

1 Kings 19: 11-14
Psalm 46
February 19, 2017
Hamilton Union Presbyterian Church
Music Appreciation Sunday

When I was in elementary school there was one day I dreaded more than nearly any other: Music Appreciation Day. That was the day when we had to go downtown to symphony hall and spend an hour listening to classical music. The atmosphere was electric with hundreds of children who did not want to be there. Between the boring music and the threat of punishment from teachers for wriggling in our seats and elbowing the student next to us, the experience was excruciating. The highlight of every performance was Haydn's "Toy Symphony" which proved that classical music could be "fun."

Ten years later I stumbled across three recordings at a friend's house which his parents let me borrow: Mahler's First Symphony, Brahms' First Symphony and Berlioz' "Symphonie Fantastique." I was enthralled. Thus was launched a love of boring music. What happened?

While I'm not sure that Music Appreciation Day as it was practiced in Cincinnati in the late 1950's and early 1960's was the best approach, on reflection it planted seeds for future awe of the capacity of human beings to express the profoundly rich and complex harmonies and dissonances, rhythms and cadences of the human soul. Such music clearly came from composers who combined intellectual brilliance with a profound sense of the bottomless depth of human life. You might be surprised that most of the great composers whose music has touched and transformed lives for centuries were what we would call troubled and complicated people. There were no medicines for depression and other psychological illnesses. The word used to describe the range of emotional and psychological disturbance was "melancholy."

It is the capacity to experience and express the depth of human suffering with compassion and delicacy that bridges the gap of isolation between the anguish of one individual to another. It is the capacity not to distance from suffering but to listen attentively that gives that

suffering voice and paradoxically provides a lifting of spirit which comes from being heard and understood.

The most moving music to me is sacred music. No other human expression communicates so deeply to me and, I believe, to many of you. For sacred music does more than express the depth of human sorrow. It speaks to the powerful source of a spiritual power which transforms suffering into patient endurance and blossoms into the joyful trust that there is a power far greater than human suffering. We call that blossoming hope—the bedrock trust that life is in the end an experience of triumph and redemption, of life over death.

You will not offend me if, when you are sad or worried or confused or feeling lost, you don't go to your carefully preserved files of Stewart's sermons for solace and reassurance. But you might sing a hymn. You might listen to music. You might walk in the woods and listen for the wind dancing in the trees and the songs of birds.

From where do we get this capacity to hear and be touched by music? How do we gain access to the capacity to be open and moved

by the wonderful, complex, often conflicted expression of one human soul in such a way that it touches our hearts and, in the beautiful words of The Book of Common Prayer, helps us to be lifted up above our darkness and distress into the light and peace of God's presence?

It begins with silence.

The tragic truth is that most people in American culture have no idea what silence is. I suspect we are intimidated by silence which is why so many of us are so busy running from one thing to the next. It is why so many people cannot be without their smart phones and cannot miss the latest text message. It is why we are so addicted to the drama of breaking news or enthralled by scandal. We are addicted to being stimulated.

Elijah is feeling driven and persecuted. He is exhausted and burned out. He is led to a mountain cave. If you ever want to experience silence go to a cave. There is no more deafening silence than that in the depths of the earth. In the cave Elijah hears a voice which asks him, "What are you doing here?" Without the silence I don't

think Elijah hears the question. The driven-ness of American culture is so extreme that most people don't even think to ask, "What *am* I doing here? Is this the true path for my life?" How would we respond to such a question?

What follows next is a moment of grace. The voice calls Elijah to come to the entrance of the cave. Then comes a wonderful and awesome call and response.

Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting the mountains.

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.

We are used to the translation of this last line being "a still small voice." Yet I like this rendering as it captures the stunning contrast between the terrible roar of the natural elements and the experience when it all comes to a sudden stop. I propose to you that the sound of sheer silence is the sound of God. It is the sound that existed before

creation. It is the setting for all meaningful communion with God and the source of our capacity to be in touch with the deepest things of life. It is the sound of our own souls—that in us which is of God. It is what allows us to respond to the soul of another and thus to be touched and moved by music.

It is the proposal of many neurologists that before there was speech there was music and singing. Music comes from the intuitive dimension of the brain. Music bypasses the analytical, logical function and connects soul with soul. Yet even the most beautiful music cannot speak to us if we do not have the capacity to be silent. Without an inner silence we will experience sounds entering our ears and going no further.

Silence is in truth the refuge of our lives. It is the salvation of our souls. It is what helps us to recognize that God is not in the drama. God is in the silence. God *is* the silence. It is how David knows that God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. When we abide

in the silence and know we are in the presence of God we know we are safe. All the violent storms of life cannot move us.

It takes intention and practice to cultivate silence. It is some of the hardest spiritual work we can do. But it pays so many dividends! It is how we can sense God's still small voice in the clamor of life—in the voice of another human being, and in the music which comes from the heart of God. Amen.