The Sound of the Wind

May 31st, 2020

Pentecost

Road trips, when I was a child, always came with the sound of wind. Road trips to the sea, road trips through the golden grain fields, road trips to the mountains and lakes—they always came with the sound of wind, blowing through the windows, buffeting my face when we stopped by the roadside for coffee, soughing over the waves and in the birch and pines of the landscape. It is one of the most natural, primordial sounds, a magnified version of our very own breath. It was the sound of traveling, of joy, of rest, of freedom. The wind can be very strong on the Ishikari Plain. Great storms blow across the Tartary Straits from Russia and blast the northwestern shores of Hokkaido. The wind cleared rain clouds and brought them back again, lifted kites, scattered spring blossoms and dead autumn leaves. The wind made galaxies of snow crystals and galaxies of distant stars. My favourite days were days of wind and sun, when the two greatest powers met, and one could wander with the wind through the landscape, lost in the mystery of its sound.

It is with the sound of great wind that the Holy Spirit descends on the apostles: “They were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability” (Acts 2:1-4). In the time of Elijah, God manifested himself in a tiny whisper (1 Kings 19:11-13), not in great wind, fire, or the quaking earth. Truly, God can manifest Himself in any way He wants to. Elijah, however, had already seen the holy fire descend on Mount Carmel (1 Kings 18); he needed to learn that God could also work in small, quiet, seemingly insignificant ways as well as through dramatic ways. For the apostles, God comes with glorious sound, glorious flickers of flame, and a glorious effusion of language—and not just Aramaic, Hebrew and Greek—but every language of the ancient Mediterranean and Near East. Contemplatives often say that we meet God in silence. The apostles encounter God once again in great noise. Imagine the kind of ecstasy the composer, conductor, or even the listener feels in one of the more dramatic pieces of Beethoven, Stravinsky, or Shostakovich. You cannot listen to such music on low volume; it is meant to be heard, meant to be felt, meant to be absorbed into one’s own body and being. Such is the force of good music and good sound; they are events with vibrant, vibrating ripple effects. They thunder through our life.

The apostles are driven by this storming, flaming Holy Spirit into the streets to speak the good news. The event is enigmatic for the men and women of Jerusalem, the people on the street who witness it. It is not an event the apostles can contain within themselves; it is not meant to be kept to themselves. As a reservoir may break its dam during a storm surge, the Spirit has broken open these shy, doubting, hesitant apostles with the certain presence of God’s Spirit. The bystanders want to know what these sounds mean—why the outpouring of languages and preaching, and Peter speaks to them, saying that it is all about Jesus: “This Jesus God raised up, and of that all of us are witnesses. Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this that you both see and hear.” (Acts 2:32-33). God is not whispering now; God wants to be heard; God wants the whole world to hear that He has come to us through Jesus and through His Holy Spirit to renew all things.

Throughout the Bible, seeing and hearing relate to faith (cf. John 9). In the midst of his religious experience, Job says: “‘I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted. ‘Who is this that hides counsel without knowledge?’ Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know. ‘Hear, and I will speak; I will question you, and you declare to me.’ I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you; therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes.’” (Job 42:2-6). It is maybe paradoxical, and the very least interesting, that Job speaks of seeing God—for there is no great visionary description other than a whirlwind and storm. Yet, the chapters covering the encounter with God (Job 38-41) are a largely unbroken monologue from the Lord. A great part of Job seeing God is *hearing* God’s questions. One of the hardest things for us to grasp is our need, our hunger, to hear God speak to us. We will do anything to silence that hunger. Our generation is too loud, too opinionated, too argumentative, too cynical, too expert, or too willfully naïve to hear anything. And even when we escape the noise of the world in contemplative silence, it is so that we can just escape hearing. To some extent, I understand that. Silence and solitude are beautiful and necessary for spiritual life, but they are not an end in themselves—there is nothing in the Scriptures to suggest that whatsoever. In silent prayer and silent reading, we should seek to hear the voice of God. The great prayer of the Old Testament is the Shema: “Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.” (Deuteronomy 6:4-9). *Shema* means “hear”. There is no other word for *obey* in the Hebrew Bible. The only word used is *shema* (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6KQLOuIKaRA>). The English word “hear” appears over 2000 times in the whole Bible. It is fascinating that when we take spiritual formation or spiritual direction classes, we happily learn to be good listeners. When we study communication theory, we learn to be good listeners. When we take courses on how to study or learn in college or university, we embrace good listening and note-taking. When we attend counseling sessions, we learn about listening more to others. When it comes to God, suddenly, we are a bit more hesitant, a bit more resistant. Without hearing, there can be no love or wisdom. One of the worst forms of mistreatment from others I can recall as a child was the silent treatment. It was a heavy and painful silence, a sign that something was significantly broken. One became invisible and unloved in that silence, excluded from communion with others. After a long day or after a period of sorrow, there is nothing more soothing than to hear a voice of love from a loved one. For millennia, for much of our lives, we have happily let God be invisible and unheard in that silence. God will wait no longer. Pentecost breaks through that silence. Pentecost is an invitation to hear and believe and be saved. It is an invitation to courage and to life. The only reason we have scriptures in the first place is that some brave men and women, prophets and apostles, risking their lives, heard God and lived, and they now invite us to hear God and live. Jesus said: “My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me” (John 10:27).

God wants to be heard; God wants us to hear the sound of salvation. In every language under the sun, God says that he loves you and wants to be with you. God made sure that we would pay attention by empowering his apostles and witnesses of the risen Christ with tongues of fire and tongues of many nations and the sound of rushing wind that hit like an earthquake. And though they mocked the apostles, the crowd unwittingly prophesied when they said: “They are filled with new wine” (Acts 2:13). For indeed, Jesus is the new wine, the best wine (Matthew 9:17, John 2:10), “wine to gladden the heart of man, oil to make his face shine and bread to strengthen man’s heart” (Psalm 104:15). Jesus is the new wine, and the Holy Spirit, His Spirit, is being poured out in abundance. It is a beautiful sound, as beautiful as the sound of the wind rushing through the landscape, driving the weather and powering our generators. All that God wants us to hear is that He loves us and calls us to Him and saves us: “Peter said to them, ‘Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him.’” (Acts 2:38-39). Repent; be baptized; be forgiven; receive the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is meant to be received; God wants to be received into your heart and into your life that He might work wonders of grace through you day after day. In seeking your repentance, baptism and change of life, God is seeking communion with you; God is seeking an everlasting friendship with you. And that is why earlier in the sermon, Peter speaks of Jesus as both a pathfinder and a traveling companion, when he quotes Psalm 16: “I saw the Lord always before me, for he is at my right hand so that I will not be shaken; therefore my heart was glad, and my tongue rejoiced; moreover, my flesh will live in hope. For you will not abandon my soul to Hades, or let your Holy One experience corruption. You have made known to me the ways of life; you will make me full of gladness with your presence.” (Acts 2:25-28). Our faith is a beautiful road trip—with our Saviour ahead of us leading the way and walking right beside us. Our path is with the Saviour; our path is to the Saviour; our path is the Saviour. O Lord, may we hear and receive the sound like a great wind, the sound of Your Holy Spirit, rushing to meet us and transform us. O Lord, may we hear the sound of joy, the sound of freedom, the sound of travel, the sound of peace and rest, the sound of salvation; may we hear Your voice and follow Jesus. O Lord, let us hear the sound of God pouring Himself out upon the earth.