

# **Earthquake, Wind, Fire . . . and a Still Small Voice— Finding a Word in Today's Many Voices**

Cathedral of Our Lady of Perpetual Help: Monday, June 13 at 10:15 am

*Using Elijah's chaotic environment of 'earthquake, wind, and fire' as metaphor for the contemporary American worship environment, this session explores the challenges as well as the possibilities of finding a 'word' through music in worship today.*

In I Kings 19 we read, “And behold, the Lord passed by, and a great and strong wind rent the mountains, and broke in pieces the rocks 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 still small voice. And a voice said to Elijah, “what are you doing here?”

At our recent American Choral Directors Association's National Conference in Chicago, we gathered to once again hear Mendelssohn's account of Elijah's story of inner loneliness and despair through his choral masterpiece. This choral oratorio is not only a physical description of loneliness and the darkness of Elijah's cave, but a description of state of mind and spirit, clothed in Mendelssohn's unique voice. In Elijah's drama, he is confronted with the question “What are you doing here?”, or in my paraphrase, “What is the meaning of my life?” and “What is the purpose of my work?” For Elijah, it is a story of a journey that begins in doubt and depression, questioning the meaning of vocation and life, and ends in revelation and renewal.

It is at this point of awareness, the “Why am I here” and the “What is the meaning” that the world of the church musician and the world of faith converge. Quoting Paul Tillich in his *Theology of Culture*, “Religion in the largest and most basic sense of the word is ultimate concern....” Tillich continues, “... ultimate concern is manifest in all creative functions of the human spirit.” As Bennett Reimer states in *The Religious in the Art*, “The deepest meaning of all art is basically the same meaning—the sense of life itself.”

So, the discovery of meaning in life, and the expression of that discovery in a relevant and appropriate way, becomes the shared task of the church musician and the believer. We have hints to this in our shared vocabulary between religion and art in words such as “inspiration, revelation, and ecstasy.”

It should not be a surprise that we turn again and again to art as we journey in our faith. Similarly, it was no accident that Elijah returned to Mt. Horeb for answers at his point of ultimate concern. It was at Mt. Horeb that Moses had encountered the burning bush and where the law was revealed to Moses. Elijah returned to Mt. Horeb looking for similar revelation, as we return to the arts to explore faith.

The religious experience, like the artistic experience, is a personal experience. God's self-disclosure varies as we encounter God individually. Similarly, art is personal

and polysemic, offering multi-meaninged symbols to the searcher. Both art and religion seek the mystic experience. Both are a result of immersion into life. The artist and the believer go into the cave of the unexplored life, and bring from it the fruit of their personal encounter.

When Elijah emerged from his cave he was given two commands: "Go forth" and "Stand before". Elijah was invited to become an active participant in a world exploding with sensory images. The sensory world of wind, earthquake, and fire were about to burst upon Elijah's condition of loneliness and despair.

The arts perform two functions in relation to the religious experience: First, they establish a world of their own, inviting the believer into that world as a participant; secondly, the arts may interpret that world the believer has entered.

The world Elijah was invited into was vibrant with symbol. It was alive with sensory systems, and as McLuhan has stated, it is in the interrelationship of sensory systems that one acquires the greatest stimulations, hence the opportunity for greatest communication and understanding.

As musicians that are active workers within faith communities, we continually invite people into the world of music, architecture, poetry, ritual, drama, procession, sculpture, and painting, which have historically formed the great bulk of the stimuli we call religious. These artistic environments are not, and have never been, mere embellishments, but are both formative and substantive.

Think of your experiences of

- tension leading to ultimate resolution in a Bach fugue;
- hope and aspiration as you look at a Gothic arch;
- eternal longing in the repeated circling motives of a Bruckner choral work;
- grace, forgiveness, and reconciliation when you read or hear *Les Miserables*;
- mercy and passion as you view Michelangelo's *Pieta*;
- the frenzied ecstasy of coming to grips with chaos in the final measures of Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony*;
- the power of the Christian sacraments as experienced in the film *Babette's Feast*.

