

## Sermon: **The Sound of Silence**

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St. Giles, Ottawa, June 22, 2025)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

“Hello darkness, my old friend.  
I’ve come to talk with you again.  
Because a vision softly creeping,  
left its seeds while I was sleeping.  
And the vision that was planted in my brain  
still remains, within the sound of silence.”

That is the opening stanza of the song originally composed in 1964, by then 21 years old Paul Simon of the duo Simon & Garfunkel, with the title: The Sound of Silence. With its haunting monotone and wispy melody, this song quickly captured the imagination and hearts of American youth, in a particularly turbulent time of their lives. Some had thought the song was a commentary on the assassination of John F. Kennedy, as it was recorded three months after the event. The composer later explained and summed up the song’s meaning as “the inability of people to communicate with each other”, therefore the line

“People talking without speaking,  
people hearing without listening,  
people writing songs that voices never share.  
No one dared, disturb the sound of silence.”

In such light, this song could serve as a commentary on the plight of Prophet Elijah as he fled to the wilderness in distress, in the passage of 1 Kings 19. You see, Elijah was a man of God, a holy man who prophesied alone in a corrupted generation where “the people bowed and prayed to the neon god they made”, and in their case, Asherah the fertility goddess and Baal the storm god of the Canaanites. Under the corrupting influence of King Ahab and Queen Jezebel, the Israelites were led astray. So in restless dreams Elijah walked alone, in narrow streets of cobblestone. “Fools” he called out,

“hear my words that I might teach you,  
take my arms that I might reach you”.

But his words were,

“like silent raindrops fell and echoed in the wells of silence”.

So in a desperate attempt to demonstrate, to prove to the people who the real God is, Elijah faced down 450 prophets of Baal and 400 hundred additional priestesses of Asherah, in an asymmetrical warfare that was seemingly rigged against the one true prophet. Elijah, nevertheless, bested them all in a fiery ordeal on top of Mount Carmel, a true miraculous display of the Lord God’s power and might. It’s a fascinating story recorded in 1 Kings 18, worthy of a read.

The key verse in that chapter is 39, “*When all the people saw it, they fell on their faces and said, “The Lord indeed is God; the Lord indeed is God.”* It should’ve been the happy ending to that story, but it wasn’t. Power and principality of this world do not yield that easily. Jezebel was enraged, incensed by what Elijah had done. She vowed in no uncertain terms to have the man of God killed.

When the man of God heard of the death warrant the evil queen had placed on his head, his confidence, his faith in God seemed to have melted in a blink of an eye. So in fear and desperation, Elijah fled, fleeing far far away to the wilderness, the traditional dwelling place of the God of Israel. Was he fleeing for his life? That’s questionable, for Elijah lamented in verse 4, “*It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors.*” He wanted to die, to end the struggle, to end it all. We the readers are left to guess why.

However, God did not shame Elijah for his despair. Rather, twice God nourished him with food and water, providing him with sufficient strength for that 40-day journey, until the man of God was brought to a cave in Mount Horeb, the mountain of God, It is there he found the Lord God not in powerful wind, not in earthquake nor fire, but in ***qol demamah daqah, the sound of sheer silence.***

Commentators have debated over the theological meaning of this phrase. I take it as an invitation to be still—be still and know that I am the Lord, as God assures us repeatedly in the Scriptures. Too often we are in a rush to get things done, to go somewhere; our attention span brief, our

patience cut short. We demand instant result, gratifying ourselves with instant gratification. We get caught up with pomp and circumstance of elemental brilliance. We drift with the wind; like moth we are attracted to flame.

We hope and expect God to do mighty things for us, but we forget the way of the Lord is not always the brightest, the shiniest, the widest path, but the winding road through a narrow door. We hope and expect the Spirit of God to descend like flame like in the Pentecost, but we ignore the still voice, the whisper of the Spirit working gently in our hearts, in our soul.

We are drawn to foolish bravados of powerful or glamorous people, but it is the voice of the downtrodden, the voice of the voiceless we ought to pay attention to, just like the closing stanza of the song by Simon & Garfunkel,

“The words of the prophets are written on the subway walls  
and tenement halls, and whispered in the sounds of silence.”

*“Be still and know that I am God!”*, says the Lord,  
*“I am exalted among the nations; I am exalted in the earth.”*  
(Psalm 46:10)

After Elijah encountered God in the sound of sheer silence, his confidence restored, his call reaffirmed. He was sent back through the wilderness of Damascus, to pick up where he left off. The lectionary reading ends in verse 15, but should one read slightly ahead, one would come to see the comprehensive scope of Elijah’s renewed call. In the realm of international politics, he was to anoint Hazael as king over Aram, that is Israel’s long-time adversary in Damascus. In the national affair, Jehu was to be anointed as king over Israel. And in the spiritual realm, God instructed Elijah to anoint and mentor a new prophet, Elisha. Most importantly, God assured the prophet that he was not alone. Others were also called to the work as well, *“seven thousand in Israel, all the knees that have not bowed to Baal.”*

The challenges facing us are just as daunting as those faced by Elijah. The idols we are called to resist today may not be the biblical Baal nor Paul Simon’s neon god, they do include the gods of nationalism, tribalism, consumerism, secularism and capitalism.

We as individuals may find such prophetic calling too daunting, especially when it involves calling out those who wield the most power, even in the institutional church. However, we are assured that God does not send us out alone. It is not all on the shoulder of me to complete the work. Others will join what we started, or we may join what others are doing, all in tradition of *missio dei*, the mission of God.

We are, however, reminded again to listen to the voice of God in the sound of silence. For it is in that voice that we are nourished, our hope restored, our call renewed, and we are sent forth.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**