

First Mennonite Church

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Craig Janzen Neufeld

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I've had a lot on my mind lately, and really, how could I not. There has been a lot of 'noise' inside my mind as of late, as I've been trying to be sure that I've attended to and taken care of all the things that I need to before I leave. Both here and at home, I've been carrying lists in my head of things that need to happen. And truth be told, with this much 'noise' in my mind it is challenging to focus on the things that matter. It's sometimes difficult to get excited for the things that are coming when you're trying to make sure that this or that have been taken care of.

One of the 'noisy' things in my life (literally and figuratively) has been anticipating moving into and creating home with Christine. On one hand I look forward to finally settling down together. My mind is filled with imaging where this thing or that thing could go. I wonder how pieces of furniture may (or may not) fit, it's a giant puzzle, and I do love puzzles, so it's occupying that part of my mind. On the other hand, I suspect that I'm going to be driven bonkers at our new home, because every single appliance in our home sings to us. Our dishwasher, when you turn it on or off, or when it finishes a cycle sings a little jingle. The Stove, when you turn it on, when it preheats, or when the timer goes off there's another song, the microwave, the washer, the dryer, all have different tunes for either being turned on, off, or completing a task.

I recently found a youtube video of two folks who manage to play the harry potter theme song using only a washing machine and dryer. It would seem that the dial and button sounds, are just the right pitch. And when played in the right order...well you get the idea.

I don't think it's a stretch for me to suggest that we live in both a figuratively and literally noisy world. I'm not going to miss some of the literal noise that surrounds me, such as hearing my neighbour idle their diesel engine at 6:30 in the morning, the way the sounds of motorcycles reverberate in my condo complex, or the sounds of airplanes overhead. Figuratively, there is much that pulls at our attention, whether it be a 24 hour news cycle, social media, or our phones constantly dinging with weather, stock, or calendar updates. There is a lot of 'noise' out there. I find it interesting that in the last couple of years, with so many alerts and notifications coming from our phones (a feature that's not all that old), Apple recently released a new feature for our phones called 'focus' mode, or a mode that silences these notifications. The irony is lost on me, the company that first introduced all this 'noise' is now creating a way to silence it.

As I read the scripture for this week I was struck with how 'noisy' it is. Literally and figuratively.

Burdened by worry and fear Elijah is fleeing for his life from Jezebel. Our story finds Elijah hiding in the wilderness and while it may be quiet to his ears, Elijah's spirit is troubled. I imagine that his mind is racing from the fear; that he is wound so tightly with worry that that every wind gust, every rock fall, every snapping twig, every movement of brush from whatever may life out there, is the trigger that could put him over the edge. He's so scared that he's ready to give up. He's so afraid, that he can't see any way forward.

And into this fear, this 'noise' in his life, that an angel appears, speaks to him, offers him nourishment and rest, not once but twice.

In the midst of the 'noise' of our lives, be it the ringing and dinging of appliances and devices, or the 'noise' of our minds, God still speaks. However, can we hear God over all the 'noise?' There's the question. In Elijah's case, he does, and God gifts for him food for the journey.

As an aside, Two phrases that caught my attention while reading this was vs 7 and vs 8.

When the angel comes to Elijah a second time and says "Get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you." and after he had eaten he was led to the mount of God, but a little side note says that "he went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights." Now, forty days and nights is an image used multiple times in scripture, it could be that this food was so nourishing that it literally sustained him that long, what I think we're supposed to take away from this is that God's food, God's nourishment, lasts, it sustains, even in the trials and tribulations of life.

Even though he's been nourished by God, there is still a good deal of 'noise' for Elijah. He's still being pursued by Jezebel's assassins, he's still fearing for his life, he's still on the run. He's still discouraged that his preaching appears to have been ineffectual and fallen on deaf ears (pun not intended). And while hiding, Elijah, somehow, hears the word of God instructing him to stand and look, for God is about to pass by.

And here's where the volume increases.

While Elijah is standing there, waiting and anticipating God to pass by, there is first a great wind. So strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks. A wind so loud that it would have demanded the attention of Elijah's 'noisy' mind. Surely this powerful wind must have been God, after all, God being all powerful would be present in this way...except God wasn't in the wind.

