

Mike Bennett
First Church of Christ in Longmeadow UCC
Fourth Sunday After Pentecost
June 24, 2007

Galatians 3.23-29
1 Kings 19.1-15a

The Sound of Sheer Silence

“...and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence.”

—1 Kings 19.12

This weekend we mark the 50th Anniversary of our denomination, the United Church of Christ. Down in Hartford, a big celebration is going on, with 8,000 people and counting! The UCC was born in 1957 when the Congregational Christian Churches (the familiar “pilgrims” and some home grown North American churches) came together with the Evangelical and Reformed Church (a collection of German followers of Luther and Calvin). Our first prayer this morning came from the convening worship service.

This anniversary provides us a great opportunity to give thanks for what the denomination’s founders called the “heady mix” of our United Church—we have a long and solid theological tradition, but we are open to new ideas; we have the autonomy of individual congregations like ours, but we also have a strong covenant between our churches; we have a wide diversity of theological views represented in our pews, but we also have unity in Jesus Christ. In an era when many religious leaders—on both the left and the right—want to polarize Christians around narrow ideological agendas, our broad and deep church is indeed something worth celebrating. Here’s to the next fifty years!

The celebration in Hartford is one of big crowds and headlining celebrities. And there’s nothing wrong with that. Jesus himself was known to like a good party! But our Old Testament lesson this morning provides an important counterpoint to the super-sized festivities in Hartford. In the United Church of Christ these days we like to say that “God is still speaking.”

This motto comes from a line in the sermon that Pastor John Robinson preached to the travelers who were departing on the Mayflower for the New World, “God has yet more light and truth to break forth from His Holy Word.” Since that day, our church has been a church that—at its best—always listens for a Word from God in each generation.

But *how* does God speak? Does God only speak at large gatherings that make the evening news? If so, many of the quiet one-on-one conversations of Jesus make little sense. Does God only speak through popes and princes? If so, then the mighty praise and worship of the tiny churches of Haiti does not matter. (But I’ve been there, and I’m sure it does!) Is God always acting only to be seen and heard by many? Our Old Testament lesson answers this with a resounding “No!”

In our story, the prophet Elijah is at a low moment in his life. He had just defeated the prophets of the false god, Baal, in a dramatic contest. He was expecting a large celebration, but instead he was on the lamb because the Queen had announced that she wanted him dead. Turns out that Jezebel had a broad spirituality and was rather fond of Baal. Who knew?!

Elijah journeys 40 days to Mount Horeb, with God providing room service meals along the way. Once there, God—seldom without a sense of humor—asks, “What are you doing here, Elijah?” Elijah lays out his brief against God, the Queen, and all humanity:

¹⁰ He answered, “I have been very zealous for the LORD, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away.” (1 Kings 19.10)

Then God tells him to go out and wait, for God is about to pass by. (Interesting logic there, huh?) Then comes the famous theophany:

Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake; ¹² and after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence. (1 Kings 19.11-12)

This story provides such a great reminder for us about the various ways in which “God is still speaking.” First comes wind—a mighty and powerful force often associated with God (in Hebrew “wind” and “spirit” are the same word), but God is not in the wind. Then comes an earthquake—another Hollywoodesque metaphor for God, but God is not in the earthquake. Then comes a fire—not unlike the flames of Pentecost, perhaps, but God is not in the fire. Finally comes “the sound of sheer silence.” Those of you raised on earlier Bible versions may remember it as the “still, small voice.” It was there—in the sound of sheer silence—that God was to be found and heard.

A still, small voice. The sound of sheer silence. “An articulate whisper,” is how my Hebrew lexicon defines the word.¹ I like that locution: an articulate whisper. It is not loud, and in that sense difficult to hear. But it is clear, and in that sense we can indeed hear God.

I’ve been thinking this week about Elijah and our beloved United Church of Christ. In many ways our church has a lot in common with Elijah. I haven’t researched his age, but 50 sounds about right. He’s clearly experiencing a bit of mid-career fatigue and burnout. He feels like he’s due a celebration, but some difficult facts intrude. We celebrate our anniversary, but we have years of numerical decline that are bringing on a reckoning. National and state UCC budgets are shrinking, not growing, as we start our second 50 years. And then there is the issue of God speaking in the sound of sheer silence.

I’m not saying that God won’t or can’t speak to 8,000 people gathered in Hartford. But I do think it would be a mistake for us to count too much on that sort of Word from God. It is in the places where the church is making room for the “articulate whisper” of God that genuine church renewal is likely to flourish in the future. I read recently that the word “disciple” appears 269 times in the New Testament while the word “Christian” appears only three.² The United Church of the future—our church—needs to reclaim the sometimes quieter practices of discipleship: prayer, reading scripture, gathering for Eucharist, supporting one another, serving the world in humility. These practices may not capture headlines, but the “sound of sheer silence” may be heard as we undertake them.

People often comment that the time of silent prayer is one of the favorite parts of the Sunday worship service. Sometimes, as a preacher, I have the inclination to bristle at this. But pride aside, I tend to agree. We get so little silence in our lives. We spend so little time listening for God. We are talkers, doers, achievers. God loves and needs all of these gifts, but God also wants us to listen. And so God has given us a place, the church, where we can learn how.

¹ *Enhanced Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*, Libronix/Logos electronic library.

² Dallas Willard via anthonybrobinson.com.