

## *The Sounds of Silence*

A Sermon by *the Rev. Dr. Joseph David Stinson*,  
Glen Ridge Congregational Church, Glen Ridge, New Jersey,  
*Preached at the Chapel Service on the 12<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time, (20June), 2010.*

Text: 1Kings 19:11b-12

“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.”

This famous story of Elijah—his defeat of the 400 prophets of Baal on Mt. Carmel, his fear of the Philistine Queen Jezebel, his flight to Mt. Sinai where he heard the still small voice of God directing him—is many things. As I read it this week I was struck by the way the New Revised Standard Version translated what was traditionally the ‘still small voice.’ The reader learns that God was not in the wind, the earthquake, or the fire, but rather in the *sound of sheer silence*. This new translation of the verse made me think the great story might be at one level about how we hear God and how God communicates to us.

If we think about God’s communication in the customary way we think probably of things like the wind splitting trees, earthquakes rolling boulders, fire consuming everything in sight. But what if that is not where God is and how God communicates? Those things are just attention-getting special effects. What if God is *in the sound of sheer silence*? Silence and listening have greater power than we know. Not long after I had become a minister, I went to see a new parishioner who had a serious problem. As she explained it to me I listened, not quite knowing what to say. I was so inexperienced and truthfully didn’t have a solution. I was quite overcome by the enormity of her predicament. I prayed for her and she said, “Thank you, you have helped me more than you know.” Because I was still learning to be a minister I asked, “How?” And she replied, “You *listened* to me and then you prayed for me.” Listening ought to be the first posture of one wanting to hear from God. But so often we think we have to have all those special effects for God to be involved. Maybe we ought to ignore all that stuff and just listen to each other and for God?

My friend Daley sent me an article by the late Rev. John Gaynor Banks. Banks was an Episcopal clergyman who helped found the *Order of St. Luke*, an organization in his church which promotes and teaches about healing prayer. Mr. Banks’ ideas relate directly to our topic this morning on how God gets through to us.<sup>1</sup> He wrote about intercessory prayer which is not as easy as we think. It is a form of prayer which Jesus encouraged all of his disciples to practice, but it is an odd thing. How do you pray for someone who is ill or who has been in an automobile

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<sup>1</sup> Banks, John Gaynor. *How to Pray for Others*. Sharing: A Journal of Christian Healing, May/June 2010, p. 7.

accident or who is serving in the military in a dangerous place? Banks wrote, “Stop for a moment and ask yourself just what you are going to say to God.”<sup>2</sup> Are you going to tell God about each of these persons and their problems? God already knows! How can you speak to God in prayer about these persons and their needs in a way that will be helpful to them? Banks recommended,

First, get quiet. This might take two or three minutes. Rushing into God’s presence is not the ideal way. Say something like this to [God]: “O God, take these few minutes of my time and accept my desire to help these, thy servants.” The keynote of prayer is this opening quietness: “Speak, Lord, for Thy servant heareth.” We reverse the order many times and say, “Listen, Lord, for Thy servant speakest.” Offer your love, your will, your time..., your imagination to God on behalf of those for whom you pray. Put some sacrifice into it.<sup>3</sup>

Banks said the next step is to think about God as light. Focus your attention Godward and think about God in terms of light. The Bible teaches, “*God is light and in him is no darkness at all.*”<sup>4</sup> Try to imagine your friends for whom you are praying in that light. “Don’t ask God anything; don’t tell [God] anything; don’t beg ... for anything. Just bring the person in thought and imagination and lift him [or her] into that light. You are looking away from self and into the Love of God.”<sup>5</sup>

One more interesting thing Banks taught. There is a tendency to focus on the sickness or the trouble, but that is the wrong approach, he said. “Look away from the disease of the problem and look up to God.”<sup>6</sup> He quoted the Lord’s Prayer: “Thy will be done on earth—here and now—as it is in heaven.” The point is ‘to bring your friend by your prayer into the presence of Jesus’ that God may take care of him or her.

We so often think if God acts or communicates it will be in something like wind, fire, and earthquakes. Usually we are the ones making all the sound and fury to convince ourselves and others we *have* God. But what if God acts in the sound of silence? What if God communicates when we ignore the pyrotechnics and background noise and sit quietly in a posture of listening? Elijah had just been through a spectacular event on Mt. Carmel with the fire from heaven being called down.<sup>7</sup> Afterwards the drama increased when Jezebel wanted to chase him down. He was frightened, not sure what to do next. He knew God had a plan for him but how could he listen? All he could think about was Jezebel’s goons galloping behind him to cut off his head. The

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

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> 1John 1:5.

<sup>5</sup> Banks, *op cit*, 8.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> 1Kings 18:36-39.

noises and fear in his head were drowning out God's still small voice. There was earthquake, wind and fire! How to hear God? Elijah had to be quiet and come out of the cave where he had been hiding. He had to come into the presence of God, and *listen*.

End

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