

The Noise within the Silent Self

A Sermon Preached by Christopher A. Joiner
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1 Kings 19:1-15



“You can’t ever really run away from anything. In the end, you only take yourself with you... Whatever it is that is troubling us is not outside of us. It is inside of us.”

With these words, Joan Chittister invites us to listen to the noise within our silent selves, dares us to imagine that what sounds like noise to us – “an agitated soul, fear, confusion, pressure, recurring guilt, or aimless pain” – is nothing less than the Spirit of God calling us to attend to what we “have long ignored or denied or forgotten.”

When I read those words months ago, an image popped into my head – really two images. One was Job, sitting on a pile of ashes, scraping his sores with broken pottery shards, cursing the day he was born, and saying he wanted silence from everyone else and an audience with God.

But Job wasn’t the only figure that popped in my head. I also remembered Elijah, how he sat out under a solitary broom tree and asked to die. But, unlike Job, he doesn’t want an audience with God. He doesn’t want anything except to fall asleep and never wake up.

And that made me think of Vaughn Fults. Fults was an old Cumberland Presbyterian pastor, already approaching eighty when I met him. I was in the middle of divinity school and serving as a youth pastor at West Nashville Cumberland Presbyterian Church. Reverend Fults had been pastor at West Nashville for over twenty years back when it was located on 51st Avenue. He was known for his quick wit and great sense of humor and was always ready with a joke.

By the time I knew him, he had slowed down considerably, but he still pastored a church out in the country in Dickson County. He preached out there twice a month, and tried to maintain a pastoral ministry as well. The summer of my second year at the church, he asked me if I would be willing to preach a revival service at his church. For those who do not know, it is a tradition of country churches in the south to hold these week long evening services with a guest preacher. They were called “revivals” because

the intention of the gatherings was to spark spiritual renewal, and the hope was that persons would come forward at the altar call and give their lives to Jesus.

I didn't care for them. But I had learned as a college student and during my time as a pastor in a small Tennessee town that they could, for college and seminary students, be rather lucrative. I'm talking \$400-500 for five sermons. I often wondered if there were salvation bonuses. Plus, there was the food. Every night, someone from the church invites the pastor, the guest pastor, and their families into their homes. And they went all out with the southern fare. So I said yes.

Reverend Fults said that he wanted to provide transportation. There was only one problem. He was down in his back rather significantly, and he couldn't sit up to drive. So that's how Kim and I made the trip from Nashville deep into Dickson County with Reverend Vaughn Fults lying in the back seat of a big Oldsmobile for six nights.

You learn a lot about someone in that kind of situation. And as a twenty three year old seminary student with an almost eighty year old veteran of pastoral ministry lying prone in the backseat, I asked lots of questions. I wasn't prepared for some of the things I learned.

His wife had died fifteen years before. It was sudden and unexpected, and it turned this jovial and active pastor into a solitary figure camped out like Elijah under a broom tree. They had not been able to have children. He described life with his wife as a joyful adventure, in which they shared so much of the burden of pastoral ministry. When she died, he wanted to die as well. "I prayed many times to go to sleep and not wake up," he said to us.

And yet here he was, lying in the back of the big Oldsmobile, bad back not able to keep him from pastoral ministry. "How did you keep going?" I asked.

"The church," came his quick reply. "The church I had served so long began ministering to me, and they would not let me quit. They showed me in small ways and big ways that God was still calling me. You know, I'd be sitting in my house, just so sad, not wanting to move, and someone from the church would pop in with a hot dish and two plates, sweet tea, and homemade ice cream. And we would eat together, sometimes not even talking."

Jezebel says to Elijah what she had no doubt said to him many times before in one way or another. "I'm coming for you, Elijah." Only now, something snaps in him. Maybe it was the stress of so much death and mayhem, culminating in the slaughter of the

prophets of Baal in the last chapter. Maybe Jezebel had just worn him down. Whatever it is, this one who slew the prophets of Baal slinks away to hide in the wilderness under the only thing close to hand, the thin ruffled lines of a solitary broom tree. Once he sits down, he says it. “Let me die.” And then he goes to sleep.

