

“Lost In Translation”

1 Kings 19:1-18

© Stacey Steck

Preached Sunday, June 24, 2007 at San José, Costa Rica

I spent this weekend with five of our church’s young people and two of our not quite as young people on a retreat to our farm in the mountains. Our theme for the weekend was our passage tonight from 1 Kings, in which Elijah flees to the mountains trying to escape those who would threaten his life with the sword, only to find himself confronted by his God who challenges his life with a question, “What are you doing here?” It’s a question we all should hope that God asks us at least once in our Christian lifetimes, because without that leading question, that probing question, we may simply wander through life and never focus in on what God has in mind for us to be or to do, and that would be a shame. Actually, it is a question I am sure God asks us, if we can pay attention long enough to hear God asking it. And it is a question that if it was good enough for Elijah, and for our young people, it is good enough to ask it again tonight.

Our retreat was held at our farm south of Cartago, a place which especially at night, is very, very quiet. It is not exactly quiet enough to hear the proverbial pin drop, but it is certainly quieter than San José, and hopefully quiet enough that perhaps we could hear God speaking. But before I say more about that, perhaps we should review how Elijah found himself up on Mount Horeb huddled in his cave.

You may remember that big, bad Ahab, King of Israel was a sore loser. Ahab, son of Omri, who reigned 22 years over Israel and who married Jezebel the foreigner; Ahab, whom the author of First King earlier told us “did more to provoke the anger of the Lord, the God of Israel, than had all the kings of Israel who were before him,” this Ahab got his little feelings hurt by our hero Elijah and high tailed back to the castle to cry on Jezebel’s idolatrous shoulder. You see, Elijah had just humiliated Ahab on Mt. Carmel, at a contest between Elijah, the prophet of the Lord, and the prophets of Baal, that local storm and fertility god who somehow must have always seemed like a lot more fun than the God who brought the Israelites out of Egypt. For this contest, two huge piles of wood were gathered and sacrificial bulls were prepared and all the prophets of Baal needed to do was call upon Baal to ignite their pile as a burnt offering. After those poor, misguided prophets of Baal danced and raved all day and even cut themselves with their swords and called out to Baal who never bothered to answer, Elijah called down fire from God to consume his burnt offering so that, in Elijah’s own words: “this people may know that you, O lord, are God, and that you have turned their hearts back,” back from worshipping Baal and back to worshipping the God of Abraham and Isaac, and Jacob. And then Elijah rounded up all the 450 prophets of Baal and ran them through with the sword. Elijah was an excellent prophet but perhaps not such a good politician.

And so the stage is set for our passage today in which a fearful, and, some would say clinically depressed, Elijah sits down under a tree and asks God to end it all, for he is really as good as dead. But as we have heard, God is not about to let Elijah off so easy, and so the prophet of the Lord is strengthened by angels for his journey of forty days and nights to Mt. Horeb, the very place where Moses spent his forty days and forty nights before he brought down the tablets with those now famous ten commandments. After a night in the cave and a stirring speech proclaiming both his righteousness and his despair, Elijah is summoned to the mountaintop for the Lord to pass by and then the action really begins: wind and earthquake and fire and finally those three Hebrew words which designate something so unlike anything else, they keep translators up at night trying to render them meaningfully for us: kol demama dekaa, the “sound of sheer silence,” as we heard the New Revised Standard Version say it, or the more traditional rendering of “a still small voice.” These are two wonderful ways of describing what happened on that mountain but listen to some other ways of translating that phrase, all of which come from versions of the Bible you can find on the shelves of a bookstore near you: a gentle whisper, the sound of the thinnest stillness, a low murmuring sound, a tiny whispering sound, a sound of a gentle stillness, the sound of fine silence, un silbo apacible y delicado.

