

GRIEF AND PRESENCE-FILLED SILENCE

Scripture Reading - I Kings 19.11-13

Then Elijah was told, 'Go out and stand on the mountain before The Lord'. Then The Lord himself went by. There came a mighty wind, so strong it tore the mountains and shattered the rocks before The Lord. But The Lord was not in the wind.

After the wind came an earthquake. But The Lord was not in the earthquake.

After the earthquake came a fire. But The Lord was not in the fire.

And after the fire there came the sound of sheer silence.

And when Elijah heard this, he covered his face with his cloak and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave.

Alicia Buhler - REFLECTION ON THE LOSS OF A (HOPED-FOR) CHILD

Silence. Many who have walked the journey of grieving the loss of a hoped-for child have done so in silence. Infertility, miscarriage, stillbirth, and early infant death...these are losses that are so often intangible; they are losses shrouded in the mystery of what could have been. There are few memories, if any, but there are many, many shattered dreams. Arms remain empty and hopes for this one child that can never be replaced remain unfulfilled. Grieving the unknown has been, in my experience, one of the most difficult griefs. And so - more often than not the grief of reproductive loss is marked by silence.

For those grieving the loss of a hoped-for child, there is no earth-shattering wind, though it may feel as though a great wind has swept through our hearts. There is no earthquake, though we may feel shaken to the core. There is no blazing fire to call attention to our loss. The shift may be large or small, but there is no doubt that a family who has struggled to conceive a child or who has lost a child has been changed forever. Yet the world goes on spinning - seemingly unchanged. And the silence closes in.

But silence is not empty. Our text from 1 Kings says that the sheer silence has a sound. It is a sound that can be perceived. In fact, this text points to the truth that silence is full of presence. God was present to Elijah in the silence. What happens in the silence of grief does not go unnoticed by God. The tears cried in the privacy of a doctor's office, the anger expressed at the injustice of it all, the precious little one whom we will never get to meet - all of this is held in the embrace of God.

The silence is not empty, but full of presence. Most people who have grieved a death know something of the silent presence that remains long after the person we love has been gone. We may not talk about this much and different people will experience the presence in different ways, but it is no less significant. We have a special day in the Christian year when we acknowledge the silent presences among us. All Saints Day (1 November) is a time when we remember the Cloud of Witnesses that are present to us - those who have died but through their being have left an indelible mark on our lives. Very often on this day we light a candle in memory of those who are no longer with us. I have often found the quiet light of a candle to be a symbol of presence. Do light candles in memory of those whose silent presence remains with us still. I also invite you to light a candle to mark the shattered hopes and dreams that you may have carried or carry with you now. Or perhaps you will light a candle on someone else's behalf....

Part of the mystery of absence is that it is full of presence. Nothing is lost forever. All is held in the eternal embrace of God.