

“Shhhh!”
I Kings 19:1-13
Psalm 46
July 8, 2007

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First Presbyterian Church
Lake Forest, Illinois
The 14th Sunday on Ordinary Time

We continue our sermon series on Sabbath this morning and today our topic is Sabbath thru silence. Seems to me the only way to effectively preach on that subject is to experience silence, so I'm going to have a seat and in about fifteen minutes we will stand up and sing. Ok? Why is that funny?

I'm guessing some of you may have been thinking: *Oh, thank God, we don't have to listen to him.* But did any of you think: *Silence, really? Fifteen minutes of silence...really?*

The irony is not lost on me that I am being asked to talk about silence, but it is an awkward subject. Silence in church is something that many people are not comfortable with. It's interesting, because on the one hand we put such a high premium on quiet and silence. At what point when we walk into this room and we need to be quiet? At what point when we gather together do we need to be quiet? How quiet can our children be? How quiet can we be? We *have* to be quiet because we are in church.

I have a buddy whose child is the same age as my oldest, and when they were babies he and I stood one day in the back of a sanctuary during a wedding, with our babies doing the bounce, trying to keep them quiet, because you have to be quiet, because we are in church. The interesting thing was that my buddy, when his baby would make a sound, little sound, a baby sound, he was so worried about the silence that he would be about ten times louder than she was trying to keep her quiet. She would say something like “ah” and he would respond with “SHSSHSHHSH!!!!” You have to be quiet, we are in church.

Here is the thing that I have always found fascinating: on the one hand we want silence and we want people to be quiet, on the other hand when we get into that silence we have no idea what to do with it. For some people it's awkward, it uncomfortable. At the last church I served the way the liturgy was broken out is that one of the pastors would lead the prayer of confession and invite some people into the silent prayer after the unison prayer. I am so grateful that we have a lay person doing it, because I couldn't stand that part. I will confess that I spent too much time wondering what other people were thinking because if you do not let that silent prayer go on long enough, I would wonder if the people were sitting out there thinking: *Oh, Reverend can't do anything wrong, doesn't have anything to confess this week.* Or, if you let it go on too long people might start thinking: *What in the world did he do? Or: What does he think we did that we need this much time to sit in silence?*

The truth is we need it. We need that silent time here; we need it outside of here. I was talking with our guest organist before worship and he said something that is right on the money: silence is counter cultural for us. We have invented ways to prevent silence from ever entering our lives. We can talk to people in our cars that are not even in our cars. If we don't like the radio stations that we get, we can hook up to a satellite and we can fill that silence. I'm one that as soon as I get up in the morning, the television is on. I might not be in the same room, but that television is still on.

Silence is so important. We need it. As we heard this morning from the passage from I Kings, Elijah needed it. He was wound up so tightly that he did not know where to find God. This is a

fascinating story he had just challenged the prophets of Baal to see whose God could light some wood on fire. He even taunted them a little bit, because he watered down the wood that his God was going to set on fire, he soaked it. Then he even took a couple jabs at them when their wood wouldn't catch on fire: is your God sleeping? Do you need to wake your God up? Then he called upon the power of the Lord and the Lord set this water soaked wood on fire. He had just demonstrated how powerful his God was. Then one person threatens his life, so he gets scared. He starts thinking, are we not done? Wasn't this enough?

Take the particulars out of the story and it is something we can all identify with. At some point in our lives we have been going and going and going on such emotion from one thing to another that we want God, we want to hear God, we want to see God, and we want to know that God is there. What do you do? You look for God in all the wrong places. I want to know that God is with me, I want to know that me God is powerful so I look for God in the wind; I look for God in that earthquake; I look for God in that fire. It's not until we stop that we hear God. We hear God in that silence. We need it.

From our Psalm this morning, it is proclaiming the mighty works of God. I hear a healthy dose of pride in that Psalm. God is our refuge and strength. The Lord, the God of Jacob is with us. Even in the midst of that, God's voice intervenes and says: be still and know that I am God.

Someone once told me that the only prayer that we ever need to utter is the words thank you. I will confess that there is a time in my life where the only prayer that I ever utter went something more like: a little help down here please! Life was good, but it was busy. Katie had just given birth to twins, we were both working, and we have a dog. Life was busy. There was never enough sleep, there was never time. You walked around constantly with some sort of goo on you. It was a time that if everything did not go just according to plan, then everything seemed to fall apart. Those were the moments where I would find myself uttering that prayer: a little help please!

One night, we had a light fixture that needed to be replaced, and I'm kind of handy, just went on my nineteenth work trip. But if you talk to the people who sell you that light fixture, or if you read the directions, they will tell you it's very simple: black to black, white to white, green to ground. Unless your house was assembled by the same people who assembled the light, you will usually find that your ceiling tells a very different story. I looked in my ceiling and there were no black wires, three white wires and six orange ones. The plate that you are supposed to use to attach to the light box didn't fit.

I got the thing wired, that part went smoothly. I tested it, it worked and the house didn't catch on fire. Everything was good. Now all I needed to do was attach the fixture to the ceiling. The way it works is there are two screws that come down out of the light box, and two holes in the fixture. You simply put the screws through the holes and twist, and there you are. Except that the screws did not go through the holes. I stood up there and I tried and I tried and I tried for about ten minutes. I finally stepped down off the step ladder and I said, "hahahahaha, it's not working."

I know how I operate. My wife knows I operate, so she decided to go to bed. I took a break, went down stairs, read for a few minutes or did something else and I thought: alright, I'm fresh; I'll go back and try again. The screws would not go through the holes...they would not go through! So I went back downstairs, into the basement and I say (frustrated), "a little help PLEASE!" As I'm thinking: stupid light...arrrrrrrgh! After about ten minutes of just completely unraveling I stopped

and I stood still. I stood still because I confess that there is still a part of me that thinks when you talk to God like that, you might just get struck by lightning. So I stopped and I waited to just go up in flames. I'm standing there and I hear it. Not from outside, but I hear that voice, not my voice but that voice from inside that says, "Use the other screws."

I go back to the light fixture box, I take the other two screws out, and I take the two screws out of the light box. I put the ones in, I hold the light fixture up, the screws go through the hole and they turn. That is honestly the closest I have ever heard the voice of God, as clear as that "use the other screws." I'll tell you what...I'll take it. This is what I learned: I did not hear God when I stepped down off the ladder and forced some laughter. I did not hear God when I walked back downstairs and started raging against him. I heard God when I stopped.

We need to stop. I think the struggle we have with that silence is that when we go into it, we think that we are not doing anything. Who's kidding who? We like to *do* stuff. We are a church of people who *do* things. We are a nation of people who *do* things. To somehow sit in silence feels like a waste of time because we feel like we are not doing anything. We are not getting anything done, so we continue on. We try to fix the light by ourselves, we try to fix our lives by our selves and we don't stop. The problem is when we don't stop we get in God's way. We can actually prevent God from going to work in our lives, from helping us to see the solution as simple as using another set of screws might be something that is far more complex. If we don't stop, we don't allow God that time to go to work in us. That silence, it isn't about sitting and doing nothing it's about intentionally opening us to what God might be ready to do in us and through us.

So now we are going to go into a time of silence. If you are eager for that time, I am so happy for you. If you are not sure what to do with that, think about this hymn that we are about to sing. Spirit of the living God, fall fresh on me. Think about those words. Just as I did with the children earlier, I want to challenge each of us to take some time out for that silence in our lives. To hear what God might be doing in us. This time of silence is going to be three minutes. I will ask that you trust me that I might be the only person in the room looking at my watch. Let's challenge ourselves and then we will sing together.

I invite us now into a time of silence.