

For an opening time of Guided Quietude:

And the man, formerly known to be stark raving mad, and in shackles and chains, maybe for the first time in his entire life is experiencing an un-tethered, in-one's-right-mind, utterly calm and absolutely holy time.

Befriend the calm that comes *after* the storm. Sound of sheer silence. . .(pause).

The Sound of Sheer Silence

I Kings 19:9-12 and Luke 8:26-38 (Message)

(I light, watch, and then blow out a candle)

" Out, out, brief candle!

Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player

That struts and frets his hour upon the stage

And then is heard no more: it is a tale

*Told by an idiot, full of **sound and fury**,*

Signifying nothing."

Or so it is said in [William Shakespeare's *Macbeth*](#).

Then later, taking its title from this Shakespearian passage: William Faulkner's 1929 literary masterpiece *The Sound and the Fury*. In German, it's called *Sturm und Drang*, storm and stress. Drivenness. Agitation. Like the poor, distressed mule deer of Psalm 42, who gets so "heated by the chase", hounded by the hunting dogs. Alas, it's what too many people experience nearly every day of their lives, either made to profusely sweat with too much to do and worry about, or pointlessly going round and round, seemingly forever on a treadmill of purposeless anxiety. Drivenness, agitation, sound and fury. *Sturm und drang*. A tale told by an idiot, a life signifying nothing. Sounds awful, doesn't it? In your own life, do you at all relate to it? *(Here I move up to pulpit from stand below)*

Once upon a time the prophet Elijah experienced just such sound and fury. When he was hiding out in that cave, 'heated by the chase' of

Jezebel's hired killers, he had to have been at his lowest of low times: frantically driven, and totally exhausted from both heightened stress levels and physical deprivation: and maybe, maybe, at a point in his life when it seemed everything he had been striving for and battling against had been for naught.

It could be that Elijah's time had come and gone. He's already experienced more than his share of battles and the resulting post-traumatic stress. Without God having counseled him to do anything of the kind, he has already taken revenge on his enemies. God's seeming absence at this time in his life may not have had to do with *what* he opposed, the worship of impotent idols, but *how* he opposed them... with violence, with a vengeful zealotry God did not intend. Yet soon, the peaceful quietude of God's forgiving love will prevail. Soon, in the silence of God, he will be invited to silence his zeal for retribution. So will we.

Elijah saw winds that broke giant rocks into pieces, earthquakes that tumbled buildings to their very skeletons, fires that flamed up and raged furiously hot. And God was not, God was not, God was not... in ... *any* of these. God is not in our frantic workaholicism either. God is not in our exploitation of the world's remaining resources. God is not in our unendingly idiotic wars. God is not in our long-buried emotions and periodic violent outbursts.

There are hurricanes, earthquakes, and fires raging a-plenty in our world. What is found first and most often after an earthquake is disease, death and displacement of thousands. Things NOT to be mistaken as having anything to do with God! Disease, death, and displacement have to do with just the opposite. It was not God that was heard and seen in the hurricane winds that hit New York City recently, not God in the tornados in Oklahoma, not God in the fires in Colorado, nor in the sometimes quite inadequate governmental response. God's work of love did not cause the hurricane, nor the weak human response. Blame global warming. Blame callousness and incompetence in high places. Do credit God for those quieter, small, to-some-degree effective

responses that also come to bear IN SPITE OF human graft and governmental incompetence. God's spirit sound is not the rumble of earthquake, it's not the roar of tsunami or hurricane gale, it's in our church's disaster relief efforts. It's in what doesn't make the headlines. It's in the still, small voice that can be detected, if we but listen well, *after*, in *spite* of, and in direct *response to* the rumble and roar. It's a still small sweet spirit voice which accompanies the doggedly persistent presence of Holy-Spirit-inspired hope.

But some of us have tried so zealously, have striven so valiantly. Having fought many a physical, spiritual, or emotional battle, we may feel we too have faced mountain-splittingly strong headwinds (or headaches!), rock-shatteringly powerful earthquakes, vast, raging hot fires. And then, perhaps we've had moments in which it seems that all our life's work and strife hardly amounts to a hill of beans. A tale told by an idiot, maybe, a life signifying nothing. Maybe we've gone off a time or two into a proverbial cave by ourselves somewhere, feeling afraid and weak and small, not entirely unlike Elijah, being made to think that perhaps we've been terribly off-kilter in all our striving and our zeal.

I didn't have the even more chillingly vivid New Testament lectionary story from Luke 8 read this morning. In it, Jesus asks a man his name, but he can't in his right mind reply; instead, demons reply that their name is legion. That word, legion, has more than one meaning. There are *legion*, that is, *many* pressures and forces *within* that get the better of us as individuals; there are also *legion* that is, *many* oppressive forces at work in wider society- and in Jesus' day in particular, *legions* of oppressive occupying Roman soldiers. But just taking a passing glance at the immediate details of this story, we find that it describes a repeatedly-convulsing, naked, bruised and bleeding man living in a cemetery under constant guard, tied up with chains and shackles.

It's a description of madness. Not being in one's right mind. Just such may feel more real and be more scary than the threat of earthquakes, closer to home than the ravaging fires we read about in California or Colorado.

Have not many of us felt at times driven nearly stark-raving nuts with all the pressure around, within?

