

Today's story about the prophet Elijah portrays him as repeating some of the stages of the Hebrew people's journey through the wilderness. They had escaped slavery in Egypt, but became anxious that they couldn't survive in the wilderness away from the reliable meals they had counted on as slaves. Hearing their complaints, God had provided them with manna—enough every day to survive for another day, but no extra. Elijah, having killed all the prophets of Baal, fled into the wilderness to escape the wrath of Queen Jezebel, and then decided to give up because he was an utter failure: "It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors." But an angel told him to eat, and miraculously there was at his head a cake and a jar of water, and at the angel's urging he ate and was able to travel to Mt. Horeb, the place where God had appeared to Moses to give him the Ten Commandments. As with the children of Israel, God fed Elijah the prophet for his journey in the wilderness.

Once at Horeb, like Moses, Elijah had an encounter with God. But his encounter was very different. Moses had hidden himself in a cleft in the rock so as not to be blinded by God's splendor as he passed by. Elijah, however, witnesses powerful phenomena straight on, but God is not in them. "Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence."

Up to this point this story is about Elijah's deep sense of God's absence. He felt, fleeing from Jezebel, that he was on his own. Fed by an angel, he wanted to lie

down again but had to get up and flee farther away. At Horeb, instead of seeing God, he saw dramatic natural phenomena from which God was absent. St. Ignatius had a word for this: desolation. And perhaps coincidentally, Lauren Winner's 2012 book about her period of desolation is entitled simple *Still*. As in the stillness that came after the earthquake, wind and fire.

Lauren Winner describes herself in her desolation as being a person who wondered if she had dreamed up God, and then a person who was tired of her own wondering (p. 8). She went to church now by habit, brittle, like a dry cake of gingerbread. Like the hinges of an old book. She went through the motions all through the season of Epiphany, experiencing no epiphanies whatsoever but standing in line for the Eucharist with sinners—embezzlers, adulterers, prigs, and feeling simply relief. She thought of the desert fathers and mothers, those ancient mystics who had advised spiritual seekers to sit in their cells and let their cells teach them. Trying that out, she felt only loneliness, and felt that the loneliness could kill her. Lauren Winner was not enjoying herself. She was trudging through wilderness without any expectation that she would come to its edge.

One day during Lent she realized that she is bored with all things Christian. “A therapist once told me that boredom is the thing I dislike most, it is the state I try hardest to avoid; this was true, and I hardly needed a professional to point it out. Still, it was something of a shock to realize that I was bored with faith” (p. 122). She was embarrassed at the childishness of the word—as if it were God's job to entertain her—but she had to admit its appropriateness. She reflected, “Thomas Merton, the 20th-century Trappist monk, wrote that what we are attempting to

escape when we try to flee boredom is only ourselves. Perhaps boredom is not unlike loneliness: the best response may be not to run from it, but to give yourself to it, to see it as an invitation to attend more carefully to the very thing that seems boring. One of Merton's biographers, Monica Furlong, put the matter like this: 'Gradually . . . a sense of order overtakes the wretchedness of boredom, there is a movement toward stillness, and in the stillness we find God, and in God, our true identity.'

There is a movement from boredom to stillness. Lauren Winner writes like an angel, and not many people could write about something as tedious and bleak as a crisis of faith and make you want to keep reading . . . but part of the reason is, I think, she has a very busy mind. She is full of scraps of remembered conversations and eclectic readings, several for every experience, and very thought-provoking it is, too. She may have been bored, but she emphatically was not still. And yet it wasn't until there was utter stillness that Elijah heard the voice of the Lord saying, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" It wasn't until the great vigil of Easter, during which Lauren Winner had to burn off some antsiness working on the vigil feast before she could return to the worship service, that she heard a voice say to her, "You can stay here now." "Just five words, and I know that this voice is God and what God means is that there is ground beneath my feet again, that this is the beginning of sanity and steadiness; this is the beginning of a reshaped life." She says that she knows that a simple explanation was that the voice came from within herself, calling attention to the ways in which she had begun to feel stable and newly alive, but that explanation is incomplete. "Even on the days when I don't believe in God, I still will tell you that

one night, while sitting in church, I heard God's voice, naming a resurrection of sorts, telling me I could stay" (p. 149).

Elijah had been very busy, killing the prophets of other gods and fleeing for his life. The wind, earthquake and fire that precede his encounter with God may be catharsis—a kind of flushing out of all the residue of his chaotic recent past. As the Zen masters say, you can't fill a cup that is already full; if you want to receive, you must empty your cup. It seems to me that what the Elijah story and Lauren Winner both describe is an emptiness that persists for a time and then transmutes into receptivity and recovery. When Elijah hears God in the stillness, he pours out his desperation—his travails on God's behalf, his failures to keep God's own people faithful, his utter aloneness as his enemies pursue him with deadly intent. And God tells him, "I have work for you—you need to go anoint a couple of kings—and I also have a successor for you, Elisha. AND there are 7000 people in Israel who actually still are faithful; you're not such a failure and you're not alone."

I've said this before but the scripture compels me to say it again: the spiritual life seems to require that we practice stillness. Whether it's because of a crisis of faith or the despair that comes from working your heart out with no discernible results, the way forward seems to begin with stopping or emptying one's habitually busy self. Sometimes life stops or empties it for us, and so be it. But even in the absence and the silence there is meaning, and there is always at least one day's sustenance to take us the next little way.

Let us pray. Powerful God, although you can make your presence known in a mighty wind, or an earthquake, or a fire, you often speak to us in the sound of sheer silence. Help us to hear. Amen.