

Eric Dupee

August 8, 2021

1Kings 19:1-13a

“The Sound of Silence”

Recently, I spent time with some friends. They have one of these voice-activated, smart speakers in their home. Do you know what I’m talking about? It’s a speaker that’s tied into the internet. It can control the lights in your house. It’s this speaker that sits on your kitchen counter or somewhere else. When you command it to do something, it obeys.

We could walk into the house and my friend could said, “Alexa, play a song by James Taylor.” Immediately, you’d hear the words “Playing James Taylor” and before you know it, you’re singing along to the music... “In my mind, I’m going to Carolina.”

This voice activation is incredible. If you say, “Alexa, turn up the volume,” the music gets louder. You can say, “Alexa, dim the lights,” and the lights go dim. You can say, “Alexa, set an alarm for 7:15am tomorrow morning,” and that system will get you up at 7:15am.

These devices just seem to wait until they hear a voice. When they hear a voice and understand the command, they do what they’re told. The technology is amazing. It’s changing everything, but what if I said to you God desires human beings to live a voice activated life? Shouldn’t the voice of God have that same effect on each of us?

In our reading today, the prophet Elijah learns to be voice activated. It happened when he tried to recreate the experience of Moses on Mt. Sinai centuries earlier. Notice the similarities in the two stories. Elijah goes on a wilderness journey of forty days and forty nights to “Horeb the mount of God.” Horeb was an alternative name for Mt. Sinai.

The period of forty days and forty nights, suggests the time Moses spent on the same mountain, where he encountered God. While on the mountain, Elijah comes to a cave, which harkens back to the “cleft in the rock” where Moses stood as God passed by.

The other similarity in the stories of Moses and Elijah was the dramatic natural phenomena. In the case of Moses, the mountain was wrapped in smoke. God descended to the mountain from the heavens in fire. After Moses spoke, God answered from thunder.

In Elijah's story, there was a great wind strong enough to break rocks, after the wind an earthquake, and after the earthquake a fire. God wasn't in any of those dramatic occurrences. However, after the fire, there came "a sound of sheer silence." Other ways the Hebrew has been translated include "a voice of thin stillness" or "a soft murmuring sound."

The point is that it wasn't the dramatic acts of nature that were most important. It was the still, small voice of God. It would be the words God speaks that would sustain Elijah and allow him to fulfill his mission.

It was the same for Moses. He received the Law and the Ten Commandments on Mt. Sinai. God was in the fire and the thunder, but the most important thing about that experience was the word Moses received. Only Moses heard God's audible voice, but just like an author finds his or her voice, God found the divine voice in the writing down of the Law. God's voice was etched in stone in the form of the Ten Commandments.

How would God bring about God's purposes and care for all of creation. It was through voice activation. The idea was that God would give the commands and the people would obey. If they were to keep the commandments, the commandments would keep them. The only question was would humankind hear God's voice and actually respond?

There was something I noticed about the smart speaker at my friend's house. Alexa never said "no." Alexa never outright ignored a command. Alexa never said "I'm too busy." Alexa never said "I don't feel like it." If Alexa responded in those kinds of ways, the whole smart speaker thing would be useless.

Imagine the impact on God when we respond to God's voice in those ways. God spoke through the Law of Moses. God spoke through the prophets and still speaks through prophets today. God commanded us to do things through Jesus and through the scriptures. I believe that, from the beginning, God intended human beings to be voice activated creatures. Otherwise, we are no more use to God than a smart speaker that picks and chooses which commands to obey.

God wasn't in the powerful wind, or the earthquake, or the fire, but in the still small voice of God. Hebrew Bible scholar, Jon Levenson, writes, "Elijah must learn to heed the almost imperceptible signal within and not rely on the dramatic intervention of God." For Elijah to continue his mission as a prophet

of God, he would need to be voice activated. He would need to be attentive to the voice of God, which can be very quiet and hard to perceive.

Recently, I was asked how I ended up coming to First Parish. When I reflected on it, I realized there was no bolt of lightning. There wasn't any miraculous sign. It started with an inkling. Someone on the search committee might have made an offhand comment that led me to think maybe God is leading me in this direction.

As God continues to speak to us, it may be that all we get to go on is a still small voice, "the sound of sheer silence." If that's the case, we need to be like those voice activated smart speakers. They're always ready for the sound of a voice. When that voice comes, they react.

Are you listening? Hearing God's voice might require some things of us. It might require us to be still at times. What's the first thing we do when we strain to hear a faint sound? We stand perfectly still. The more still we are, the easier it is to hear. God instructed Elijah to go out and stand on the mountain before the Lord. The instruction was to stand still so he wouldn't miss God's voice.

That's one thing I love about gathering for worship. It forces us to be still for a short time. Hopefully, it allows us to still the thoughts that constantly run through our minds and to be receptive to the voice of God. It's really a way of being attentive.

There's a Zen story about a man who one day asked a Zen master whether she would write down a few sentences of the highest wisdom for him. The Zen master took a brush and wrote the word "attentiveness."

The man asked whether that was all; would she not write some more? Then she wrote the same word again. The man was disappointed and said that he still didn't understand neither the excellence nor depth in what the Master had written. She wrote the word a third time. Close to anger, the man wondered what the word "attentiveness" was supposed to mean. The master answered, "Attentiveness means attentiveness."

I think much of what we do in the church is about learning to be attentive to God's voice. It's why we read scripture in worship and engage in Bible study. Prayer is another way we listen for the voice of God. Prayer is really about two-way communication. It's about being attentive, because when we hear that voice, we can do the things God wants us to do and be the people God wants us to be.

Elijah was at the end of his rope. In despair, he asked that he might die. Then, he fell asleep under a bush. An angel touched Elijah on the shoulder and told him to get up and eat. He did what he was told. Afterwards, he wandered in the wilderness forty days, until he stood on the mountain and encountered the still, small voice of God.

That's when God instructed him to anoint the next king over Israel and to anoint a prophet to succeed him. Elijah heard the voice of God and responded. Therefore, God was able to use Elijah to bring about divine purposes. That's the power of a voice activated person!

When we're voice activated, God can use us: "Be still and know that I am God (Psalm 46:10)." "What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God (Micah 6:8)." Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest (Matthew 11:28)."

Today, they make voice activated phones for the blind. If you find it too much effort to sit on the couch and use a remote control, there are voice activated televisions. There's a voice activated trash can. If you agree with me that voice activation is incredibly useful, guess what. God has been using voice activation since the beginning.

God has spoken. It's time to act.