

LEARNING TO WALK IN THE DARK

A Whisper in the Dark

1 Kings 19:1-18

April 6, 2025

It all began with sound.

A newborn's cry pierces the silence of the delivery room—not because they have learned to speak, but because they are alive. With that first breath and first sound, a newborn announces to the world: *I am here. I exist.* Even before we form words with our mouths, we know deep in our bones: sound is life. Voice is identity.

So, it's no surprise, then, that Scripture begins not with sight, but with sound. "Then God said..." Creation unfolds through voice. Sound pierces the void and gives shape to the chaos. Voice calls light into darkness.

And from the very moment we were born, we were mimicking that first voice, learning to speak, sing, cry, and in time, to pray.

We were born into a world of sound. So, it's no wonder that silence—the absence of sound—can leave us unsettled.

I grew up in a big city in South Korea, where noise was a constant companion. Siren, footsteps, the buzz of scooters, the late-night echo of conversations drifting up through the windows—all of it was part of the soundscape of my childhood. Even in the still of night, life carried a hum.

Then when I moved to the Philippines, in a small town, at the age of 17, the silence caught me off guard. It was quiet in a way that startled me. It felt like someone had turned the volume of life all the way down.

At first, I didn't know what to do with that stillness. It felt awkward like an empty room you are unsure how to enter. But slowly, like ears adjusting in the dark, I began to hear new sounds: the wind moving through the trees, the soft creak of an old house, and even my own breathing. And strangely, in that silence, I saw not only the familiar faces around me with new eyes, but also deep currents moving within me.

The mystery of silence is this: it does not just quiet the world; it clarifies it. Because it strips away the noise we hide behind, removes the distractions, and unmasks our truest selves. In silence, we don't just hear our surroundings more clearly. We hear ourselves as well. Our fears. Our longings. Our doubts. Our indifference. Our pride. Our pretensions.

We often assume it is light and sound that reveal. But silence? Silence reveals, too.

Today, we continue our Lenten journey with a story of a weary prophet in a cave, who also encounters God not in noise, but in silence. Elijah was not in a good place. Just days earlier, he had called down fire from heaven. He had confronted the prophets of Baal. It was a dramatic display of God's power that should have settled all doubts.

"God is here. God is victorious. God is clearly on my side."

But before having the luxury to savor the taste of victory, Elijah is on the run. Jezebel, the queen of Israel, wanted him dead. The thrill of Mount Carmel has quickly faded, and what remains is exhaustion, fear, and confusion. Elijah runs into the wilderness and finds a cave. It's dark. It's lonely. And in that cave, he says something that may sound familiar to many of us here: "I have had enough. I am the only one left."

Life has taught us that great victories may lift us high, but they do not always shield us from the emptiness that follows. Now, God invites Elijah out of the cave—to stand on the mountain. And then, the drama begins.

A mighty wind tears through the mountains. But God is not in the wind. Then comes an earthquake. Surely this must be it? But God is not in the earthquake. Next, a fire. A symbol often used for God's presence. But again, God is not there.

And then a *sheer silence*. Or as some translations put it, a *gentle whisper*. And that's where God shows up. Not in the spectacle, but in the stillness. Not in the noise, but in the hush. Not in the drama, but in the whisper.

This moment shifts everything. Because it reminds us that God does not always speak loudly. Sometimes, God whispers. And if God whispers, it means we must learn to listen differently.

It is no coincidence that silence has been feared by people throughout the ages. Barbara Brown Taylor, an Episcopal priest, says it well: "Silence is often God's last defense against our idolatry."

We want noise. We crave clarity. We demand crystal clear answers. And maybe we long for loud, unmistakable signs that God is on our side. But isn't that what Jesus' own disciples wanted, too? Isn't that what the crowds longed for? Indeed, the teacher Kohelet in Ecclesiastes was right: there is nothing new under the sun.

So...Silence.

Silence feels like absence. Like defeat. Like cowardice. Like something has gone wrong. It feels counterintuitive. And yet, Taylor reminds us, "Only an idol always answers." The true God is not a machine or a vending machine or an algorithm. The true God is not in our control. We cannot tame God with our self-serving motives and agendas.

Even when God's own flesh and blood cried on the cross, the answer came not with thunder but with silence. A loud cry... and then silence. The earth shook. The rocks split. Creation itself seemed to mourn. And still, God remained silent.