Art invites us to experience the Holy. Music invites us to experience something which is untouchable, awe-inspiring, and using Tillich's language, the experience of ultimate meaning.

Contemporary culture should remember that the sensory medium of Elijah's encounter was not new, nor was it limited to his own personal experience. Wind, earthquake, fire, and smoke were commonly seen as signs which heralded the coming of the king. I mentioned Moses' experience of a burning bush, and we recall

the pillar of fire which led the children of Israel. In the tabernacle, God's presence was symbolized by the ever burning light. We recall John the Baptist's words when he said "I baptize with water—he with fire." What are all of these if not symbolic and multi-sensory environments and references?

I would like to suggest that all primary revelatory acts of God were first creative and relational before they were reduced to description and rationalization: creation was first an act before it became an "account"; creation was done before it was a "doctrine" or religious and political debate; the cross was pain and death before it became a "passion narrative" or for my evangelical friends, a "plan of salvation". To state this classically, orders of being precede orders of knowing. To state it theologically, manifestation is prior to, or least concurrent with, inspiration.

Art has great potential for the believer. We must prepare ourselves and open ourselves and those we work with for the "still small voice" that comes after the earthquake, wind, and fire, but is not "in" the earthquake, wind, and fire. Our sensory systems are not religion, but they can lead to the religious experience.

Elijah's encounter with the world of sight and sound pointed beyond its own sensations to the meaning of his existence. Similarly, art that deserves to be called "great" art possesses the capacity to take us to a place beyond its presented surface toward quickened awareness, and to the world that is both wider and deeper than art's own. Like Elijah, we are invited into the world of wind, earthquake, and fire, to move beyond the world of sensory matter to God's self-disclosure.

This is art's ultimate potential.

What we experience through great art is not information about God, but rather, and invitation to communion with the divine. Art works mysteriously to suggest more than it can clearly describe or define. As we stare out of our cave, asking the ultimate question, "What are we doing here?", our experience of revelation is mediated through an experience in the world, and for the believer, art provides such an experience.

For me, it comes in that second of silence between the conclusion of the "Crucifixus" and the "Et Resurrexit" in Bach's *Mass in B minor*. For me, it comes when Haydn lowers the key at the point of the "fall of man" in his oratorio *Creation*. For me it comes at the moment of the golden mean in Barber's *Agnus Dei* setting of his string *Adagio*, as the chorus cries out "pacem." And my list goes on and on and on, and continues daily.

So, what did Elijah hear in that "still small voice" that followed his sensory encounter? We know that Elijah was led beyond the presented surface toward a quickened awareness. We see that Elijah had journeyed from despair to revelation. He was renewed. We don't know what he heard, but we know it was powerful. He emerged from the cave of his despair with purpose. Our art holds this potential for all of us.

In an address presented to the Fountain Street Baptist Church in October, 1961, Robert Shaw concluded the following purposes of music in worship: "We shall propose concerning our music that nothing but the best is good enough." Shaw then offered four criteria in defining "nothing but the best":

- 1) Motivation, or the purity of purpose;
- 2) Craftsmanship;
- 3) Historical perspective;
- 4) The art must embody revelation.

And to help in this pursuit, he offered these concluding words, which I, too, offer to you 50 years from the date he delivered them:

Nothing which has stirred the heart and mind of mankind to the consideration and creation of worth—in whatever time or place—can be foreign to worship. Wherever the Word has been made flesh—in Beethoven or Shakespeare—it should be made welcome in our worship.

We propose that music, shall be as worthy an act of worship as the spoken word, our occasional part in it and our response to it.

For finally it is our desire to create for a certain period each week, out of worthy things, a wholeness of beauty and truth, an integrity of sound and sight and reason, which shall be its own reason for being and our reason for being there.

So, in conclusion, let me remind us of these words from the Greek scriptures in Hebrews 12:

"Therefore, let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe; for our God is a consuming fire."