

**Spiritual Practices-Listening for the Soul-Praying With Silence**  
1 Kings 19: 8-13 *November 4, 2018*

Let me start by saying that I get the irony of a sermon on silence. Preaching a sermon on silence is like asking the clerk at a bookstore to help you find a book in the self-help section. But silence is not an easy thing for most of us. Part of the problem I think is expectations. We might expect silence to be a time of serenity and peace. But, the reality is when we first enter into silence we experience an ambush and assault by our minds. The silence fills with shopping lists, to do lists, commitments. We feel like spiritual amateurs. If we stick with it long enough the second wave of the assault hits us, memories, emotions, resentments, regrets, worry. We come face to face with the things we try so hard to suppress. We feel like Jesus thrust into the emptiness of the desert, tested and confronted by danger and temptation. We become dis-heartened that we can't achieve a more monk-like serenity and union with God.

Another challenge is that many of us associate silent prayer with doing nothing, it's unproductive and inefficient we think. Who has time just to sit in silence? Happy lives are busy lives and to a certain extent that's true. But, sometimes all our doing just reveals a kind of spiritual anxiety based in our fear and insecurity about our own adequacy, our purpose in this life and our standing before God. American Episcopal preacher and writer Barbara Brown Taylor commenting on this phenomenon shared this story:

*Soon after I moved to the country, a friend from the city set out to see me and got seriously lost. These were the days before cell phones, so she was on her own with nothing but my directions and a badly out-of-date map. Already an hour later than she wanted to be, she was speeding through a little town when she saw the blue lights in her rear-view mirror. I forgot to warn her that it was a speed trap. Busted, she pulled over on the shoulder of the road and had her license ready when the officer arrived at her window. "I am so sorry," she said, handing it to him along with her registration. "I know I was speeding, but I've been lost for the last forty minutes and I cannot find my road anywhere on this map." "Well, I'm sorry about that too, ma'am," he said, writing up her citation, "but what made you think that hurrying would help you find your way? What made any of us think that the place we are trying to reach is far, far ahead of us somewhere and that the only way to get there is to run until we drop?"*

Taylor goes on to say, "Many of us Christians have been taught to think of God's kingdom as something outside ourselves, for which we must search as a merchant searches for the pearl of great price."<sup>2</sup> Silent prayer is an invitation to listen for the possibility that God is already here, not in some far off imagined ideal or perfection.

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<sup>1</sup> *Leaving Church: A Memoir of Faith.*

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

Elijah was running—he had already dropped by the time we catch up to him in our faith story today. He'd been doing God's work, the exhausting, dangerous work of speaking truth to power. Life was far from perfect. God seemed impossibly far away. Vulnerable and desperate he can go no further without direction from God. It's when he stops the work that he experiences the presence of God. He experiences that presence not in the ways he expected but in the beautifully paradoxical "sound of sheer silence".<sup>3</sup> We know this was God because Elijah wraps his face in his mantle to speak with God, consistent with passages elsewhere that say one cannot see the face of God and live.

The Quakers, the Christians most comfortable with silence say that silence is alive with the possibility of prophecy.<sup>4</sup> Silence is about setting aside the life we have created, the life of work, family, volunteer commitments, the face we show to the world to pay attention to the life God presents us and asks us to live. In silence, we come face to face with life as it really is. In silence, we come up against the things we suppress or hide so that we can function in the world; fears, pain, anguish, insecurity, anxiety, grief. In silence, none of these things disappear, but rather we face up to them honestly. We stay with them, we are transparent and vulnerable because that's the only way God gets into our lives. Gradually we become more aware of, and compassionate of our inner life and struggles. The grace of silence is also acceptance, knowing that we are works in progress, coming up against our limits and being OK with that.

Silence takes time and practice. In the midst of a noisy, distracted, instant gratification world, it is not easy to make time for something that does not give us an immediate benefit. Silence is not a spiritual quick fix, there is no such thing, nothing that is enduring anyway. Silence is a journey homeward. Silence allows the need to accomplish to stop driving us or prove ourselves and the need to project an image of competence to the world. Silence brings us the freedom to be ourselves, our truest selves—children of God.<sup>5</sup> We discover a truth in the life of faith, that despite what we might have been taught or see in popular media, God is not the God of morality, issuing edicts and commands that start with, "thou shall not". God is not the God of morality; God is the God of reality. God is known in the midst and messiness of our lives, accompanying us, calling us beyond fear to faithfulness.

Here is more grace, meeting God in the silence assures us that the kingdom of God is not only something we are striving to build with our good works, the kingdom of God is something already inside us. The great American poet Wendell Berry upon noticing a flock of geese on their fall migration wrote these words:

Geese appear high over us,  
pass, and the sky closes. Abandon,  
as in love or sleep, holds

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<sup>3</sup> 1 Kings 19: 12.

<sup>4</sup> <https://mic.com/articles/98624/a-brief-history-of-the-moment-of-silence#.bWloOGa1a>

<sup>5</sup> Henri Nouwen, *With Open Hands*, p. 21.

them to their way, clear  
in the ancient faith: what we need  
is here. And we pray, not  
for new earth or heaven, but to be  
quiet in heart, and in eye,  
clear. What we need is here. <sup>6</sup>

What we need is here, that knowledge is the grace and gift of silence. It is to live in the deep knowing that despite everything you hear and fear, what we need to make the kingdom of God a reality is already here, is already in you. Thanks be to God.

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<sup>6</sup> *Selected Poems of Wendell Berry*, Counterpoint Press, 1998.