**Sounds of Silence**

**Luke 5:12-16**

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 Some of you may remember that last summer, Em, my soon to be high school senior, and I went on a grand adventure exploring several of the National Parks out west. One afternoon, while we were staying in Moab, Utah, we drove up out of town along a narrow dirt road above a river canyon. We were on a journey to find some of the ancient petro glyphs in that area. All we knew was that somewhere there was a boulder with early drawings from the native people who had lived there centuries before.

 After several false alarms (there were a lot of boulders to choose from), we finally found the one we were looking for. Under the hot Utah sun, we checked out ancient drawings of animals and people, of dancing and birthing, carved into the rock – a permanent record of a people who lived long, long ago. Pretty soon, Em went off to explore the canyon while I sat in the shade of the boulder. And that’s when something extraordinary happened. After a few minutes of resting on the rocks, I began to realize that there was absolutely no noise. I was sitting in total silence – no airplanes or air conditioners, no voices or music or traffic sounds, no buzzing or ringing of phones, not even the call of a bird or the sound of the wind. Nothing but absolute silence.

 Honestly, it took me by surprise. Yet, it was, without doubt, a God moment. Because with all the distractions gone, leaning on a boulder in this breathtakingly beautiful and holy place, held in this sacred silence, the presence of God was almost palpable. As if God were the very air that surrounded me, the very earth that I was sitting on, completely occupying the void left when all the sounds stopped.

 I couldn’t help but think of this passage from I Kings that we heard a few minutes ago. God calls to Elijah and tells him to go stand on a mountain and wait for God to come. And so Elijah waits. Out on the mountainside, a powerful wind blows through, so powerful that it shatters rocks on the mountainside. But, God is not in the wind. Then, an earthquake shakes the very ground the mountain is on, and still God isn’t there. And then a fire sweeps through, but God is not in the fire either. God is not in the wind or the earthquake or the fire. God is in the sheer silence that follows.

 Since that day above the canyon in Moab, I’ve thought a lot about how unusual it is for us to experience that kind of intense silence – a silence in which we can encounter God. In 2011, the World Health Organization issued a report in which they spoke of noise pollution as a modern plague -citing overwhelming evidence that exposure to environmental noise has adverse effects on health. Our lives are filled with noise – lawn mowers and jack hammers, piped in music in the grocery store, podcasts on our iPods, children crying, dogs barking, phones ringing. In many ways, I think we have come to depend on the constant presence of sound to distract us – to provide a sort of buffer between our lives and our emotions.

 There is so much going on in our world all the time. It can be difficult to engage when terrorist attacks seem to happen almost weekly and the news is filled with questions about the future of our country and the ethics of our politicians. Meanwhile, we pour so much of ourselves into our work and our families that we are exhausted. Even the service we offer, our acts of kindness in mission work and outreach, can leave us drained.

 I wonder if all the noise has become a way of protecting ourselves when what we really long for, what will restore us and refresh us is quiet time with God. As is so often true, Jesus offers us some insight into this. Over and over again, throughout the gospels, Jesus leaves the disciples and the crowds which follow him so that he can retreat into quiet. Oftentimes, he does this after he has performed a miracle - like healing the man with leprosy - as if he has just given so much, poured out so much of himself and his love, that he has to step away from the crowds to be restored and strengthened in God’s presence. Yet, we also see Jesus withdraw to quiet places when he is making important decisions, when he is grieving over the beheading of John the Baptist, when he is preparing for his arrest and execution. In fact, there are at least a dozen times in the gospel of Mark alone when Jesus separates himself from those around him to find a place of prayerful silence.

 And he not only seeks out silence for himself. He teaches his disciples to do the same, saying in Mark 6, “Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest.”

 Rather than avoiding silence, Jesus seeks out quiet time because in the silence, he finds God and the assurance he is loved. In moments of quiet, he becomes grounded again in God and in his mission to be God’s love in the world.

 Have you ever noticed that while sometimes silence can feel awkward or uncomfortable, there are some people with whom it feels totally natural? Long-time friends, family members, or life partners, they are the people whose love we do not doubt. And so we don’t have to do or say anything when we are with them. We can simply be.

 That is the love Jesus finds in silent moments with God. And that same love, God’s unconditional love, is there for us, too. When the noise clutters our souls as well as grates on our nerves, in silence, we, like Jesus, can feel the assurance of God’s love, nudging us toward what we need to do to live more fully, more joyfully. In silence, we can feel God’s peace – a peace so much greater than anything the world has to offer us because it is grounded in absolute acceptance, unconditional love. And in silence, we can tap into God’s strength – strength to live as our authentic selves, strength to tackle the injustices of the world, strength to forgive those who have hurt us, strength to step back into the constant flow of activity and noise but remain grounded in a God who is so much bigger than anything we fear, any worry we have, any challenge we face.

 Not only do periods of quiet strengthen our spiritual selves but our physical selves, as well. Recent scientific studies have shown that silence lowers blood pressure and decreases stress. Just a few moments of quiet each day can lead to better sleep, improved memory, and increased brain growth. We need to remove ourselves from the din – from the music and the television, the phone calls and the chatter – in order to rest in the comfort of God’s love.

 We are in the early days of summer – a time when often the pace of our lives slows down a little bit. The days are longer, schedules seem to have a bit more stretch and flexibility. If you find yourself hoping to come out of this summer feeling rested and refreshed, perhaps this is a good time to consider how you can incorporate a few moments of quiet in your life. You may not be able to make your way to the mountains like Elijah or to the high canyons of Utah, but somewhere, sometime in the busyness and buzz of your life there is a space for you to spend some quiet time with God.

 You may have to start small – turn off the radio while you’re driving to work or turn off the television while you’re doing the dishes. Or, perhaps you can give it a little more time and go for a walk in the woods, spend a few moments in prayer here in the sanctuary, or get up early and take a time of quiet breathing or meditation in the early morning before your family wakes up. If you’re really enthusiastic about this, you could even follow the monastic tradition of a great silence – total silence from evening until morning – a period you enter and finish with prayer.

 May this summer be a time when you find a way to work a bit of silence into your life. Open yourself to encountering God. And may you find that when you stop and listen, God is already there, in the very air that surrounds you, the very earth where you stand, completely occupying the void left when all the sounds stopped, just waiting for you to claim God’s love, compassion, and peace.

Amen.