

The Sounds of Silence

Part 6 of Sermon Series: *Living In Between*

a sermon based on

Luke 2:41-52

and delivered on

December 30, 2018

First Sunday of Christmas (Year C)

at

Cherry Valley United Methodist Church

Copyright © 2018 Rev. Mark A Harkness

“Hello darkness, my old friend. I’ve come to talk to you again.”¹ Those of you who looked at the sermon title in the bulletin, may have suspected those would be the first words of the sermon, this morning. You were right. But if you expected that the message today would be tied to the lyrics of that song, you’d be mistaken.

Although I enjoy listening to that song, it does have a certain dark quality. It even begins, “Hello darkness.” I think that’s the way we approach silence. Isn’t it? As often as any of us might just yearn for some peace and quiet, silence is uncomfortable.

In the quietest place on earth, the anechoic chamber at Orfield Laboratories in Minnesota, where it’s so quiet that the background noise is actually measured in negative decibels, the longest anyone has ever been able to tolerate the silence is forty-five minutes.² In fact, in order to stay in that room for even half an hour necessitates a chair, because in the absence of all sound, the human body can’t even balance itself.

I suspect even with the ambient noise in this room, many of us would have difficulty with forty-five seconds of silence.

So, why all of this talk about silence? In the Gospel reading today, we heard about the boy Jesus in the temple in Jerusalem. He was twelve years old. After that – until John the Baptist appears in the wilderness baptizing people in the Jordan River some eighteen years later – all we have in Scripture regarding Jesus’ life is ... silence. Monday – Christmas Eve – we gathered together to remember the nativity of Jesus’ birth in Bethlehem. Besides the two accounts of his birth in Luke and Matthew, we have only two other stories about Jesus before he was grown. There’s the account of the visit by the Magi, in Matthew, and the subsequent flight and return from Egypt. And, in Luke, the account of Jesus’ presentation at the temple, an event we recognize on Candlemas – February 2 – when the Church’s Advent-Christmas-Epiphany cycle concludes. But we want to know more.

In the other two Gospels, Mark starts with “the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God,” (Mk 1:1) and then immediately turns to Isaiah’s prophecy about John the Baptist, and his appearance as a voice crying out in the wilderness. John tells us that “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God,” (Jn 1:1) and that the Word came to people to overcome darkness; but before he even mentions the name Jesus, we hear (in only the sixth verse, “There was a man sent from God, whose name was John.” (Jn 1:6).

But we want to know more. Don’t we? Why?

We’re not alone here in the 21st century wanting to know more. There are ancient texts like the Infancy Gospel of Thomas that attempt to fill in the blanks, but excluded from Scripture for good reasons. We’re not alone in wanting to know more. The silence bugs us. To an extent it keeps us off balance like people standing in that anechoic chamber.

But we can know something about those silent years. Can’t we? Can’t we extrapolate from the story in today’s reading, when we hear that “every year (Mary and Joseph) went to Jerusalem for the festival of the Passover” (Lk 2:41) – not once in a while or fairly frequently, but every year – doesn’t that tell us that Jesus was probably in Jerusalem for the Passover on each of those years, in between? It tells us that Jesus was raised in an exceptionally devout household. That he made it to thirty years old, tells us that Joseph and Mary took care of him. His familiarity with Scripture tells us that he grew up immersed in the word of God. Mary’s devotion to him that kept her near even in her agony as she watched him die on the cross for our sake, wasn’t some late development, but a love that clothed her in such a way as to exemplify how love can bind us in perfect harmony like Saint Paul implores in that passage from Colossians. (Col. 3:14)

Maybe that silence tells us something else about Jesus’ childhood and early adulthood. Maybe that silence tells us that most of Jesus’ life wasn’t that extraordinary. Maybe the silence is there because there was nothing more of particular importance. Would Luke have even shared

the story about Jesus' presentation in the temple as an infant, if it weren't for Simeon and Anna? Think about that for a moment.

Except for his birth (to a virgin mother) and his ministry, there was really nothing exceptional about Jesus' life. He was just one of us. He got to grow up as a normal kid. He probably played whatever games kids played in those days. He did chores. He learned a trade. He kept the faith by listening and inquiring, and by devoting himself to the celebrations of God's love for his people. We may not know the details; but we know the result.

We're singing Christmas songs in worship, today, because it's still Christmas. But on the radio, the Christmas songs have been silenced – because Christmas is over. Already, the Valentine's Day decorations and supplies are appearing in the stores. But for us – we need to remember that Christmas has only just begun. The birth of Jesus is only the beginning of the story. The man he would become – the Savior he is – is what's most important. It's only because of those ordinary – silent – years when he was growing up that the Son of God is so fully able to be like one of us – to appreciate what it is to be human.

I don't doubt that God was continually at work in Jesus' life as he grew up. But maybe – it was in the same way God is at work in each of our lives. I believe that. Maybe the reason we don't always see it is because all the little miracles surround us like the hum of the world – miracles which we could only notice in complete silence if we could bear it.

Doesn't that say something about God's love for you? That most of his miracles, most of his love consists of things we just take for granted as ordinary strokes of luck?

Each of us here, has been surrounded by God's grace since the moment we were conceived. It's called prevenient grace. Prevenient – pre=before – venient=comes. Grace that comes before we can even appreciate what it is. Grace that God extends to every soul on earth. Grace that we don't notice except in silence and contemplation.

I'm convinced that Hell is nothing more than an anechoic chamber – not for sound in general – but for sound of God's gentle, loving cooing that we take for granted.

We are only a day away from a new year. One of the practices we engage in is the making of resolutions. Most of those resolutions are about making a significant or noticeable positive change in our lives – either by taking better care of our bodies by quitting smoking or losing weight – or maybe by growing in some other aspect like expanding our mind by reading more, or even becoming more intentional about our time with God so that our souls might grow.

Ironically, most resolutions don't last that long. That's how health clubs make money. They can sell all those annual memberships at a discount because they know few will actually use the facilities all year. It's not that we're failures, but that we want things to happen quickly and we doubt our selves.

But the same God who allowed thirty years for Jesus to grow up – the same God who took his time filling Jesus with a sense of his abiding love – that same God sticks with you even in the ordinary. He doesn't rush it – because he loves you. He doesn't rush you – because he wants you to know the perfect you he intended. He doesn't rush you because he wants to make sure you have time to experience all of his ordinary love.

As we end this year and prepare for the next, let us take time for the sounds of silence. Let us take time to put aside distractions so that – in the silence – we can hear and know the background hum of God's love – as we say "Hello Jesus, our old friend. Now we know the light again." AMEN.

¹ Simon, Paul. "The Sounds of Silence." Genius. Accessed December 29, 2018. <https://genius.com/Simon-and-garfunkel-the-sound-of-silence-lyrics>.

² Eveleth, Rose. "Earth's Quietest Place Will Drive You Crazy in 45 Minutes" Smithsonian.com (December 17, 2013) <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/earths-quietest-place-will-drive-you-crazy-in-45-minutes-180948160/#WzzuP623orUmke0b.99>