

# WE ARE INVITED INTO SILENCE

By Elizabeth A. Eaton

There are very few times in my life when I experience silence. There is the ever-present ambient noise of the city or the office: traffic, planes, power mowers, power tools, the intrusive alerts from computers signaling new emails or texts, ringtones. I find myself obsessively plugged in to the news, Twitter and YouTube—all available all the time, portable and near at hand on my cellphone.

And then there is the noise in my head: racing thoughts, internal conversations, grocery lists, music. Even—or perhaps especially—when the world around me is mostly still, I notice that I am not.

I'm not sure what drives this acoustic and mental busyness, but I know I'm not the only one who so seldom experiences silence. Maybe we are just trying to get more stuff done. Maybe it's FOMO—fear of missing out. Maybe it's habit.

I do know that this constant noise and stimulation can be exhausting and stressful. The more noise, the louder we become in order to be heard, which leads to more noise.

In recent weeks we have been overwhelmed by disasters, natural and human-made. The West Coast is burning, and the Gulf Coast and East Coast are drowning. The elected Afghan government has fallen, and that 20-year war has come to an end. We are still stuck in this pandemic. We worry about our children who are too young to get vaccinated. We worry about our elders with comorbidities. We worry about ourselves.

In an effort to make sense of all this, we seek to gather more information and more data, which we hope will give us answers or show us a way out. There is no shortage of voices. We are bombarded with experts and pundits analyzing everything, talking and talking and talking. STOP.

The prophet Elijah had a profound experience of silence. He was fleeing for his life from the wrath of Jezebel. I imagine the stress was generating a lot of internal noise. But the word of the Lord came to Elijah



and said, “Go out and stand on the mountain before the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by” (1 Kings 19:11).

And then we read: “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 a sound of sheer silence” (11-12).

Wind and earthquakes and fire all seem reasonable when God makes an entrance. There are many instances in Scripture when God is announced in sound and pyrotechnics. But this story from 1 Kings has always caught my attention. The phrase in verse 12 is often translated as the sound of “a still, small voice.” Yet it wasn't the sound of a voice that indicated that God was present. It was the sound of sheer silence. “When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and stood at the entrance of the cave” (13).

Silence.

Spending time in silence is a spiritual discipline. My spiritual director urges me to spend 20 minutes in silence every day. I can do about five. Silence is not a technique but a way of being in God's presence. It's pretty simple, but it's not easy. Sheer silence silences us—all of our defenses and self-justifications. It can be terrifying because in silence there is nothing between the soul and its source of being. No wonder that Elijah, when he heard the sound of sheer silence, wrapped his face in his mantle. He was in the presence of the Holy.

We are invited into silence. In the words of the hymn: “Let all mortal flesh keep silence, and with fear and trembling stand; ponder nothing earthly minded, for with blessing in his hand Christ our God to earth descending comes full homage to demand” (*Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, 490). †

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