The Courage Born in Silence (Summer Saints: Howard Thurman)
A sermon preached by the Rev. J. Thomas Buchanan on June 21, 2026
Covenant Presbyterian Church

At that place [Elisha] 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; when you arrive, you shall anoint Hazael as king over Aram. Also you shall anoint Jehu son of Nimshi as king over Israel, and you shall anoint Elisha son of Shaphat of Abel-meholah as prophet in your place. Whoever escapes from the sword of Hazael, Jehu shall kill, and whoever escapes from the sword of Jehu, Elisha shall kill. Yet I will leave seven thousand in Israel, all the knees that have not bowed to Baal, and every mouth that has not kissed him."
(I Kings 19:9-18, NRSVue)

I *do* love this story we just read from the Old Testament! Elijah doesn't sit in this cave as a serene spiritual master. That's one of its gifts. The scripture doesn't place him at Mount Horeb glowing with quiet confidence, ready to receive a timeless lesson about prayer. Elijah comes to the mountain exhausted. He comes *afraid*.

In one moment, he's living in a season of high drama and real danger, of seeming *triumph*, after confronting the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel, after seeing fire fall from heaven, after what might have appeared as the great vindication of his prophetic ministry. And then, almost immediately, everything changes. Queen Jezebel threatens his life, and Elijah runs. He goes into the wilderness and sits beneath a broom tree. He asks that his life might be over. By the time he reaches the cave, his body is depleted, his spirit is frayed, and his imagination has narrowed around one terrible, apparent truth: "I alone am left."

That's how exhaustion often speaks. It convinces us that everything depends on us. It tells us that no one else understands. It shrinks the world until the future seems no larger than our own

depleted strength. Elijah has been faithful, bold, and brave, and yet he now finds himself in the wilderness, undone by his own fear.

I find it so tender in this story the way God *cares* for him *before* God *questions* him. Before the voice at the cave, there is *food*. Before the commission, there is *sleep*. Before God sends him back into the work, God lets him *rest*. His fear is taken seriously, and his weariness is met with mercy. And only after all that, does the question come: "What are you doing here, Elijah?" What are you doing here, in this cave, in this fear, in this loneliness, in this place where your courage has run dry?

Many of us know something about the cave, even if our lives don't look much like Elijah's. We know what it is to become tired from caring. We know the drain of trying to remain faithful in a world that seems to produce fresh reasons for grief every morning. We know the exhaustion of outrage, the weight of bad news, the fatigue that comes when justice feels slow and cruelty feels relentless.

In such a world, *faith* might feel like a constant summons to *respond*: to speak, to act, to resist, to remain vigilant. And much of the time, that summons is real. But a life lived only at that pitch will eventually exhaust the soul. Elijah has *spent* himself in public struggle. Now, in the cave, he must learn again how to *listen*.

Which brings us this morning to Howard Thurman, our second figure in this summer's series. Last week, Dolly Parton helped us think about joy, generosity, dignity, and the grace of turning one's gifts outward for others. Howard Thurman brings us into a quieter room. His voice is less familiar to many, but it is one we need deeply. Thurman was one of the great spiritual teachers of the twentieth century, and he understood with unusual clarity that the work of justice must be rooted in a rich inward life with God.

Howard Washington Thurman was born in Daytona Beach, Florida, in 1899, in the world of Jim Crow segregation. His father died when he was young, and he was raised in large part by his mother and grandmother. His grandmother, Nancy Ambrose, had been enslaved. She couldn't read or write, but she carried within her the memory of slavery and the deep wisdom of a faith that had survived it.

Thurman later wrote about how formative she was for him. She had listened to preachers read from Scripture in antebellum days, and she remembered that enslavers especially liked to quote Ephesians' words about slaves obeying their masters. She wanted nothing to do with that text. But she cherished the songs of Israel, the prophets, the stories of Jesus, the promises of deliverance, the God who stood with the lowly and made a way where there seemed to be no way.

So, from the beginning, Thurman learned that Christian tradition *could* be used to wound, but that it could also become a source of *life*. He learned that religion *always* carries *power*. The deeper question is what kind of power it carries, and whom it serves.