For many Hebrew words there is but one translation. A temple is a temple is a temple. But for other words, their character suggests something more to the

translator. And so we have an incredibly inconclusive range of expressions for the same experience atop Mt. Horeb. I cannot think of another instance in the Bible where different English translations vary so thoroughly than here, a situation that speaks to its ineffability, its completely “other” quality. You see, the closer we come to the divine, the more approximate must be our language. We are not very good with specifics for things we don’t understand very well. In the Bible, very often in passages that describe heavenly beings or divine visions, the language used is either poetic or indeterminate: it was “something like” such and so or it “appeared like” this or that. In this passage are words which do not designate your ordinary, everyday object, but rather something divinely indescribable, an experience like no other.

And this is really the key to understanding this passage. It is important to remember that the silence Elijah hears is the thing which allows him to know God is passing by. God is clearly not in the wind, the earthquake, or the fire, but neither is God in the spoken word. It was not a still, small voice which spoke to Elijah and gave him comfort and direction, but it was a sound of sheer silence that terrified him and caused him to cover his face lest he should see God and die. The voice of God comes *after* the “sound of sheer silence,” after God passes by. But it is the sound of the silence that brings Elijah to the entrance of the cave, and not the voice itself, no matter how still we might describe it.

But it was a sound not like any other sound and this is why I began this evening by reminding you of that very human way of describing silence, in a quiet in which we say you can actually hear a pin drop. You see, for us, in our common language, the very quietest environment we can imagine is one in which the tinkle of a pin falling on the floor can be heard above all else. But that does not go far enough to describe what took place that day, because what Elijah experienced was a silence in which you couldn't *even* hear a pin drop. This is not to say this is a silence in which God is unable to speak, but rather it is to say that this is a silence through which and by which *only God* is able to communicate. This is not a sound you or I can create, even with the best acoustical engineers at our disposal. This is not a sound we can hope to capture to reproduce, even with the best audio recording technology available to us. This is not even a sound that we can even talk about using the same words. And the reason we cannot do these things is not because the sound is silence, but because it is God's holy lack of sound and it was God's unique gift to Elijah and was and hopefully still is God's way of letting us know that something or someone divine is passing by.

So what's the big deal about this sound you can't even hear? The big deal is that it serves as the antithesis of the contest I described earlier between Elijah and the prophets of Baal. In that contest, God does not speak but God comes in fire at Elijah's command. Baal, who is supposed to come in natural phenomena and who is asked to speak by his prophets, neither brings fire nor speaks. Then, on Mt.

Horeb, God comes not as fire but in silence and then does speak. This juxtaposition is meant to remind us that our God is a God who is unlike any other God, that our God is to be understood in completely different terms from anything else we know, even ourselves. God passing by in silence is completely unlike the gods of Baal whose expected appearance was in thunder and lightning and rain. It is as if God is saying in that silence, “Yes, I sent fire down to win that contest for you but let there be no mistake: I am not like Baal, and to show you how unlike him I am, I will appear before you in a way that Baal cannot and in a way completely different than the way Baal appears.”

The sound of sheer silence is an oxymoron, and one which speaks to the kind of lives we lead as people of faith. Like it or not, we live somewhere between the promise of “I am with you” and the reality that “no one has ever seen God.” Some of us are fortunate enough to experience the presence of God in ways as profound as Elijah who knew enough to wrap his face rather than see God and die. Others of us must depend on such gifts as the Lord’s Supper in which we acknowledge that although God is not in the bread nor the wine, God is present with us at the table, and speaks to us as we commune with God and with one another.

Friends, we live in trust that God is with us through the most turbulent times, even when those are the very times when we would most like to do the impossible and “see” God. We live in faith that ours is a God who would not fail one man who

*wished* to die, and who is not a god who would fail 450 men who went so far as to make themselves bleed that their god might answer their prayers. Perhaps it would be more comforting to know that God is only found in rocksplitting winds, earthquakes, and fire. But that would be to limit God, and to make God fit our picture of who God is. It would be making God in our own image instead of the other way around. May we live rejoicing that we are loved by a God who has at God's disposal all kinds of power but chooses to show it in ways that are just right for our needs, including the simple gifts of bread and wine. Amen.