

- Please join with me in the prayer for illumination. Open our hearts and minds, O God, by the power of Your Holy Spirit so that as the word is spread and proclaimed we may hear Your message with joy this day. Amen. The Gospel lesson is from Luke chapter 8 verses 26 through 39 Then they arrived at the country of the Gerasenes, which is opposite Galilee. As he stepped out one day, a man of the city who had demons met him. For a long time he had worn no clothes, and he did not live in a house but in the tombs. When he saw Jesus, he fell down before him and shouted at the top of his voice, "What have you to do with me, Jesus, "Son of the Most High God? "I beg you, do not torment me" for Jesus had commanded the unclean spirit to come out of the man. For many times it had seized him; he was kept under guard and bound with chains and shackles, but he would break the bonds and be driven by the demon into the wilds. Jesus then asked him, "What is your name?" He said, "Legion"; for many demons had entered him. They begged him not to order them to go back into the abyss. Now there on the hillside a large herd of swine was feeding; and the demons begged Jesus to let them enter these. So he gave them permission. Then the demons came out of the man and entered the swine, and the herd rushed down the steep bank into the lake and was drowned. When the swineherds saw what had happened, they ran off and told it in the city and in the country. Then people came out to see what had happened, and when they came to Jesus, they found the man from whom the demons had gone sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed and in his right mind. And they were afraid. Those who had seen it told them how the one who had been possessed by demons had been healed. Then all the people of the surrounding country of the Gerasenes asked Jesus to leave them; for they were seized with great fear. So he got into the boat and returned. The man from whom the demons had gone begged that he might be with him; but Jesus sent him away, saying, "Return to your home, "and declare how much God has done for you." So he went away, proclaiming throughout the city how much Jesus had done for him. This is the word of the Lord.

- Thanks be to God.

- The Old Testament lesson is from 1 Kings chapter 19 verses 1 through 15a. Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done, and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword. Then Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah, saying, "So may the gods do to me, and more also, "if I do not make your life like the life "of one of them by this time tomorrow." Then he was afraid; he got up and fled for his life, and came to Beer-sheba, which belongs to Judah; he left his servant there. But he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a solitary broom tree. He asked that he might die: "It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life, "for I am no better than my ancestors." Then he lay down under the broom tree and fell asleep. Suddenly an angel touched him and said to him, "Get up and eat." He looked, and there at his head was a cake baked on hot stones, and a jar of water. He ate and drank, and lay down again. The angel of the Lord came a second time, touched him, and said, "Get up and eat, "otherwise the journey will be too much for you." He got up, and ate and drank; then he went in the strength of that food 40 days and 40 nights to Horeb the mount of God. At that place he came to a cave, and spent the night there. Then the word of the Lord came to him, 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." He 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. Then there came a voice to him that said, "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." Then the Lord said to him, "Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus." This is the word of the Lord.

- Thanks be to God.

- Will you join me in the spirit of prayer? May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our collective hearts be acceptable, O God, our rock and our salvation. Amen. The phone rang. Immediately I sense that this was not the typical voice of my 14-year-old I-love-life-boarding-school son. Now for the record, we are not rich and Nathan is not bad. Nevertheless, every fall he is boxed up and shipped off to a New Jersey boarding school. Nathan's conversation didn't begin with the normal pleasantries. Hi, mom. How are you? What you been up to lately? No, instead Nathan launched into this lament about a created short story he had written for English class. He said to me in a rather abrupt way, I am going to read this to you and I want you to listen and you tell me what grade you think I should have made on this paper. Well, as I listened I tried to do so objectively. I tried to forget that I am Nathan's proud parent. I wanted to give this English professor the credit due a teacher in a nationally acclaimed prep school. Well, Nathan began to read. And honestly as he read I tried, honestly I did, I tried to convince myself that this wonderful paper that he was reading must have received low marks because without a doubt it was filled with misspellings and punctuation errors and all these things that I could not see through the hearing of it. And then Nathan read on. And he rather artfully described this wonderful scene of an elderly hermit who lived in a bleak winter forest. And I was sort of taken into this whole story. And then all of a sudden a sentence came that shattered my objectivity. In the midst of his description, when he talks about this austere yet peaceful environment, he says, the silence echoed. Well, I guess I must have let out this sigh of appreciation for the rich symbolic imagery, and Nathan stopped me short. And he said, "You like that?" Before I could even answer he went on and he said, "You know what my teacher wrote about that "on my paper? "He wrote 'not possible'. "And when I asked him after class why not "he said, 'How can silence echo "'when it doesn't make a sound?'" Well, so much for my objective analysis. All I could think of throughout the reading of the remainder of the paper was how little this English professor knew about silence. I know silence echoes. I've heard it. I mean, having lost a child to boarding school and another son to Duke University, and a husband to cancer, I know something about the sound of silence. Now clearly I don't know everything. I don't know as much as the prisoner incarcerated on death row. I don't know as much as the patient awaiting test results. I don't know as much as the lonely elderly in the nursing facility. But I do know enough to know that silence has the capacity to echo. And now you see why out of those lectionary verses that were read today, I was grabbed