One of the hardest and holiest lessons I learned as a hospital chaplain was how to be present in silence. One evening, I was called to the bedside of a middle-aged Asian woman. After years of illness, she was preparing to take her final breath. Her family gathered around her. And as I stepped into the room, a sacred stillness wrapped itself around me. No one spoke, and no one needed to. And yet, I felt I had to say something. I fumbled for words and searched for a prayer that would somehow make sense in the moment. But quickly, I realized: no words could meet this moment. Not really.

So instead, I approached the grandmother and looked into her eyes and gently offered a hug. She accepted, and as I held her, she began to cry in her own language, one I did not understand. But her grief needed no translation.

And then, the daughter passed. The silence was broken by the sound of mourning. The grandmother began to chant in her native tongue, while the entire family wept aloud. And I wept with them.

It was overwhelming—yet mysteriously holy.

After a moment, I offered a short prayer and then invited the room into silence again. And as we sat there, I sensed the Spirit moving. The silence became sacred space. As the grandmother left the hospital, she held my hand tightly and looked into my eyes, and simply said, "Thank you. Thank you."

That day, silence wasn't the kind of silence that feels empty or hollow. It felt alive, full of presence and full of God.

I remember during the early days of the pandemic—when the world seemed to stop spinning, when the streets were empty, the churches were closed, and the air itself felt dangerous—how loudly we were asking, *why?*

Why did God allow this? What is the meaning of this suffering? We were like Elijah in the cave, hiding, afraid, and waiting for God to answer. And across the world, theologians scrambled to respond. A lot of them reached back to traditional explanations: punishment, warning, purification. And I want to believe that these responses came from a place of deep faith, honest wrestling, and a sincere desire to make meaning in the midst of suffering.

But among them, one voice stood out—not because he had the clearest explanation, but because he refused to give one. N.T. Wright, a former bishop of Durham in England, in his book *God and the Pandemic*, boldly deflects the question. Instead, he invites us to sit in the space of unknowing, to acknowledge that we do not always get answers. He then reminds us of what God asked of the Israelites in the time of crisis, which is not to explain God, but to reflect God.

So maybe we are not primarily called to explain suffering. We are called to do what Jesus did in the face of the crisis. To bring healing, to offer hope, to feed

the hungry, to weep with the grieving. Even in silence. Especially in silence.

In other words, in the silence of the pandemic—when there were no easy answers—God's whisper came in the form of a call. And the whisper said: *Go and serve. Love and stay faithful.*

And isn't that exactly what God told Elijah? "Elijah, what are you doing here? You are not alone. In fact, there are still thousands who remain faithful. Return to where you came from and continue the work that I have given you."

Thomas Keating, a catholic priest and monk, once said, "Silence is God's first language. Everything else is a poor translation." The question is: how do we learn that language?

Maybe it begins with simply stepping away from the noise. Even for a few moments a day. Putting your phone on silent mode. Closing the laptop. Because even when our mouths fall silent, our fingers on the screen keep speaking.

Maybe it means becoming people who value presence over explanation. When someone is grieving, we often want to say the right thing and right words. But, sometimes, the most holy thing we can do is just *be* with someone.

Not long ago, I was walking through downtown Chicago. The sound of sirens, again, and I felt like I was back home in Korea. But that night, it hit me differently. I thought of how much noise fills my day. How rarely I sit still. How easy it is for me to miss the whisper. And then, returning to Indianapolis, the quiet felt like a gift. Well, except for last night in my little apartment when my team lost in the Final Four...

Peace appeals to me, but not so much that I'm ready to *rest in peace*. I still want to make a little noise. And that's how I remind myself that I'm alive. But maybe, just maybe, we are most alive when we can also rest in silence. When we can trust that even in silence—especially in silence—God is present, and God is at work.

So, friends, Lent is a time to learn to walk in the dark. Yes, with fear, but also with trust. And if we truly listen, we may hear the still small voice.

So, it's a season to listen for the whisper. Because the whisper still speaks. It speaks to the exhausted. It speaks

to the lonely. It speaks to the powerless. It speaks to those who have seen fire and earthquake and thunderstorm and wind—and are still waiting for God.

So, may we have the courage to make space for silence. May we not fear it. May we resist the urge to always explain, and instead bear witness. I see you. I hear you. May we continue to learn to walk in the dark, not because we have all the answers, but because we trust the One who whispers our name.

The whisper says: You are not alone.

The whisper says: Be still. Know that I am God.

And the whisper says...[silence] Amen.