

“Be Still: Mental Static”  
1 Kings 19:9-13

In his book *Let Your Life Speak*, Parker Palmer tells about a time in his life when he was discouraged about his vocation. He was in his late thirties and was trying to discern his vocation and what he was supposed to do with his life. He was living in a small Quaker community near Philadelphia. Here is what he said, “If I were to discover a new direction, I thought, it would be at Pendle Hill, a community rooted in prayer, study, and a vision of human possibility. But when I arrived and started sharing my vocational quandary, people responded with a traditional Quaker counsel that, despite all the good intentions, left me even more discouraged. ‘Have faith,’ they said, ‘and *way will open.*’

‘I have faith,’ I thought to myself. ‘What I don’t have is time to wait for “way” to open. I’m approaching middle age at warp speed, and I have yet to find a vocational path that feels right. The only way that’s opened so far is the wrong way.’

After a few months of deepening frustration, I took my troubles to an older Quaker woman well-known for her thoughtfulness and candor. ‘Ruth,’ I said, ‘people keep telling me that “way will open.” Well, I sit in the silence, I pray, I listen for my calling, but way is not opening. I’ve been trying to find my vocation for a long time, and I still don’t have the foggiest idea of what I’m meant to do. Way may open for other people, but it’s sure not opening for me.’

Ruth’s reply was a model of Quaker plain-speaking: ‘I’m a birthright Friend,’ she said somberly, ‘and in sixty-plus years of living, way has never opened in front of me.’ She paused, and I started sinking into despair. Was this wise woman telling me that the Quaker concept of guidance was a hoax? Then she spoke again, this time with a grin: ‘But a lot of way has closed behind me, and that’s had the same guiding effect.’

I laughed with her, laughed loud and long, the kind of laughter that comes when a simple truth exposes your heart for the needlessly neurotic mess it has become. Ruth’s honesty gave me a new way to look at my vocational journey, and my experience has long-since confirmed the lesson she taught me that day: there is as much guidance in what does not and cannot happen in my life as there is in what can and does — maybe more.”

What do you think prevented him from discovering his vocation? What was the internal dialogue that was going on in his head? I think that Parker Palmer, like many of us, was driven by fear and the negative internal commentary that keeps us chasing unrealistic dreams and expectations. Negative self-talk, unrealized dreams, loneliness, fear, worry about the future, and other factors often become the mental static that run our days which prevents us from being able to be still and know the presence of God. Some of these thoughts are based in reality and in our struggles, but the problem is that they rob us of seeing the potential in our future and what God has in store for our future. Do you ever find yourself struggling with such mental static?

The great thing about the Bible is that we can find so many of our human experiences there with people who struggle just like us. Today's Bible story is about the prophet Elijah who found himself in a very tough place in life. He is literally in a cave.

This is the place where the prophet Elijah went to hide as he was running for his life from Queen Jezebel. He was at the end of his rope. The winds of change were blowing in the kingdom of Israel. The new king and his wife Jezebel were power hungry and were trying to prove that the ways of the gods of Baal were better than the ways of the God of Israel. The ways of Baal were the ways of greed and violence and that is how Ahab saw as the way to rule and run the land. Elijah and other prophets like him had spoken the word of God to challenge the dominant truth which Ahab and Jezebel were promoting and proclaiming. As a result, Elijah was being hunted down by the king. Caves were important symbols in our biblical tradition. Caves were used for burial and for refuge. Cave dwellers in the Bible were either dead or running for their lives. In Genesis 23 we hear about Abraham burying his wife Sarah in the cave of Machpelah east of Mamre, that is, Hebron, in the land of Canaan. Lot, Abraham's nephew, went with his daughters to live in a cave in the hills above Zoar because he was afraid to return to town life after the destruction of Sodom and Gamorrah (Genesis 19). The Israelites fled into the caves when oppressed by the Midianites (Judges 6:2) and when they were confronted by the Philistines (1 Samuel 13) David ran away for his life and hid from King Saul in the cave Adullam (1 Samuel 22:1-2). Of course, we are very familiar with the story of Lazarus, the friend of Jesus, who was buried in a cave before Jesus brought him back to life (John 11).