by Elijah's encounter with the divine stillness. I nearly laughed in solidarity with my poetic son when I read these two phrases back to back. The sound of sheer silence, period. When Elijah heard it. Mr. English professor, you may have a string of degrees behind your name, but you sure don't know much about silence. Trust me, it can be heard. So what does it take to hear it? To some it takes going to hell and back. Look at poor Elijah. Bless his heart, he has just stood before King Ahab and confronted him with his apostasy. He has challenged queen Jezebel's Baal prophets to a contest. The deal is this. Both sides will build altars on Mt. Carmel and then they will ask God to send fire upon the altar. And the god who complies will be considered the real bonafide, authentic, legitimate God. Now to add drama to the challenge, Elijah pours water on his altar. A big show off. Need I tell you who wins? I didn't think so. Elijah then has the 450 prophets of Baal slaughtered and Jezebel in retaliation says to him, "You're next, bud." Well then of course Elijah is fearing for his life, runs away, goes to Beersheba. He is going as far south as he can and still be in the settled cultivated land. But that's not far enough. He lives his servant there and travels yet a day further into the wilderness. And there we find him under an isolated broom tree praying for death and then falling asleep. Clearly the work of a prophet is frustrating and exhausting business. God seems to understand. God lets him rest and gives him food, enough nourishment to last him for his long journey all the way to Mt. Horeb. And at this point Elijah then makes his residence in a cave. Now, I've always thought it was rather ironic that this ninth century BC Arnold Schwarzenegger who has just blown away 450 Baal prophets, runs and hides at the threat of a woman. Maybe it's true, hell hath no fury like a woman's scorn. My late husband used to describe me by modifying the words of David Banner right before he turned into the Incredible Hulk. You remember that? He used to say, and my husband would say of me, "Don't make her angry. "You wouldn't like her when she's angry." Well, to say that Elijah was did not like Jezebel when she was angry would be a gross understatement. In fact he was terrified of her. So here's Elijah holed up in a cave when all of a sudden he's told to go out and to wait for the passing by of the Lord God. Now I don't know what you would expect if someone told you to go out and wait for God to pass by. I don't know what you would expect. But we aren't told, but I think clearly it would be accurate to say that earthquake, wind and fire would just about sum it up. If you look at the expectation of the prophet Isaiah, you can get a clue. Hear Isaiah's words. And in an instant suddenly you will be visited by the Lord of Hosts with thunder and earthquake and great noise with whirlwind and tempest and the flame of a devouring fire. That's the way theophanies, divine appearances, occur. God appears to David on the wings of the wind. God appears to Moses in the burning bush. And don't forget God has just appeared to Elijah by igniting a very wet altar. Clearly, Elijah would have anticipated God to be in the earthquake, wind and fire. But God is in none of it. God is in the sound of sheer silence. The still small voice. The low murmuring sound. Or to put it in the words of poet John Keats, "And then there crept a little noiseless noise "among the leaves born of the very sigh "that silence heaves." Fortunately Elijah didn't live at the end of the 20th century. Today, competing voices drown out the voice of silence. They are many and their name is Legion, and like those that possess the Gerasene demoniac, they plead against annihilation. They con us into believing that truth can be found in those things that make the biggest show and possess the greatest noise. Last week I discussed this sermon with one of the ministers in the Wilmington District and he asked me, "Have you seen 'The Wizard of Oz' lately?" Well, it's been a long time. So I went straight to Blockbuster, rented the colorized version of the 1939 movie. To watch the "The Wizard of Oz" during office hours legitimately must be akin to Elijah napping and eating cake in the middle of the day with God's blessing. What a treat. As I watched, I got the point. Dorothy and her companions are fooled by wizardry. They believe in the smoke and the fire and the

