

Breath of silence

By [Isaac S. Villegas](#)

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*For more commentary on this week's readings, see the [Reflections on the Lectionary](#) page, which includes Villegas's current *Living by the Word* column as well as past magazine and blog content. For full-text access to all articles, [subscribe](#) to the Century.*

When the angel of the Lord told Elijah to go to Mount Horeb, Elijah knew he would encounter God. After all, Horeb was where God spoke to Moses with fire and to Israel with a storm. But for Elijah, God didn't show up as expected.

On the mountain, Elijah endured a fierce wind and an earthquake and a fire, "but the Lord was not in the wind...not in the earthquake...not in the fire." Not, not and not. The storyteller makes it clear to us, the readers, that God will not be found this time in the grand spectacles of power. Instead, silence: "After the fire a sound of sheer silence," or as another translator puts it, "the sound of faint silence."

I've been learning to pay attention to the silence, to the God who comes to us in moments of speechlessness. Like last Sunday, when Kendra said at the end of her congregational prayer, "And now, O Lord, hear the prayers we offer in silence." As I sat in the quiet stillness, I could hear the faint breath of the person sitting in the pew behind me, her gentle inhale and exhale.

I remember that when Jesus came back from the dead to be with his disciples, the scriptures say that "he breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit.'" In our prayerful silence, I wonder if I can hear the Spirit in my neighbor's breath, as the life of Jesus circulates through our bodies at rest in God's presence—the church as the body of Christ, alive with the breath of the Holy Spirit.

In their prayer guide, the Benedictines describe the moments of quiet during their worship as "liturgies of silence," which are "a constant epiphany of the Spirit" in which the praying body opens itself to the God who announces her presence in

wordless stillness: the Holy Spirit's breath.

A sound of faint silence.