When we moved into our current house back in 2017 something very odd happened the first night -- I was awoken by the sound of the ice machine dropping a load of ice into the ice bin. For those of you familiar with this sound you are also familiar with the fact that it is not terribly loud. But it woke me up because our new neighborhood was so much quieter than our old neighborhood. What was imperceptible at the old place was now not only audible but towered over all other noises in the house. The icemaker had not gotten louder but the accompanying sounds had grown much quieter. If any of you have ever seen *The Blues Brothers* you may recall the scene where Jake visits his brother Elwood’s apartment for the first time. As they stand there an L train goes by a few feet from the window making a horrendous noise. Jake asks, “How often does the train go by?” to which Elwood replies, “So often you don't even notice it.” That is what noise can do, it can become so commonplace that we don’t even realize its going on. And because we don’t realize how much noise there is, we also do not realize how much we are missing because it is drowned out by the constant cacophony of modern life. This is not a good thing because a lot can happen in the silence like we hear from Elijah today.

The passage comes after Elijah has been having a rough time – The Israelites have been running after other gods and killing prophets. Elijah has fled to a cave where God finds him. God then tells him to “Go out and stand on the mountain before the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by.” Elijah obeys and then we hear this famous passage, “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.” And God was in that silence. I spoke last week about why our society has grown more secular and offered my theory that we miss God because we evaluate Him based on consumerist criteria. Today, it seems, we have another reason for secularization – maybe our society does not hear from God because everything else is simply too loud.

Now I realize that this idea of the world being really noisy is a theme I return to now and then but since the world has not shut its big yapper, it looks like I am going to have to keep on with it. But before I proceed let me say that I think we here at St. John Chrysostom are doing a reasonably good job at spending time in silence. So, take what I am about to say as more of a pep-talk to keep up the good work and to remember that God is often in the silence.

There is a question in Christianity that goes back pretty much to its beginnings about inculturation. The term inculturation basically means the adapting of Church teachings to non-Christian cultures. In practicality what this means is that when the Christian message arrives in a non-Christian society how much of the preexisting culture can be adopted to Christianity. What is often considered the first council of the Church, the Council of Jerusalem in 50 AD, wrestled with this. The question before them was whether or not one had to be Jewish before one could be Christian. This may sound strange to us today but for the early believers, it was a real question because Jesus came in the context of Judaism. So, they were not sure if a non-Jewish culture could make the jump straight into Christianity potentially bringing some of their pre-existing culture with them. In more modern contexts, we see the results of this inculturation process in many places. Just for an obvious example think of the Christmas tree. As you might know they appear nowhere in the Bible. In their modern form they come from Germany, mainly courtesy of Martin Luther. Although their full origin is a bit murky at least part of the story is that pagan northern Europeans worshiped trees. Now, I am not saying adopting the tree to Christian worship is a bad thing; it is just an example of taking the items from non-Christian cultures and repurposing them for Christian purposes. But inculturation is a somewhat tricky business because when done incorrectly, rather than the non-Christian thing becoming Christian, the Christian thing becoming non-Christian. This wrong way of doing things can also be labeled as selling out to the culture. And here is where I want to return to the discussion of silence. We live in a very noisy world and the question becomes do we as Christian yell louder to be heard or do we set an example of being different, of being quiet?

When I was deployed in Qatar I was in charge of the “Liturgical Protestant” service. In deployed locations the Chapel is more of a multi-purpose room meaning a steady stream of services of varying shapes and sizes take place in that space. As it turned out the Liturgical Protestant service occurred right after the non-denominational service. That service always ended with some blaring praise music broadcast through the speakers of the chapel. After a few months the people in charge of that service decided they would just keep the music going as we prepared for the liturgical Protestant service. One day I had had enough and explained to them that the people coming to my service did not want noise, rather they came early so they could sit in silence. I don’t think they understood my point but they complied, probably more because of my rank rather than because they felt me endowed with any spiritual wisdom, but whatever the case they quieted down. But in that moment, one could see the contrast. There was one view of Christianity that said we just need to yell louder and one that said our witness is the silence. I assume you know where I come down on the debate but I think I have a good argument and that argument comes from our lesson today. This does not mean that we are to be silent all the time. There are times and places where noise is appropriate for as Jesus says when some Pharisees complained about the noise of some of his followers, “I tell you, if these were silent, the very stones would cry out.” But that time and place is not all the time. As Elijah discovered today sometimes the silence is the only place where we hear from God.

I once heard it said that those who do not know how to fast do not know how to feast. The point of this statement was that if we are not sometimes without, we do not know how to fully appreciate the times of abundance. My concern is that with too much noise we miss the subtlety and the nuance that is part of God. Our minds become so overstimulated that they simply cannot see or hear what God may be doing in our presence. There was a study out of Ohio State last year about the correlation between high dog ownership and lower crime in neighborhoods. One reason for this was, of course, the fact that dogs bark. But another reason was that people who have dogs take them for walks. And people who walk their dog notice more things about their neighborhood and are therefore are more likely to notice when something is not right. Walking reveals information that driving at high speed will not. In slowness we see more things. Similarly, silence will reveal things that noise will not. Sure, there are times for noise, just as there are times from driving fast, but slowness and quiet reveal items that are imperceptible with speed and noise. God’s voice is not always the loudest meaning that we need to spend time in silence so that we may be his own this day and forevermore.