So, when we hear that Elijah was hiding in a cave, we know that he was in serious trouble. We know that his life was on the line and hope for survival was nowhere near that cave. Elijah was facing certain death as he was being hunted down by the king's men. Sitting under the broom tree, he uttered this prayer, "It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors." In other words, "I've had enough, O God, this is way too painful. I can't take it anymore. I'd rather die than live like this. A fugitive's life is no way to live. Please make this pain go away!" He was like Parker Palmer, saying that nothing looked hopeful in his life and that the future looked bleak! But the most interesting part of the story was about to unfold in the quietness and fear of that cave. Elijah who was most likely trained and certainly very experienced in listening to God was trying to listen to God in the normal ways he had heard God's voice before. At first, he thought he would find God's presence and hear God's voice in the great wind, but God was not in the great wind. Wind is usually associated with the power of God. The word in Hebrew for wind in this text is "*ruah*" which is the same word for the Spirit of God which hovered over the watery chaos in Genesis 1. So, this is a great surprise for the Hebrew speakers to hear that God was not present in the great wind. The second element where Elijah looked for God's presence was the earthquake. Divine activity and revelation was often associated in the Bible with the earth shaking. One famous incident is the time when the mountain shook when God gave the Law to Moses and the people of Israel on Mt. Horeb which was the same exact location where Elijah was standing, But again, surprisingly enough, God was not in the earthquake which would have been the assumption of the Hebrew people upon hearing this story.

Then of course, there was the fire. This was another unmistakable sign of God's presence. Think of the story of Moses and the burning bush (Exodus 3) and the "pillar of fire" which led the people during the night as they wandered in the desert on their way to the Promised Land (Number 14:14). So, in all these typical elements where people would normally look for God, Elijah did not experience or hear God. What finally connected was the sound of sheer silence or the small still voice. God is not present for Elijah in all the big signs that he knew before. Instead God is present in silence. In a time of despair when Elijah could have used a big sign in the sky or an earthquake to speak to him, God spoke in the sound of sheer silence and that changed everything for Elijah. When Elijah finally settled down and listened in the absence of noise he was able to know God's presence. It was the act of letting go that helped him to finally get to that deeper peace.

I am reminded of the movie "The Life of Pi" and what the main character had to learn in his harrowing experience to survive. The film tells the story of an Indian boy known by the nickname Pi. The son of a zookeeper, Pi is deeply interested in religion and the search for meaning. As a young man, he explored the religious traditions of India and takes up the practices of Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity, weaving the three religions together despite protests from those in his family who tell him that a person can't just combine religions together. As a teenager, his family decided to move the family zoo to Canada. The family and all the animals set sail across the Pacific Ocean on a large tanker. A destructive storm sinks the ship and Pi finds himself adrift in a life raft in the middle of the ocean with a Bengal Tiger, as his only companion in the life boat. At the beginning of the movie Pi claims that his story is a story that will make you believe in God. After finding land, Pi reflects on the experience and on the importance of letting go in life. The line that really spoke to me is when Pi says, "I suppose in the end, the whole of life becomes an act of letting go." Let's watch the clip:

[https://youtu.be/dW\\_Kse2yPYs](https://youtu.be/dW_Kse2yPYs)

I would like to end with words from Forrest Church in his book *Life Lines: Holding On (and Letting Go)*. He writes, "How can we make peace with our mortality and the death of those we love? How can we accept things that cannot be changed and change the things we can? How can we forgive ourselves and others? How can we gather the courage to overcome our fears?... How is it that some people manage to conquer adversity while others are consumed by it? When cast into the depths, to survive we must first let go of things that will not save us. Then we must reach out for things that can. Until we free ourselves from an attachment to false sources of security and let go of our illusions, we will remain in the abyss."

I pray that today as we listen to the stories of Elijah and others about the power of being still and letting go of our mental narratives that are driven by our egos and fears, that we may find the peace that passes all understanding. Amen.