

# FINDING YOUR CAVE: LISTENING SPACES

**I Kings 19:9-13**

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**First Christian Church**

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1 Kings 19:9-13

Then the word of the Lord came to Elijah, saying, “What are you doing here, Elijah?” He answered, “I have been very zealous for the Lord, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away.”

God said, “Go out and stand on the mountain before the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by.” 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. When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave.

I’ll never forget the first time a group of women at Kingwood Christian Church—that’s the church north of Houston that I pastored for 14 years—let it be known that we were going on a 24-hour silent retreat. We made the announcement in Sunday morning worship several times, encouraging other women to join us. We were going on our pilgrimage to the Cenacle Retreat House, a peaceful lodge surrounded by gardens and porch swings and wind chimes and glorious meals prepared by a talented chef using ingredients fresh from the garden. Cenacle Sisters are a religious order of faith formation and hospitality founded in France. The order operates retreat houses in 11 countries.

But back to my story. When I made the Sunday morning announcement about spending 24 hours in silence, all the husbands in the pews began to laugh. They didn’t believe we could be silent for one hour,

much less 24. They thought our contemplative pilgrimage was a slumber party in disguise.

We got to the retreat house around supper time on a Friday evening. We found our rooms—comfortable, simple rooms with a single bed and a rocker and a small table with a reading light. No electronics. After supper we went to the library where one of the Sisters came to lead us into silence. She gave us some instructions about listening for God in the silence, and she told us to return to the library the next afternoon when we would break the silence and talk about our experience. Then she prayed and we left quietly to walk the grounds, to sit in a porch swing and watch the sun set, to find a comfortable chair in a corner of the retreat house, or to brew a cup of tea.

We moved around a lot in that first hour or so—the Sister told us that the silence might make us restless at first. We smiled and nodded when we passed another pilgrim. We went to bed in silence and ate breakfast in silence and by mid-morning we had hit our stride. We wrapped the silence around us like a soft sweater. It was delicious. There is a quality of rest in silence that surpasses a night of slumber on the most expensive mattress. The time went by all too quickly and before we knew it we were back in the library where the Sister prayed and began to ask some simple questions encouraging us to share our experience. At first, we were reluctant to return to the world of voices and opinions and did-I-tell-you-what-happened-today conversations. The Sister nudged us gently and

finally the women began to speak. Faces beamed and eyes sparkled around that circle. We couldn't wait for the next silent retreat—let's make it 48 hours next time.

When we went back to our church to tell about our experience, the men still didn't believe that we had been silent. But that's OK. You recall that happened in the gospel of Luke the women ran from the empty tomb to tell the disciples Jesus has risen. Luke tell us “the men found that the women's words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them.”

We were silent for 24 hours whether the men believed us or not, and we went back again and again to drink from that well and hydrate our souls. For centuries monasteries and convents around the world have provided space for pilgrims to experience silence and solitude.

David Mathis, who writes for the website [desiringGod.org](http://desiringGod.org), likes to sit in a deer stand for his silent retreats:

*I am alone in the woods, it is silent—but for the whipping of the frigid Minnesota wind—and my soul is decompressing from months on end in the urban jungle. Body and soul find fresh air there that is hard to come by in the big city.*

Matthis teaches that silence allows us to search the depths of our own souls,

*...asking what our blind spots have become in the rush of everyday life. In the busyness, is there anything important I'm neglecting or repressing? How am I doing in my various roles? What needs refocusing?*

*So we might get alone and be quiet to hear our own internal voice, the murmurs of our soul that are easily drowned out in noise and crowds.*

*But the most important voice to hear in the silence is God's. The point of practicing silence as a spiritual discipline is not so we can hear God's audible voice, but so we can be less distracted, and better hear him speak, with even greater clarity, in his word...Silence and solitude, then, are not direct means of grace in themselves, but they can grease the skids for more direct encounters with God in his word and prayer.*

Our scripture today reminds us that even the great prophet Elijah who was bigger than life found himself in need of more direct encounters with God. Of course, it's important to know the whole story. Elijah was fresh from a major victory at Mt. Carmel over 400 pagan prophets. In a contest reminiscent of the most exciting smack-down at the World Wrestling Federation, Elijah challenged the other side to pray to their god asking him to send down fire to consume a sacrificial altar. Because he was a gentleman, Elijah let the other side go first. Their prayers over several hours produced no results. Now, it was Elijah's turn. He decided to up the ante, calling on his servants to bring jars of water to drench the wood and fill the trench they had dug around the altar.

Now it was Elijah's turn to pray to the one true God. Immediately God sent down fire that consumed the wood and the rocks and every drop of water in the trench. As Elijah was taking his victory lap, he became the most wanted man in all of Israel. Queen Jezebel sent her henchmen after Elijah, but he was nimble and stayed one step ahead of them. Elijah fled to the wilderness, consumed with fear.

The great Elijah had lost his nerve. He was convinced his ministry was over, which was a shame, he said, since he was the last man standing for the Lord in all of Israel. (That was part of Elijah's problem—he regularly exaggerated his importance.) Now he was out of ideas. Elijah could see no way out. So God told Elijah to go stand at the entrance to the cave where he was hiding. God was going to make a house call. As Elijah stood there, feeling helpless and defeated, God sent the symbols used in the time of Moses to indicate God's presence. God sent a hurricane force wind, followed by an earthquake, and then an all-consuming fire.

But God chose a very medium for his conversation with Elijah. The Hebrew word used here tells us God spoke to his prophet through *sheer silence*, through a *whisper*, through a *small voice*. Elijah was used to living on the edge, he preferred drama and bigger-than-life encounters. It only makes sense that God chose another route to communicate with his star performer. God spoke to Elijah from the silence. And once Elijah was listening, God in all his wisdom planted the prophet's feet back on solid ground by giving him his next assignment. "Get up and head for Damascus, Elijah, because there are two kings I have chosen who need to be anointed, along with a new prophet for you to train." Then God assured Elijah that he wasn't the last man standing. In fact, there were seven thousand more in Israel who were faithful to the one true God.

God was the creative, sensible voice at a time when Elijah couldn't see his way forward. Can you imagine what God has been waiting to tell

you—about his love for you, about his plan for your life? Maybe it's time for all of us to learn how to listen for God's voice.

Excerpt from “Take A Break from the Chaos” by David Mathis, Executive Editor, [desiringGod.org](http://desiringGod.org), December 5, 2014