But he does not die. He is awakened by the brush of angel’s wings and whispers. “Wake up. Eat.”

Elijah awakens and still finds himself weighed down with sleep and fear. In that dreamlike state, he sees the hot dish and sweet tea, homemade ice cream melting on a stone. Or bread and water. Take your pick; it’s still brought by angels of God. And the whispers. “Eat. Drink.” And so, like Moses and the Israelites in the wilderness, Elijah is nourished by bread and water.

He gets just enough food to get drowsy, and soon he’s sleeping again. But the angel is persistent, as is the God who summons him. “Get up. Eat. You’ll need it for the journey.”

The one who has asked to die, to sleep, to relinquish his calling, is called on a journey to Horeb/Sinai, the mountain of God. Elijah had hoped to escape and die. God feeds him and sets him on a journey. The one who has just said he is no better than his ancestors suddenly finds himself in the one place where his ancestors are all around. For Presbyterian pastors, it would be akin to failing your ordination exams and then having to go on a trip to Scotland or Geneva and commune with the ghosts of Knox and Calvin. God is not letting him free of his calling. God is doubling down.

So Elijah goes, in the strength of that bread and water, forty days and forty nights (a not insignificant number), and when he gets to his destination, the mountain of God, he promptly finds a cave, crawls in, and hides again.

It is here, in this most holy and vulnerable place, that God chooses to end the game of hide and seek. “What are you doing here, Elijah?” In a display surely appropriate for this mountain, Elijah is treated to wind, earthquake, and fire. But Elijah does not budge. He merely responds, “I alone am left.” God has commanded him to come out, but Elijah will not.

Chittister says it. Listen to the noise. Pay attention to the wind, earthquake, and fire going on in your head, in your soul. It may be the Spirit, speaking to you, summoning you on a journey of discovery, not letting you relinquish your calling, reminding you that you are not alone. Listen.

When the chaos, the noise, stops, there is this other thing. The sound of sheer silence, our translation says. A still, small voice, others say. Whatever it is, it is enough to move old Elijah. He wraps his head, goes outside the cave into that silence that speaks, and hears again, “What are you doing here?”

Elijah says it again, “Look, I alone am left.” I am alone. I am afraid.

In his pain, in the noise that lives in his head, he has imagined that he is alone. That’s what the noise can convince us of, that we are alone, alone in a sea of words. And yet, here, in the sheer silence, another voice is speaking, telling Elijah he is not alone.

At the beginning of our text, Elijah is afraid. But now, in the silence, something has changed. He entered the wilderness prepared to die; he emerges from the silence ready to live vibrantly into the future. He entered the wilderness assured of his isolation; he emerges from the silence knowing he is not alone. He entered the wilderness thinking himself a failure; he emerges from the silence knowing that whether he lives or dies, succeeds or fails, he belongs to God.

Saturday would be the last night of the revival. Reverent Fults woke up in lots of pain. When Kim and I came to pick him up, he could barely move. “You’ll have to help me into the car,” he said. “I’ve got extra pillows.”

“Why don’t you just stay here,” we both said. “We can take care of everything at the church.”

“Oh no, I can’t miss. Tonight’s the cream.”

“Cream?”

“Ice cream. It’s the ice cream supper. Closes out the revival every week.”

We heard about the flavors all the way down – butter pecan, chocolate chip, Rocky Road, and what became my favorite, Miss Wanda’s Red Velvet Vanilla. When we got there, three people from the church were waiting at the front door to help him out. They lifted him out of the back seat and straight into a wheelchair for the short, painful ride to a pew they had set up in the fellowship hall where he could recline. As they moved him from the car to the chair, he said, “This makes me think of a hymn. *Love Lifted Me.*”

It was noisy in that fellowship hall, lots of ice cream and laughter, Reverend Fults telling jokes from his spot prone on the pew. And yet, it was as though a silence was also there, sheer silence.

We are surrounded, all the time, by noise and words, outside and in. When the inside of your head feels like wind and earthquake and fire, listen...listen for the silence underneath it all, beckoning you, teaching you, calling you, loving you, lifting you, lifting us, together, out of the cave and into life, abundant and true. Amen.