But let me now read for you some concluding verses, this one, from the New Testament story, Peterson translation, Luke 8:35: "The people came to Jesus, and found the formerly-chained man from whom the demons had been sent, sitting at Jesus' feet, wearing clothes and making sense. It was a holy moment." I'd like us to stay in that holy moment now, breathe into it, let it be. (*re-light the candle, back at table*).

Suddenly . . . the sound and the fury all came to a halt for Elijah too. All his zealously righteous indignation that had motivated such a violently frantic pace, such workday fury. The Lord was not in the wind, not in the earthquake, not in the fire, but after all of that, the Lord *was* in the sound of sheer silence. (*pause*)

How can one possibly describe in words the sound of sheer silence? Is it like describing the color of utter darkness? Like darkness, at first much silence itself may seem scary- simply because we're not used to it. Eventually though, we find it to be imbued with profound serenity. When I've gathered in silent Quaker meetings, for instance, I've experienced what gets described not as an *empty* silence, not an absence of sound, but rather, a presence, a *full* silence, a prayerful Holy Spirit-infused sense of utter peace and tranquility. But no one can adequately tell you about it. At the end of the day, the only way to know the good contained within silence and darkness is to befriend them for yourself. The sound of sheer silence, the still, small voice, is a very good thing to experience. But one has to be patient. There will be distractions a plenty. Just notice them and smile them away. Give silence- call it prayer if you like- time to blossom, to become full. Give darkness- call it rest for the spirit- a chance to become radiant with color. We get to the night via the day, after all. We get to the quietude

amid much competing noise. So in the morning light, when we gather as a congregation, we'll keep practicing quieting spiritual disciplines. And we'll keep telling our ancient faith stories too, we'll tell honestly of that old prophet, Elijah, so very zealous, so furiously committed to doing what he thought was right, and yet, how he went awry like great ones so often do. We'll hear tell of earthquakes, winds, and fires he endured- they will remind us of ones we've endured too- and we'll remember that though we may have learned from these, in and of themselves, God was not in midst of any of them. We'll hear tell of that equally-furious madman, tied with chains and shackles, crazed and driven by his inner demons, and though through the story we'll be reminded of the principalities and powers that oppress us, we'll also remember that Christ came to make our burden light and easy too. Then every night, we'll lay our excess burdens down and forgive those we felt were indebted to us and in gratitude rather than resentment, we'll keep the demons at bay, content and un-oppressed in utter darkness, amid sheer silence.

God NOT in the hurricane wind, God NOT in the earthquake, God NOT in the fire. After earthquakes have stilled, storms and fires have abated, the sound of sheer silence. After the fury, in contrast to the clamor, a gentle, quiet whisper, a still, small, clear, sweet voice of calm. In THAT, finally, God IS. *(pause)* Amen.

1 Kings 19:3-12

19 (After Jezebel threatened to kill him) Elijah was afraid; he got up and fled for his life... he went a day's journey into the wilderness, and sat down under a solitary broom tree. He asked that he might die: "It is enough; now, O LORD, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors." ⁵Then he lay down under the broom tree & fell

asleep. Suddenly an angel touched him & said to him, "Get up and eat." ⁶He looked, and there at his head was a cake baked on hot stones, and a jar of water. He ate and drank, and lay down again. ⁷The angel of the LORD came a second time, touched him, and said, "Get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you." ⁸He got up, and ate and drank; then he went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights to Horeb the mount of God.

⁹At that place he came to a cave, and spent the night there. Then the word of the LORD came to him, saying, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" ¹⁰He answered, "I have been very zealous for the LORD, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away." ¹¹He 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; ¹²and after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence ("a still, small voice").

Luke 8:26-38 (The Message)

"The Madman and the Pigs" Story

²⁶⁻²⁹They sailed on to the country of the Gerasenes, directly opposite Galilee. As he stepped out onto land, a madman from town met him; he was a victim of demons. He hadn't worn clothes for a long time, nor lived at home; he lived in the cemetery. When he saw Jesus he screamed, fell before him, and bellowed, "What business do you have messing with me? You're

Jesus, Son of the High God, but don't give me a hard time!" (The man said this because Jesus had started to order the unclean spirit out of him.) Time after time the demon threw the man into convulsions. He had been placed under constant guard and tied with chains and shackles, but crazed and driven wild by the demon, he would shatter the bonds.

³⁰⁻³¹ Jesus asked him his name. "Legion. My name is Legion," he replied, for many demons oppressed him. And they begged Jesus desperately not to order them to the bottomless pit.

³²⁻³³ A large herd of pigs was browsing and rooting on a nearby hill. The demons begged Jesus to order them into the pigs. He gave the order. It was even worse for the pigs than for the man. Crazed, they stampeded over a cliff into the lake and drowned.

³⁴⁻³⁶ Those tending the pigs, scared to death, bolted and told their story in town and country. People went out to see what had happened. They came to Jesus and found the man from whom the demons had been sent, sitting there at Jesus' feet, wearing decent clothes and making sense. It was a holy moment, and for a short time they were more reverent than curious. Then those who had seen it happen told how the demoniac had been saved.

³⁷⁻³⁸ Later, a great many people from the Gerasene countryside got together and asked Jesus to leave—too much change, too fast, and they felt threatened.