He went on to Morehouse College and then to Rochester Theological Seminary. He became a Baptist minister, professor, dean, preacher, writer, and spiritual guide. In the 1930s, he traveled with a small delegation of Black Americans to India, where he met Mahatma Gandhi. That meeting profoundly shaped him. Gandhi pressed the delegation with hard questions about Christianity in America, and Thurman came home with a deepened sense of nonviolence as a demanding spiritual discipline. It required far more than "strategy." It required the transformation of the inner life.

In 1944, Thurman and Alfred Fisk founded the Church for the Fellowship of All Peoples in San Francisco, one of the first intentionally interracial and intercultural churches in the United States. Imagine that in 1944: a worshiping community formed around the conviction that the divisions America treated as natural had already been overcome in the deepest truth of God.

Later, Thurman became dean of Marsh Chapel at Boston University, the first Black dean of a chapel at a predominantly white American university. And there, in Boston, he became an important influence on a certain young doctoral student named Martin Luther King Jr.

When we think of King and the Civil Rights Movement, we rightly remember Montgomery, Birmingham, Selma, and the March on Washington, and the jail cells, the bridges, the dogs and firehoses. But beneath all that, ran deep underground streams of spiritual formation: the Black church, the teachings of Jesus, hymn-singing, the discipline of prayer, the strength of ordinary people. And among those streams was the thought and witness of Howard Thurman.

King knew Thurman personally. He read him. He drew strength from him. And one of Thurman's books, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, became a spiritual classic of the movement. Published in 1949, it revolves around a question as direct as it is devastating: What does the religion of Jesus have to say to people whose backs are against the wall?

For Thurman, that was no abstract question. Jesus himself was a poor Jew living under Roman occupation. Jesus belonged to a people constrained by forces greater than themselves. He knew the pressure of empire, the vulnerability of the poor, the suspicion directed toward those without power. Thurman wanted Christians to see Jesus from that underside of history, from the place where the disinherited know in their bodies that the world is not arranged for their flourishing.

This past Friday, our nation observed Juneteenth, recalling June 19, 1865, when enslaved people in Galveston, Texas, finally received the news that they were *free*, more than *two years* after emancipation had been proclaimed. The day carries both celebration and ache: freedom declared, freedom delayed, freedom still awaiting its fuller embodiment. Thurman's life unfolded within that difficult space. He asked what freedom means when the law may have changed, but fear still governs the body; when chains have been struck off, but the soul still bears the pressure of a world organized against its dignity.

It's from within that struggle that Thurman names three great dangers pressing upon the souls of the oppressed: fear, deception, and hatred. These are *spiritual* dangers, not just emotional ones. Fear teaches the body to contract and the spirit to hide. Deception can become a survival strategy when truth-telling carries too much risk. Hatred may feel like strength for a while, especially when dignity has been denied, but it gradually gives the oppressor too much power over the inner life.

Thurman was asking what kind of soul could resist evil without being remade in evil's image. What kind of inward life could sustain truth when lies are rewarded? What kind of communion with God could make courage possible when fear seems entirely reasonable?

That brings us back to Elijah at the mouth of the cave. The story says there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces. Then there was an earthquake. Then fire. These are the sorts of signs we might expect at the mountain of God. They belong to the landscape of Sinai and revelation, to the memory of divine majesty.

But Elijah doesn't meet God in any of these. For him, in that moment, God comes in what many of us learned to call "a still small voice." The Hebrew here is beautifully elusive. Some scholars have rendered it "a thin silence," others "a gentle whisper," but I still remember the phrase my Hebrew professor offered in seminary: "the sound of silence inexpressible." However we name it, the story leads us to the edge of a great mystery. The exhausted prophet is met by a presence that reaches beneath his fear, beneath his weariness, and into the deepest place where courage might be born anew.

