

## “The Sound Of Silence”

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I Kings 19:1-3, 8 and I Kings 19:9a, 11-15a = listening for God

Paul Simon’s greatest hit is and always will be *“The Sounds of Silence.”* It is so clearly a reference to our verse 12 today:

“and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence.”



The phrase “sheer silence,” or more familiarly the “still, small voice” is notoriously hard to translate. In the original Hebrew it is a paradox, an oxymoron, literally the “loud whisper” or the “great, small voice.”



Paul Simon’s song has been called “the quintessential folk rock release.”<sup>1</sup> It has perfectly captured a vision in our world of what Elijah experienced on Mt. Horeb in his encounter with God.<sup>2</sup> Each verse ends with “the sounds of silence.”

Unbelievably, “*The Sounds of Silence*” almost did not get released. Simon and Garfunkel had been singing together since Middle School. They had been met with little or no interest in a time when the recording industry was stuck in 50’s Rockabilly. The world was not yet ready for folk music.



They had put together a demo tape only grudgingly accepted. Columbia released it, but it flopped. Simon and Garfunkel broke up. Garfunkel took a day job. Simon was off to England to “find himself.”

Totally unannounced, Columbia rereleased “*The Sounds of Silence*” as a single, now overdubbed with drums, electric guitar and bass. It was an immediate hit. The rest as they say is history.



The experience of getting that wonderful song published parallels perfectly Elijah fleeing for his life to the Sinai after his greatest triumph had turned to failure. He was in desperate straits:



“for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away.”

Consecrated to God’s justice, Elijah now had to “find himself.” He needed soul sustenance. He needed to recover his call from God. So Elijah went ‘walkabout.’ 40 days crossing the desert, a serious retreat.

Almost all reformers are disheartened sooner or later ~ almost all who seek to transform what is into what God wants it to be ~ everyone who seeks to advance God’s kinship community ~ every prophet sooner or later ends up on Mt. Horeb seeking a word from YHWH.

All we who seek to be provocateurs for God’s realm must return to the mountaintop time and again ~ return to the source to “find ourselves,” for soul sustenance. If you haven’t found yourself needing this, you’ve either never risked yourself for God’s cause or you have given up at your first failure.

Everyone who has accomplished something great has experienced failure.



Michael Jordan was cut from his high school basketball team. Albert Einstein didn’t speak until he was almost 4 and his teachers told his parents he would “never amount to much.” Walt Disney was fired from a newspaper for “lacking imagination” and “having no original ideas.” Oprah Winfrey was demoted as news anchor because she was judged “[un]fit for television. The Beatles were rejected by Decca Records who said the Beatles had “no future in show business.”

Yet the closest parallel to Elijah on Mt. Horeb is Steve Jobs. Jobs after his great success, the triumph of founding and building Apple Computers until it was a household name, at age 30, he was summarily fired from his very own company. He was left devastated and depressed. He

went 'walkabout.' He needed soul sustenance. He needed to recover his calling. 40 days crossing the desert to climb that mountain again.

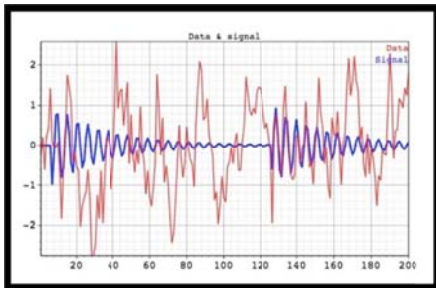
**E**lijah had experienced God's majesty and power many times, but he was ill prepared for what he experienced on the mountain then ~ the same mountain where Moses had met God in the burning bush, where Moses had heard God speak in the "great, small voice," the selfsame mountain around which the wandering Israelites had encamped while Moses brought down the tablets of the Covenant.



Elijah may have been ready for the wind, he may even have come expecting the earthquake and the fire, but how could he have possibly anticipated God in the "sheer silence?"



**I**n all forms of broadcasting and data-transmission, one of the most critical issues is the signal-to-noise ratio. In AM radio and other analog systems, if noise exceeds the signal, then the signal is lost. What we hear fades to static. FM and digital systems are more advanced with technology to help filter through the noise, but even those systems have their limits.



Dirk Gently, the psychic detective in Douglas Adams' novel *The Long Dark Tea-Time of the Soul* had just such a noisesome static moment. He was thinking on songs:

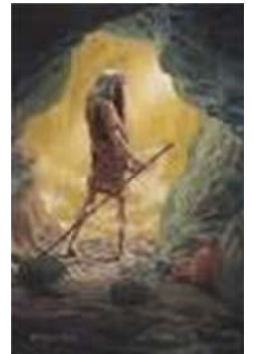


"Another tiny note sang in the back of Dirk's mind and then was lost in the hubbub.

[Dirk] wondered for a moment what it was like to be a whale. ... [What] he was thinking of, in fact, was the whales' songs. In the past the whales had been able to sing to each other across whole oceans, even from one ocean to another because sound travels such huge distances underwater. But now, again because of the way in which sound travels, there is no part of the ocean that is not constantly jangling with the hubbub of ships' motors, through which it is now virtually impossible for the whales to hear each other's songs...

But for a moment Dirk had a sense of infinite loss and sadness that somewhere amongst the frenzy of information noise that daily rattle[s our lives] he thought he might have heard a few notes that denoted the movements of [God].”<sup>3</sup>

God’s call is so easily drowned out by all the secondary, transient and ephemeral things with which we fill up our lives. If we want to hear God’s voice we have to be prepared to stare into the darkness, to listen for the sheer silence masked by all the static-filled noise.



God spoke to Elijah when he sought God ~ when Elijah needed help, when he needed soul sustenance, when he needed to recover his calling from God. God speaks to us when we seek God in distress and failure. Every one of us has been disheartened at one time or another. All of us who seek to transform what is now into what God wants it to be ~ everyone who seeks God’s kingdom ~ all the prophets sooner or later end up on Mt. Horeb seeking a word from YHWH. All who seek to be provocateurs for God’s new age dawning have to return to the Mountain time and again.



Despite all the vainglorious displays of pious patriotism in the present, even despite popular opinion, God is not in the grand displays. On Mt. Horeb God is not in the wind, earthquake and fire, but God is in the indescribable silence which follows. Society and we ourselves generate enough wind and enough earthquake and enough fire to fill up all the oceans with noise, but God is not in those but rather in the silence in between.

It is true: “there is no music without the rests.” There is no sign without silence. There is no Word without stillness. Maybe the contrast between the loud and soft, between the noise and the signal, is all to make us listen, to make us strain to hear God’s real Word. Maybe that’s the point. Maybe that’s the plan.

The wise learn from failure. The faith-filled return to the mountain. The children of God listen to the silence and stare into the darkness and detect if only for a moment “a few notes that denote the movements of God.”



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<sup>1</sup> Frank Hoffmann, *Encyclopedia of Recorded Sound*, 2nd ed., New York, NY : Routledge, 2005. [ISBN 0-415-93835-X](#). Cf. volume 1 (of two), p.408, article on "Folk Rock"

<sup>2</sup> *Lectionary Homiletics* for August 7. 2011, p. 5

<sup>3</sup> Douglas Adams, *The Long Dark Tea-Time of the Soul*