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Training the Ear of Your Heart

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*He comes to us as one unknown,
A breath unseen, unheard...*

Timothy Dudley-Smith

There was a tiny whispering sound. When Elijah heard this, he hid his face in his cloak and stood at the entrance to the cave.

1 Kings 19: 12b-13a

There was one time that I was sure I was in the presence of God.

I was an altar server at Mass, sitting reverently in a tall wooden chair in the sanctuary and wearing a heavy alb. Out of nowhere, I was startled by a wonderfully refreshing breeze. It was so cool, I could almost drink it. It felt so soothing, I was sure that it had to be the Holy Spirit. I started to get excited. I almost burst into song: “Surely the presence of the Lord is in this place...”¹ In the middle of my reverie, the priest leaned over to me and whispered, “Someone left the back door open and it’s causing a draft. Go close it, please.”

I feel blessed to even be able to share this story with people who will understand. I have friends – perhaps you do, too? – that were I to tell them, “I talked with God today,” they’d shake their heads and say, “Riiiiiiiiight...sure you were.” They wouldn’t believe me without proof.

I’ve always been jealous of the people in the Old Testament. For them, God is so real, so tangible. I’m especially jealous of Gideon, who seemed to get all the signs he wanted from God. “If the fleece is wet and the ground is dry...” “If the fleece is dry but the ground is wet...” Gideon got clear and certain answers to his questions.² Whereas for me, God seems to dwell hidden in subtleties. Or, to quote a music professor of mine, “The Deus is in the details.”

I really wish there was a surefire way to practice listening for God. As a music major, I spent a fair bit of time doing ear training. These days, this means you go to a computer, play a sound file, and then try to write down the notes or rhythms that you

hear. You have to get a sense of how much higher or lower one note is from the note before it. For a lot of beginning music students, this feels impossible. It’s a whole new way to listen – it’s not a muscle that you can flex and just “listen harder.” Someone told me once that it’s like having no sense of colors, and then having to distinguish various shades of green and blue. The only consolation is that you get the answers in the end. You know what you were supposed to hear – which doesn’t seem to happen with God.

I’m reminded of another exercise that I had for a music class. The assignment was to sit alone in a quiet place for thirty minutes, and just listen to see what you can hear. I went to a chapel on campus, one which was usually open but which few people visited. I sat and listened intently. After I got used to the quiet, I could hear my own heart beating and my own breath. The building creaked as it settled in the evening coolness. The wind rustled leaves outside. A few blocks away, a bus pulled up to a stop, and there was a hiss of air as the doors opened. I could even hear the hum of the single electric light in this chapel. Once I started listening, there was a whole new creation out there to hear. I suspect the voice of God is like this new creation. It’s going on constantly – you just have to listen for it. You have to have that power of concentration, like Elijah had, to cut through the noise in the world.

And that’s one reason we’re all here at the School of Theology Seminary. We’ve come because we hope to hear more clearly. In our noisy world, the voices I hear most loudly say things like “It’s all about you – and only you.” They say things like “Blessed are the powerful, the rich, and the famous.” They say, “One person can’t change anything. Don’t even try.” It can be hard to hear the soft, whispery voice of God through this din. But God speaks now, just as at Mount Horeb. God’s power is manifest here in Collegeville just as much as in the world – maybe not through earthquakes and winds, but perhaps through snowstorms and loons instead.

We come to Saint John’s because it is a place more conducive to this kind of listening. Here we have some expert “ear-trainers” to guide us. Spiritual directors abound and are ready to help. And our

¹ Lyrics from the refrain of “Surely the Presence of the Lord” © 1977 by the composer, Lanny Wolfe.

² Judges 6:36-40.

gracious monastic hosts model for us this listening, guided by a Rule that begins with the word “Listen.” I suspect that Elijah was listening with the “ear of his heart” (though he would have been centuries too early to have known that expression.)

However, it’s not enough to just listen to the word of God. We must act on it as well. Like Elijah, we have a tough job ahead of us. It’s more than just a whole lot of reading and too many papers – although that may be part of it for now. But the papers and the work aren’t the end in themselves. God’s soft whisper calls us to be prophets. God has plans for us, as God did for Elijah and Elisha. Like Elijah, we must be ready to die to self. Like Elisha, who boiled his oxen, we must be willing to leave be-

hind a comfortable way of life that we know and follow a God who calls us somewhere we can only imagine.

I wish I could tell you that after a year here I’ve become an expert in listening for God. There are days I feel like I’m making progress...and days where I feel like I’m a beginning music student again, struggling to make sense of anything that I’m hearing. I do, however, take consolation in the fact that I have you all here to listen with me and to encourage me. I’m still trying to listen intently to figure out what exactly God wants me to do in my life. Please pray for me, as I pray for you, that you may hear what God is calling you to do in yours.



“The Face of Jesus”
Photographed by Ahran Huh