electronic voice. That voice by the way reminds me a lot of the voice that you can create here in Duke chapel. It's powerful. In fact, their belief in the wizard to bring wholeness depends on these very apparitions. And then suddenly everything changes. Dorothy's little dog Toto goes over and with his teeth grabs the curtain and opens the curtain and truth is exposed. Behind the curtain standing, manipulating the controls is a powerless little man. And when he realizes that he has been seen, he quickly closes the curtain. And in one vain attempt to maintain the illusion of power, he speaks boldly into the microphone. "Pay no attention to that man behind the curtain." Well, today there is not just one voice telling us to pay no attention to the powerlessness of the seemingly powerful. There are a legion of voices. And what we as Christians know and what the world so desperately needs to hear is that there is a still small voice of calm that has the power to bring wholeness. And that voice is Jesus. In Luke's account of the Gerasene demoniac, there's one part that I've always questioned. I have never understood why the townspeople were afraid of Jesus. I can understand why they might be afraid of demoniac. Anyone with any sense would run from a raving streaker who lives in tombs and has the Hulkish ability to break out of chains. But what I can't understand is why the local folk would be upset and nervous when they saw this same man fully clothed and in his right mind. Why would they fear Jesus, the giver of sanity? I can imagine why they would ask him to leave. For heaven's sake, he just destroyed somebody's livestock. But why be afraid? Interestingly enough in all three synoptic gospels, right prior to the incident of Jesus calming the Demoniac, Jesus calms the sea of Galilee. And oddly enough the disciples are fearful when they see Jesus' ability to bring calm. Perhaps not as obvious to you, but Elijah also demonstrates fear. He will not look at the silence but instead he covers his face with his robe. I sense today a fear in this one who only wants to bring calm into the midst of the chaos of our lives. During annual conference one night, I stayed up late with a college son of a friend of mine. He is a professed agnostic and has many questions about God. We talked until midnight, two hours I believe, about everything from creation to infinity. And finally I said, "I think we all need to get some rest." His mother had told me that he was having trouble sleeping at night. Before we went to our rooms, I called him by name and I said, "You need to listen for God to speak to you." I'll never forget his nervous response. He said, "Oh, Mrs. Harper, please don't tell me that. "Not before I go to bed. "I wont' sleep a wink all night." why do we fear? Why do we fear listening to the silence? That's the question I had to ask my self after my husband Lee died a year ago. I hated the calm, I hated the stillness that his absence created. And I wondered, why was I so fearful of the quiet? And then it came to me. I was afraid that I would listen, listen intently and hear nothing. Nothing at all. The thought occurred to me that I might be like the Canaanite woman who pleaded with Jesus on behalf of her demon-possessed daughter but got no answer from him at all. What if I really did stop, became quiet, listened and still heard nothing? It's safer to stay in the whirlwind to keep things stirred up. That way we don't know if the silence is speaking or not. Our daily routine of squeezing just as much as we can into 24 hours, of constantly telling people how busy we are, of cramming something into every idle moment, of keeping the noise level high and the thought level low. All this confusion saves us. It keeps us from getting into the deeper side of life. It protects us from finding out that our lives are nothing but shallowness and we are scared half to death. This was my first fear. What if the silence doesn't speak? And then came my second fear, what if it speaks and I miss it? Or worse yet, what if it speaks and I don't like what it says? I don't know what's more terrifying, a silence that's mute or a silence that speaks an unwelcomed message. Helmut Thielicke in his book "The Silence of God" claims that behind unanswered prayers are God's higher thoughts. What would it take for us to break free of our fear long enough to listen for God's higher thoughts? Clearly it would take realizing that God loves us, that we are cared for

unconditionally, that God wills our good. One of the most comforting text for me this long and lonely year comes out of Jeremiah. "For surely I know the plans I have for you," says the Lord, "plans for your welfare and not for harm, "to give you a future with hope." or in the words of the Apostle Paul. If God is for us, who can be against us? When we know that God is for us, we know that the divine calm is not to be feared. After hearing the low murmuring sound, Elijah steps out of the cave. Nevermind the fact that he's supposed to have been on the mountaintop a long time ago. Nevermind the fact that he didn't so much as stick his head out when the Lord passed by. The Lord meets him anyway. Isn't it wonderful how God is willing to speak to us even in our disobedience? In response to the summons, Elijah steps out to the entrance of the cave and his honest to God dialog. And sure enough God said some things that I know Elijah doesn't appreciate. For example, "Elijah what are you doing here?" After listening to Elijah whine a little while about his lousy life, the silence speaks again, this time with an even harder message. Elijah, go back. What? Go back to the administrative minutia? Go back to the relentless ringing of the telephone? Go back to the squeaky wheels that constantly demand grease? Do I have to? Yes. But in the midst of it all from time to time, be still and know that I am God. And when you feel tempted to feel every waking moment with meaningless activity, repeat these words to yourself a few times. Don't just do something. Stand there. Clearly we all need a divine sanction that tells us we don't have to constantly be doing something that we can stand still for a few minutes and think and feel. A little inner control over the chaos of our lives would not hurt any of us. In fact, it might pull back the curtain on the demonic powers and principalities that invade our everyday lives. It was Tuesday mid afternoon, the second day of annual conference. The middle of the pension report. Only one delegate elected to general conference and many, many more ballots yet to be cast. My election seemed less likely with the casting of each new ballot. To keep from losing myself in disappointment, I picked up a book and began to read. For one brief moment, God translated me out of that situation and into a realm of peace. I read as Dag Hammarskjold described his life at age 51. I thought to myself, "I'm almost there." He wrote about meaningless honors. He defined himself as trapped into the straight jacket of the immediate. And this is the vision for which he longed, to step out of all of this and stand naked on the precipice of dawn. Acceptable, invulnerable, free, in the light, with the light, of the light. Whole. What a vision. And isn't this what the silence says? Step out of all of this and stand naked on the precipice of dawn. Yes, go back. Face the frenzied pace. Only now be aware of the things with bells and whistles that demand to be possessed and yet invariably calm to possess. Be aware that true caring can only be demonstrated through honest attentiveness and be constantly aware of how critical it is to stop at regular intervals and commune with the divine calm. Mr. English professor, if you would just listen, the silence speaks.