Alexander Randolph Rickert / General Adult

Intersection - Two Tools: Silence and Suffering

- Have you ever shown up to Mass or to a time in prayer where it feels like God is absolutely silent, like you are just talking to a brick wall? Or have you ever in the midst of some heavy cross, some heavy suffering, cried out to God for relief and help, but it doesn't seem to come?
    - These questions were rhetorical because I am pretty sure—and I hope, actually—that all of us can say yes to those two questions.
- Much of God's work happens through two tools that we don't really enjoy in the moment, but always produce abundant fruit, if we let it. Those two tools are **silence** and **suffering**.
- And it's precisely silence and suffering that Elijah is experiencing in the First Reading today when he experiences the Lord's presence outside the cave.

Investigation - What Was Elijah Going Through?

- Real briefly, let's put ourselves in Elijah's shoes for a moment. Of all the Old Testament prophets, Elijah is the prophet who works the greatest wonders and preaches some of the hardest truths.
    - Prior to the point we heard in today's reading, to name a few of his more impressive miracles, Elijah had:
        - brought a drought upon the whole land and then later lifted the drought,

    - he brought a boy back to life (the first resurrection story in the whole Bible),
    - and has an epic, movie-worthy showdown with the pagan prophets of his land where He proves the existence and power of the God of Israel over the pagan gods
  - In short, Elijah had seen God work in amazing ways in and through his own life.
  - But now, it seems that God has turned his back on Elijah. An evil queen of Israel is pursuing Elijah to kill him for his fidelity to the God of Israel. The reading today skips over one and a half verses today:

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    and he (God) said to him, “What are you doing here, Elijah?” 10 ¶ He said, “I have been very jealous for the LORD, the God of hosts; for the sons of Israel have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and slain your prophets with the sword; and I, even I only, am left; and they seek my life, to take it away.”
  - Basically, Elijah is complaining to God and asking God why this is happening to him.
- It’s at this point that God tells him to go outside his cave because “the Lord will be passing by.”
- So Elijah waits for him. Amazing forces of nature manifest: a violent wind (perhaps a tornado or earthquake), an earthquake, and a great fire. And although the Lord had shown up in these ways in the past, the passage of Kings tells us “the Lord was not in” any of these impressive forces of nature.

Insight – God’s Presence in the Silence and the Suffering

- Shortly after, comes the “tiny, whispering sound”, or as another translation has it “a still, small voice.” Finally, it’s at this point that Elijah “hides his face in

his cloak." In the Old Testament, people often hide their faces—whether in their cloak, or in their hands, or by laying facedown on the ground, and it's always a sign of their being in the presence of God.

- So Elijah recognizes in the "tiny, whispering sound," the "still, small voice" the voice of the God that spoke to him throughout his big dramatic miracles.
- We don't hear it in today's reading, but Elijah then complains again to God, but this time God answers with prophecies and instructions for Elijah to carry out, which end up preserving his life but also allow him to continue his mission as a prophet in Israel.
- St. Irenaeus, a Doctor of the Church and Saint who lived in the 100s AD, explains that through this, "the prophet [Elijah], who was greatly downcast by the transgression of the people and the murder of the prophets, learned to work with greater calm."
    - Elijah learned to work with greater calm because he learned that our God is God in the silence and in suffering just as much as as He is God in the loud wonders and miracles.

Inference - God is Just as Present in Our Silences and Sufferings as He Is in Our Miracles and Victories

- St. Irenaues also adds that (I'm paraphrasing here) this truth, the truth of our God being in the silence, is confirmed in the Person of Jesus Christ. Although the Old Testament is filled with great, dramatic stories of God physically saving His people from destruction, oppression, natural disasters, Jesus comes as "a tiny whisper" from Nazareth. Meek and humble of heart, He gently submits Himself to His Father's Will and to the evil plot of Pharisees and Romans.

    - But we know that that “tiny whisper” of a man brings forth the salvation of the world and has blessed us, His Church, with a peace the world cannot give.
    - And in today’s Gospel, Peter learns that when he shifts his attention from the “still, small voice” of Jesus to the loud, crashing waves all around him, he loses his ability to walk towards Jesus on the water.
- The gentle silence which Elijah learns, which Jesus embodies, and which Peter attempts | serves as instructive for us today. If we really think about it, the story of the “still, small voice” teaches us that precisely when we feel that God is the most distant from us that He has ever been, it is then that He is closest.
    - Many of the saints, especially St. Teresa of Avila, St. John of the Cross, and St. Therese of Lisieux, have written much about how God draws us closer to Himself when He removes the warm, fuzzy feelings from our times of prayer and when He gives us sufferings.
    - These experiences teach us to love the Lord and welcome Him more deeply into our hearts because we are learning to love Him and listen to Him when “there’s nothing in it for us.”

Implementation - How Can We Benefit from Silence and Suffering?

- We can think of silence and suffering as the two plows through which we and God till the soil of souls...
- Through a bit of sweat and determination on our part (and on His part, during His Passion), the soil of our souls is loosened, aerated, and better prepared to receive the seeds of God’s Word and the water of His love and grace.

- I have seen these two plows at work in my own life, and I credit them more than anything else in my life for giving me the grace to respond not just to God's big call to the priesthood, but the small calls that I try to respond to every day.
- But I am so fickle, (e.g. going back to STL) and even though I have seen God working amazing things in my soul and in my life through silence and through suffering.
- There are so many opportunities for silence and the cross every day, and they often come together: Do I take some time for silent prayer every day? Do I show my coworkers and my family the respect and love that I owe them as my neighbors? In my times to myself, am I filling my environment with music, podcasts, social media, etc, or do I take some time for silence in case God wants to speak into the middle of my day? In the crosses the Lord has given to me or to my family, do I try to accept them and surrender to God's will in them? Or do I only ask for them to being taken away?
- It's clear there's a challenge to us today from the First Reading and from the Gospel: what are we doing to welcome the plows of silence and suffering into our souls?