There is a kind of noise that keeps us from hearing our own souls. There is the noise of the world: breaking news, urgent alerts, endless argument, the steady churn of anxiety. There is also religious noise — the pressure always to be useful, the need to prove our concern, the temptation to mistake agitation for faithfulness. We might even begin to imagine that quiet itself is a betrayal of the world's urgency.

Howard Thurman helps us resist that confusion. He teaches that silence can be a form of courage. The silence he commends is a listening so deep that the soul remembers God, before returning to the world that God loves. For Thurman, the inward life was the necessary ground for public faithfulness, because if it's fear that rules the soul, our work for justice becomes frantic and reactive. If hatred rules the soul, our resistance begins to resemble exactly what it opposes. If despair rules the soul, we may keep doing good things while inwardly surrendering any possibility of good news.

The struggle for justice needs people with *deep roots*. Think of the Civil Rights Movement at its best. It certainly required strategy, organization, legal brilliance, and political pressure. It required people willing to march, sit in, register voters, and place their bodies in harm's way. But it also required songs sung in the dark. It required prayer meetings, and Scripture, and wise elders who knew how to say, "Child, keep going." It required an inward discipline to face hatred without *becoming* hate, to face violence without surrendering dignity, to face delay without

losing sight of the promised land. That's the gift Thurman offers us, reminding us that it is in the spiritual life where the work of justice finds its strength to endure.

This is especially important for a congregation such as ours, for we *do* care deeply about the shape of the world: about hunger and violence, inclusion and democracy, creation and peace. We come to worship carrying real concerns and a genuine desire to live faithfully within them. Yet we also have to ask how we can keep caring without being consumed, how we can remain engaged without becoming brittle, how we can seek justice from a place deeper than outrage.

Elijah goes into the cave convinced that he's alone, but in the silence, God tells him the truth: There *is* still work to do, but there are companions he has not yet seen. There are seven thousand who have not bowed to Baal. There is Elisha, who will come alongside him and after him. The silence does not mark the end Elijah's calling. It *returns* him to his calling with a wider horizon. God's quiet voice frees Elijah from the lie that everything depends on him. It gives him back to the world with the severe mercy of knowing he is neither abandoned *nor indispensable*.

There is freedom in that. We *are* called, and we *are* responsible for the work given to us. But the work is God's before it is ours. God has companions we do not yet know about, reserves of grace we have not yet imagined, and voices still speaking in places we have not thought to listen.

Thurman helps us hear this gospel afresh because Jesus stands at the center of his vision: Jesus among those whose backs are against the wall; Jesus among the poor, the threatened, the weary, and the forgotten. He of all people knows the power of empire, the loneliness of betrayal, and the violence human beings inflict upon one another. But through it all, he remains rooted in the love of God. He tells the truth. He loves to the end. And *God raises him up*.

This is the solid ground beneath Christian courage: Christ is risen. Death does not speak the final word. The world's noise is not the deepest truth. Love has gone down into the grave and returned – *bearing life*.

Thurman wrote of finding within oneself a place of quiet rest, a center that the tumult could not finally overcome. That place takes practice. It takes prayer. It takes Sabbath. It takes worship. It takes walking away from the noise long enough to discover that God has not stopped speaking. For some of us, that may mean literal silence, a few minutes each day when no device is asking for our allegiance. For some, it may come through music, through walking, through gardening, or even through simply attending to the steady rhythm of breath. For some, it may come here, in worship, when a hymn carries us deeper than our own thoughts. For some, it may come in the sacrament, in the quiet receiving of bread and cup.

But we all need places where the loudest voices of the world lose their authority over us, where fear is met by love, and where we remember who and whose we are. From that depth, we can return to the world with steadier courage and a more durable hope.

Friends, Howard Thurman's witness is a gift for days like ours. He teaches us that the work of love needs depth, that justice needs prayer, and that courage is born in the quiet places where the soul meets God. Elijah came to the cave emptied out and afraid. God met him there in the sound of silence inexpressible, and sent him back fed, steadied, accompanied, and called.

May it be so for us. May we listen beneath the noise. May we find again that quiet mercy at the center of our lives. And from that deep place, may we rise again with courage to do the work of love—to the glory of God. Amen.