Next there was an earthquake. An uncontrollable force, a force which demands our humility, a force that is larger than what we can comprehend acting on a scale that so much larger than we're familiar with. An earthquake which must have rumbled at the lower frequencies of hearing. Surely God must be in the earthquake...but no, God was not present in this way.

And after the earthquake was a great fire. Relentless and primal, burning without mercy, consuming, and reducing everything to ash. A fire that must have roared as it burnt. Surely God, who's been referred to as a refiner's fire, who led the Hebrews through the desert in a column of fire, surely God must have been there...and no, God wasn't there.

And after all this was the sound of sheer silence. <pause> A sheer, piercing, commanding silence.

And when Elijah, ironically, heard it. He covered his face, and went out to meet God.

God wasn't in the noise. God wasn't in the wind, the earthquake, or the fire. God was not in the great big noisy events. God was in the silence.

How often do we look for God in the noise of the world? We want God to be in the big, the spectacular, the awe inspiring moments. We want God to act in the grand gestures. We want God to appear and dare I suggest prove God's existence through miracles, signs, and wonders. Because we're impressed by the spectacular, the grand, the bombastic, and yet, in this story, and in others, God appears in the silence in the stillness.

Maybe it's because we live in such a 'noisy' world that we seek the stillness and silence of the wilderness to re center ourselves. Maybe that's why places like Camp Valaqua are so

important. But I wonder, how can we find those retreats in the everyday? How can we find that stillness, that silence for the in-between times? Certainly they quick response for us, is to go to one of the many green spaces in the city be in touch with nature again. But I think it's more than that which we are longing for, it's more than just that which we need to quiet the 'noise' in our lives.

Questions that arise for me when thinking about this are: How do we still the 'noise' so that we can hear the voice of God? How do we listen for the voice of God, in amongst the 'noisiness'? I've often talked about my home as my sanctuary, the place I go for quiet and stillness, I suspect that won't be the case for much longer, but it's something I've appreciated, and when that stillness, that silence is violated, either by an idling engine, or a slamming door, or an airplane overhead, I do get annoyed. I wonder for you, what or where's your sanctuary? Your place of stillness or quiet?

The church is sometimes talked about as a place of rest. There is an old gospel hymn that begins with, "there is a place of quiet rest, near to the heart of God." Perhaps a calling of the church is to grow into being a space where people can find that stillness, where the church can become a less 'noisy' place to hear God's calling in their lives? A...sanctuary perhaps?

I also think about the church as a place of discernment, and I wonder how we can create space for silence, and for a listening to God as you/we make decisions together? What might it look like to build in times of silent prayer before voting on decisions, big and small? Building in a time to pause and to purposefully pray and listen for the voice and leading of God?

I also think about the church as a place of encountering God. Another interesting piece that I noticed in this story. At the end, Elijah was expecting God to pass by. Elijah was expecting to encounter God, so Elijah was listening for it. He was tuned, and anticipating God. I wonder, how we can adopt that attitude of expectation? Another one of our hymns has the stanza, 'we expect you this glad hour.' What might it mean to purposefully create space so the small, still quiet voice of God can speak to God's people? And, what might it look like for us to begin to expect this to occur? Or maybe I'm assuming something, maybe I need to ask, do we still expect God to show up?

I believe that God is still active in the world. I believe that through the movement of the Holy Spirit God is still present and involved in creation, God's good creation. And whether we notice it or not, whether we're looking for it or not, God is present. Our challenge, as a missional people, is to notice, see, discover where God is at work and join in with that work. To do that, however, we need to be looking for it, expecting it, and listening for it, that second Pentecost miracle.

We are surrounded by so much 'noise' some of it our own doing, some of it is our environment. Into the 'noise' of our lives, God still speaks. Sometimes loudly, but, more often, quietly. Elijah reminds us that God is not necessarily present in the big, large and spectacular. Rather, God is sometimes present in the quiet, still, small, and silent parts of our lives. God's challenge to us, is to make space, and to tune our ears, and our attitudes, to anticipate and expect that voice of God. Because God does speak, we only have to listen for it.

Amen