There is a theory that gets repeated on a fairly regular basis, which states that every priest really only has three sermons and we just dress them up differently – something like a Hallmark Christmas movie (where it is always snowing but never cold). I am not sure if I only have three sermons, but I do know that the reading from 1st Kings scratches one of my favorite itches. And that itch has to do with the noise of this world and the fact that we need to be quiet in order to hear God – it is kind of an introvert’s manifesto.

To begin let me give you a quick summary of what happens in the Old Testament reading. The prophet Elijah has been having a rather rough time and God tells him to go and stand on a mountain because he is about to pass by. The text reads, “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.” For us in Wisconsin we are pretty familiar with the wind bit and since I am from California I am pretty familiar with the earthquake and fire stuff. But regardless of whether we have experienced these events they are not really the focus; rather the point of them seems to be their distracting nature. All of them demand our attention, like a crying child. In fact all of them, if significant enough, will let us think of little else. Not a lot of great theoretical physics or poetry has been done in a hurricane or forest fire. And so rather than think about these literally, it would seem the wiser course would be to think about those in our lives that demand an amount of attention that prevents us from hearing anything else. Or even put slightly differently what things have we allowed into our lives that garner our total attention and prevent us from hearing from God?

I came across a survey published by the Bureau of Labor Statistics entitled, “Time spent in primary activities and percent of the civilian population engaging in each activity, averages per day by sex, 2017 annual averages” – which basically tells you how much time the average American spends in a day doing various things. The least amount of time spent on an activity that they tracked was .07 hours which was dedicated to caring for and helping non-household adults. The second lowest was .13 hours, which was for time spent on religious and spiritual activities. If you would like to know the bigger categories where the average American spends time let me give you a few fun facts. Americans spend on average 1.18 hours a day eating and drinking (but I would suspect that the number is higher in Wisconsin at least for the drinking part). We spend an average of .72 hours a day buying stuff and 8.8 hours sleeping. As far as leisure activities go we average 5.24 hours a day of it, of which watching television occupies 2.77 hours. What I did not find in any of this was time dedicated to standing on the mountain waiting to hear from God - I guess it would be lumped in with the .13 hours for religious and spiritual activities. What the story tells us in broad terms is that the time in which we are not involved in essential activities, i.e. working, sleeping, taking care of the house and children is mainly spent on leisure. Now please hear me out, I am not about to say that we must cease all leisure activities, but I do want to reflect on something for a minute.

One thing I have been doing a bit of thinking about lately is something known as Occam’s razor. It is attributed to an English Franciscan friar by the name of William of Ockham who lived from around 1287–1347. His “razor” is a statement, which says, "entities should not be multiplied unnecessarily". What this means in practicality is that when you are presented with multiple explanations for why something happened, you should pick the one that involves the fewest hypotheses. It is sometimes summarized as saying the simplest explanation is probably the correct one. Because of this it is not a very popular theory with conspiracy types. Why I was thinking about this in terms of today’s lesson has to do with the various explanations of why we in the West and many around the world have become less religious as of late. There are lots of explanations offered, like what is taught in schools, the messages that people receive through the media or the feeling that science has explained everything. And all of these may play a part, but I wonder if a big piece of it might be the fact that we no longer have periods of the sheer silence that Elijah encounters today. If the message of today’s lesson is that God cannot be heard over the din of earthquakes and wind we need to ask how are we to hear from God when we can’t even pick up a box of Count Chocula in the grocery store without being serenaded by the 80’s band Poison reminding us that every rose does indeed have a thorn. Just to get slightly off track for a minute I discovered in writing this that there is a service known as “Store Streams” whose sole purpose is to provide background music for grocery stores. As they explain on their website, “Solutions are tailored to create the perfect ambiance and listening experience for your patrons.” I just love the fact that music is called a solution. But back to my point which is that I have to believe that some of the crisis of belief that we face today is the direct result of never being quiet for sufficient periods of time to hear the voice of God.

When I was a kid I was a notoriously sound sleeper. One time my family and I were staying in a hotel and in the middle of the night the fire alarm went off. Everyone in the hotel scrambled out of bed to see what was going on and after a while learned that a guy smoking in bed had set the whole thing off. Everyone in the hotel that night had a direct experience with the fire alarm and the consequences thereof…well everyone except me – I slept right through the thing and only learned of it the next morning when my family filled me in on the events of the night. The fire alarm had no effect on me because I simply did not hear it. My question in all of this is whether God may be saying all sorts of things to us that we simply do not hear, because we are not in a state where we can hear. Are not only those of us who are Christian, but those in the secular world, missing profound interactions with God because no one will shut up?

I am not accusing anyone here of only spending .13 hours a day dedicated to God, but I am suggesting that we could probably all do a little more, myself included. We could maybe take some time in silence. Maybe this means turning off the radio while driving, maybe it means taking thirty minutes away from the television to contemplate God. I don’t know what everyone’s lives look like and so do not know where there might be some space to stand on the mountain and wait for God to pass by. But I believe if we do not take that time we are severely limiting our ability to hear from God and to be changed into his likeness. If our main goal on this terrestrial ball is to grow in our love and service of God the more time we spend time listening for God the better we will do in that goal, so that we may serve God both now and forevermore.