

Sermon for 08-13-2017

1 Kings 19: 9-12

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The Sound of Silence

An aphorism variously attributed to Martin Mull, Frank Zappa, and others, says that “writing about music is like dancing about architecture.” For some reason this came to mind when I gave myself the task of preaching about silence. I briefly considered titling the sermon 10’42”, in homage to John Cage, the minimalist composer known in part for his work 4’33”, in which the performing musicians sit in silence for four minutes thirty-three seconds, with the ambient and incidental sounds in the concert hall comprising the music for the composition. I decided it might be pushing the envelope a bit far to stand at the pulpit in silence for ten minutes, forty-two seconds, so instead I will speak for approximately that period of time. If afterward you think the time would have been better spent in silence, please remain silent.

In today’s lectionary passage from 1st Kings, we have a theophany of sorts. MerriamWebster defines “theophany” as “a visible manifestation of a deity.” We all are familiar with theophany stories in the Old Testament, in which God appears in the guise of meteorological phenomena. Judges 5: 4 -5: “Lord, when you went out from Seir, when you marched from the region of Edom, the earth trembled . . . The mountains quaked before the Lord.” In Psalm 18 the psalmist called upon the Lord, and “the earth reeled and rocked; the foundations also of the mountains trembled and quaked . . . Smoke went up from his nostrils, and devouring fire from his mouth.”

But in today’s passage, we have something different, what one commentator calls an “antitheophany.” Listen again to verses 11 and 12:

He said, “Go out and stand on the mountain before the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by.” 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; and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire the sound of sheer silence.

As I read through lectionary passages for this Sunday, I kept returning to these two verses, to “the sound of sheer silence.” I had recently read Catherine Keller’s *Cloud of the Impossible*, a work of what is called “negative” or “apophatic theology,” which is contrasted with positive, or kataphatic, theology. In positive theology, we make positive statements about the nature of God, about who and what God is. But negative theology is concerned with knowledge of God obtained through negation, in part through “unsaying” positive statements that have been said about God.

Is that what’s going in these verses from 1st Kings? Is the writer “unsaying” that God is manifested in the wind, in the earthquake, and in fire? Rather, is God made known in what is left after this unsaying, this negation, in the sound of sheer silence?

I do not pretend to fully understand all that I have read of negative theology. Much to Myra’s amusement, I read *Cloud of the Impossible* with my I-Phone handy for access to the on-line dictionary. But I’ve understood enough to think there are several concepts and themes in negative theology that might be meaningful, and useful to us. I offer three for consideration this morning.

The first is this concept of “unsaying,” or negating, positive statements about God. Though this terminology might be new to us, the idea should not be. Our anabaptist forebears unsaid a God revealed only through the church and its professional clergy. The Christian church in America, after many years of condoning slavery, unsaid a God who values some members of humanity more than others. In the thirty-some years I have been a member of this congregation, we have unsaid a solely masculine God, we have unsaid a God who does not welcome our LGBTQ brothers and sisters into the Kingdom, and we are currently working to unsay a God whose people remain separated by racial boundaries.

Positive statements concerning God and God’s nature have done a lot of damage in this world. Those who are certain they know exactly who God is, how God acts in the world, and who God looks upon with favor, scare me. So it’s worth considering what statements we, as individuals, as a congregation, and as the broader church, have said about God that might need unsaying, what idols we have created that might need to be torn down.

So what’s left after all of this unsaying? The so-called New Atheists -- Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, and their ilk – tell us that nothing is left. They unsay everything they have heard said about God, and arrogantly, and rather naively, think that is the end of the discussion. Not so in negative theology, in which unsaying is merely the beginning of the discussion.

After the unsaying, after the admission that we cannot be certain concerning God’s nature and attributes, we are left with God’s call upon us, what theologian and philosopher John Caputo calls “the insistence of God.” This idea of the call of God is the second theme from negative theology that I offer for consideration this morning.

In Caputo’s formulation, “God does not exist. God insists.” Put aside for the moment your reaction to the statement that God does not exist - what Caputo means by this statement is the subject of a lengthy academic treatise and is fairly nuanced. But listen to what he says about God’s insistence:

The insistence of God means that the name of God is the name of something that lays claim to us unconditionally, like a promise of things that eye has not seen nor ears heard, but without the force of being, power, sovereignty, and omnipotence.

To say God is insistent . . . is to say God calls, God solicits, God lures, God invites, but without the force of arms. God calls for justice, or mercy, or forgiveness, for a cup of cold water for the wayfarer—without compromise, without delay, here and now and always—without why.

The world is made restless by God.

God takes the chance of calling upon us uninvited, depending upon us precisely when everything is at stake, leaving the kingdom of God at the mercy of our response. God’s Kingdom is run by the unruliness of grace, where the divinity of God depends upon the sheer fortuitousness that this call will be heard, the summons heeded God’s chance in the world depends on us.

The message I take from this is that what is important is not what we believe about God, what statements we make about God, but how we respond to God’s call – how we live.

How do we hear this call? I found it interesting that Catherine Keller finds the genesis of negative theology in Nicholas of Cusa, a 15th century German mystic, and that John Caputo titled one of his

chapters in *Hoping Against Hope*, from which the above quotes were taken, “A Taste for the Mystics.” The work of these theologians and philosophers might seem overly cerebral, but there’s something deeper going on here. Both Keller and Caputo recognize a way of knowing that is beyond language, beyond rational thought.

This brings us full circle to this morning’s scripture, and to the third theme from negative theology that I offer – the value of silence. Is it in the sound of sheer silence that we hear God’s call, God’s insistence?

Richard Rohr, a Franciscan priest and founder of the Center For Action and Contemplation in Albuquerque, with whom many of you are familiar, has this to say about silence:

It is always an act of faith to trust silence, because it is the strangest combination of you and not-you at all. It is deep, quiet conviction, which you are not able to prove to anyone else – and you have no need to prove it, because the knowing is so simple and clear. . . .Spiritual knowing is from a God beyond you and a God that you do not yet fully know.

Here I must make a confession: I do not practice what I am preaching this morning. My attempts at contemplative prayer, at listening to the sound of sheer silence, have been feeble. Too often all I hear are my own thoughts. But I take Richard Rohr’s words to heart. In today’s world of constant connection to others through social media, immediate accessibility of information through the internet, and the ability to watch any movie or series you want to watch at any time, any place, through streaming services and other media, the sound of silence can be hard to hear, but I believe its worth trying to hear it. In the verses immediately following this morning’s scripture, God’s call to Elijah emerges from the silence.

So where does all of this leave us? I am not suggesting that we all whole-heartedly embrace negative theology, unsay all we have ever said or believed about God, and begin spending our Sunday mornings in sensory deprivation tanks rather than listening to sermons. I am suggesting that we remain open to what might need to be unsaid, and that we at least occasionally turn off the social media, the streaming services, and the television, and try to listen to that sound of sheer silence. Perhaps then we will be made restless by God, will experience God’s call, God’s insistence, and just maybe, we will increase God’s chance in the world.

The negative theologians seem as fond of poets as they are of mystics, so I leave you with these lines from Emily Dickinson: Silence is all we dread. There’s Ransom in a Voice— But Silence is Infinity.