

40 Days of Prayer and Fasting

October 28th

Daily Devotional #28

We Are in the Season of Listening

As We Ask, "What Is GOD Preparing Us/for Us to Do?"

Today's devo takes us back to "Pilgrim Heart" by Darryl Tippins, and his look at the surprising paradox of what we often find in Listening: Silence as the Presence of GOD...

("Pilgrim Heart", Chapter 10, "Listening: Within the Deep Stream of Silence", pgs. 125 & 126)
(all Scripture quoted from NRSV)

Elijah's remarkable encounter with GOD is illustrative. In flight from his mortal enemy Jezebel, depressed and desperately forsaken (so it seemed to him), Elijah retreated to Mt. Horeb. And there in solitude he heard a voice: "Go out and stand on the mountain before the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by" (1 Kings 19:11). Elijah did so, and he was treated to a magnificent light-and-sound show that would have astonished a Las Vegas impresario:

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. (1 Kings 19:11–12)

Elijah met GOD, not in dazzling special effects, but in a way no movie director or rock musician could imagine. The LORD of the universe came to Elijah in the ensuing silence. The Hebrew phrase found in 19:12 – rendered as "a sound of sheer silence" or as "a still small voice" – presents a difficult challenge to the translator. How does one convey the paradox and the mystery implicit in this phrase? What is a "sound" of "silence"? What is this speaking silence, this "thin voice of silence," as one commentator renders it? We are stretching towards a mysterious reality, quite beyond anything the cleverest communicator can devise.

Most people understand one kind of silence: a negative silence signifying emptiness, abandonment, or relational failure, when one hopes for a message (an expression of love, an apology, a blessing) but receives none. Yet "the silent treatment" is not the only possibility.

There is another kind of silence, a positive stillness honored throughout Scripture. This second kind of silence is, paradoxically, a positive form of communication. It is

seen in the quiet communion of lover and beloved when words become superfluous. It is felt in the whispers of a mother as she consoles her child. It is known in the resonant hush as one walks alone in nature. Potentially, there is spiritual meaning in these kinds of silence. Elijah encountered a speaking silence, a silence so pregnant that it pulsed with the presence of the Holy One of Israel. Wherever the silence is found, it can lead to the awareness of GOD:

“Be still and know that I am GOD!” (Psalm 46:10)

“Be silent before the LORD GOD!” (Zephaniah 1:7)

“But the LORD is in His holy temple; let all the earth keep silence before Him!” (Habakkuk 2:20)

“Never be rash with your mouth, nor let your heart be quick to utter a word before GOD, for GOD is in heaven, and you are upon earth; therefore, let your words be few.” (Ecclesiastes 5:2)

Through the centuries spiritually mature disciples have known the necessity of this kind of silence. Søren Kierkegaard once that people commonly suppose that the most important thing in prayer is to concentrate upon what one is praying for:

Yet in the true, eternal sense it is just the reverse: the true relation in prayer is not when GOD hears what is prayed for, but when the person praying continues to pray until he is the one who hears, who hears what GOD wills. The “immediate” person, therefore... makes demands in his prayers; the true man of prayer only attends.

...Remembering Jesus’ prayer vigils, we might consider whether Jesus actually delivered a continuous monologue throughout the night, or whether He might have contemplated and listened as well. Listening prayer may also explain why the prayers of Jesus recorded in the Gospels – even the one in John 17 – are not very long. Perhaps Jesus’ prayer vigils were marked by periods of intense listening for the will of GOD.

It may well be that the deepest form of prayer begins when we run out of things to say...