

Proper 7 C 2010

1 Kings 19:1-15a
Psalm 42
Galatians 3:23-29
Luke 8:26-39

This news story
Really gave me pause.
I hardly know what to say.

Disasters are everywhere –
Floods and oil spills
And fire and rain –
And in the midst of all this,
A fierce thunderstorm
In deepest Ohio
In which lightning struck
A 64 foot statue of Jesus
And set it ablaze and burned it to the ground,
Leaving only a heap of twisted metal,
And, oddly,
A lot of foam.
Foam?

What is your Jesus made of?

Can he stand secure
Against lightning, wind and rain?

Where is God in the midst of lightning,
Wind and rain?
In the midst of oil spills,
Faltering economies,
And an uncertain future?

Where and who is God?
How do we find God?
Can we go up the mountain,
Like Elijah,

And discover God?

Elijah was on the run –
On the run from a tyrant
And his tartar wife
Who were looking to kill him.

He ran straight into the wilderness,
And up the holy mountain,
And there he witnessed something
That has made us stop and wonder ever since.

Elijah had been accustomed to believe
That God is a God of power.
And that is true.

What Elijah did not know,
What Elijah was given grace to understand,
Is that God is also a God
Of no power.

Earthquake, wind, and fire –
All of them were understood
To be signs of God's action in the world.
But Elijah let them all pass by.

He did not know
What he was waiting for.
But when he encountered the sound of sheer silence,
The still small voice,
Then he knew
It was that voice that answered all the longing within him,
And he went out to meet the holy.

Stillness, silence,
And the encounter with the holy.
How often does that happen
In the midst of a world

Addicted to noise and action
And quick cuts –
A world on the run from fear and death?

Our addictions
And our desperate struggle
To avoid the pain of a changing world
Are legion.

In ways we would never want to think of,
We are more like the desperate man
In today's gospel
Than we would care to admit.

Naked against the cold of the world,
With no shelter from the winds of change,
Tormented by demons,
We wander in a daze,
Until help comes.

Now, we can go into our heads here,
And approach this story
From a very rational angle.
We know, of course,
That demon possession
Is the way the people of Jesus' time,
And the people for centuries before and after,
Described the anguish of mental illness.
We have a different understanding now,
And a different approach.

But to stop there
And keep the story at arm's length
Is to miss the still small voice
That invites us to go deeper.

Now some of us have suffered the pain
Of this man whose name is Legion,

And some of us have suffered
With the pain of those we love,
And some of us
Have been spared this pain,
And know other pain.

For each of us,
There is something here.
For each of us,
There is earthquake,
Wind and rain
That threaten our lives
And beat down our doors.

And for each of us,
There is a still small voice that beckons,
If we can only hear the silence.

Silence is gone from our world.
Listen.
Can you hear it?

Some of you will know
Of the quest of one
So-called acoustic ecologist
Who seeks to preserve
One square inch of silence
In a noisy world.ⁱ

This requires great effort,
Petitioning airlines and negotiating with countless officials.
But the quest is worth the effort.

He describes the quest for silence
As an awakening joy,
A place of communion.

Listening to silence is not absence,

But presence.

One square inch of silence
In a world of noise.
How little we value it,
Even when we call it God's first language,
Even when we sing about the still small voice of calm.

A stillness, a quiet,
A peace within.
This is a longing
We cannot even remember,
Many of us.
And yet it remains.

Silence is the sign and symbol
Of the peace
That passes understanding,
A peace that comes from the presence of God.

The world is beyond our control,
Within and without.
There is nothing we can do
To stop the flood, the spill,
The violence,
The sickness,
The pain of those we love
And our own pain.

When we know this,
There is only one choice.
We can let the fear take over,
tear ourselves away,
And flee to the place of death,
Or we can turn to greet the one
Who enters into our pain
And creates within us
A place of calm, and peace,

And healing.

It is hard work to heal.
The man called Legion
Begged Jesus to leave him alone.
He experienced the beginning of his healing as torment.
Change is hard.
And change is scary.
The people of the town
Begged Jesus to leave them.
Because he made them so afraid.

There is always a choice.
A choice to embrace
The square inch of silence
That promises a better world,
The choice to embrace the one
Who can calm our fears and drive away the darkness.

There is a Jesus who is stronger than lightning,
Who is made not of foam and twisted metal,
But of flesh and blood
And the spirit of the living God.

In the presence of Jesus,
All the disquiet,
All those things
That keep us bound and frightened
And hopeless,
All those things flee
And disappear.

How does it happen?
That is a mystery,
A mystery as great
As the silence
That lives on after the storm.
We do not need to explain the mystery,

And rob it of its power.

We are here to stand in awe,
Head bowed,
Before a mystery
That was before us and will remain
When we are gone.

We are here to honor the mystery,
In prayer and bread and wine –
And there is more.

We are a people with a mission.

There are many ways to talk about our mission in the world.
Let's wonder,
Just for today,
If we might talk about our call this way –
We are called to invite and offer,
Through works of healing,
And listening, and love,
Some measure of the peace that passes understanding.

We are called to maintain a square inch of silence
Where God can be at work.

We are called to model
The freedom from fear
That takes Jesus to a place of madness
And, with him, offer quiet and compassion.

We are called to remember
That this is not a final haven,
But a place to gain strength for the journey.

We are a people on a journey,
But we cannot go on
Unless we are fed from within,

From the well of peace
And quiet
That comes from the presence of the holy.

The man who was healed
Wanted to linger
At the side of Jesus.
But he understood
That he was called
To go and bring the good news
To a world
That was waiting to hear.

Listen.
The quiet within him
Is calling to us now.

ⁱ One Square Inch of Silence
One Man's Search for Natural Silence in a Noisy World
Gordon Hempton, John Grossman
Free Press