things. A message for us is that we can find God's strengthening, empowering presence and God's comforting, guiding word not in the noise, but in the sheer silence.

I think we can learn from our fellow Christians of the Quaker tradition, who practice in their worship services finding the voice of God, not by listening to fiery sermons or loud music, but by sitting together in silence. When one of the worshippers senses a word of God coming to them in that moment, they share that word with the others.

While our style of worship is quite different than our friends of the Religious Society of Friends, we share with them the belief that God is still speaking to us. And while we don't include lengthy moments of time in our worship services to quietly pay attention to God's still-speaking voice, we can join them in creating moments when we can be silent and still so that we can pay attention to God's voice.

We do not have to retreat to Mt. Sinai or the wilderness to create such moments, but we do need to retreat, to get apart from the noise, away from the cacophony

of the legion, to hear God's voice, which strengthens us and gives us peace. So retreat. Create spaces to experience God in the sheer silence, without the noisy, flashy distractions that so characterize our day to day existence. Find strength, peace, and guidance in experiencing God so that you can go where God calls you to go and do the work God calls you to do.

Here on this day of Juneteenth celebration in this Pride month, may you experience God, and may your experience prepare you to continue the work of creating a more peaceful and just world for all. Amen.