

Advent Week 3 Sermon in series "Silent Night"

December 12, 2021

Theme: Silence

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This Advent, we are meditating on the quality of silent nights as we approach Christmas Eve. It is our tradition as it is in many churches to hold a beautiful, candlelit service that tells the story leading up to Jesus' birth. Our lessons and carols culminate in the singing of the beloved hymn: Silent Night, while sharing the light.

*Silent Night, Holy Night, All is Calm. All is Bright. Round Yon Virgin, Mother and Child.  
Holy Infant, so tender and mild. Sleep in heavenly peace. Sleep in heavenly peace.  
(Glory to God Hymnal, 122)*

It is an idyllic image. I will never tire of listening to the children learn the lyrics and the sign language. But can I just get a show of hands as to whose entry into this world-- or whose birthing of their own children, was quiet and calm like this?

Strange then isn't it, that we associate our birth into this world as silent and holy? Sigmund Freud (God! help him rest in peace!) wrote that "we are born into trauma" and that trauma of being violently separated physically and psychically from the body that nurtured us forms "the nucleus of the unconscious." According to Freud, Birth is the first experience of anxiety.

(Freud, *The Interpretations of Dreams*, pp. 400-401)

Where, then, is the hint of noise, mess and trauma in our account of the Christ-child's birth? Now, I understand the need for modesty and wonder. I'm not asking to alter every Christmas carol. But what do we forget about the human experience when we lose our collective memory that this Holy Silence followed a physical and psychological trauma?

Our lessons and carols are not wrong. Babies do sleep 20+ hours a day as newborns. But, is sleep the holy silence we are worshipping when we sing the song? Do we all wish to return to a state of adored unconsciousness?

Our Christmas Eve services just don't tell the whole story in our sanctuaries... year after year. Funny how that happens, huh? How often do we gloss over the pain and loss in church? -- Not just in formal liturgy but also in casual conversation... *I'm fine, and you? Good. All Good.*

Silence is not always good. Beyond the calmness of sleep, many of us spend our lives afraid of silence. We fear silence because it reminds us of absence. It can be a sign of our failure or our oppression, a symptom of our despair or an indicator of an estranged relationship.

When I visit new parents, they usually tell me about the events of the birth and how little they are sleeping at night. The stories are action-packed and animated. On the other hand, when I

visit the bedside with a family after the death of a loved one, there is a stillness that lingers. The air is heavy like nightfall. Words are not enough. I notice long pauses between conversation.

Is this too, not an image of a Silent Night? I wrote another verse to the hymn.

*Silent Night, Holy Night. All is done. Gone from sight. Wise-eyed mother, mourning her child. Holy Servant, so truthful and kind. Sleep in heavenly peace. Sleep in heavenly peace.*  
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Is there a more wordless image than the place where Jesus breathed his last? Calvary represents more than the finality of the death of someone we love but our failure to protect the vulnerable when our fears turn to violence. Golgatha presented a real problem for 20th century theologians who seriously grappled with the evil of the Holocaust especially in light of Christian anti-semitism and complicity. One described this “place of the skull” as “a horror unredeemed.”

(Davies, O. & Turner, D., *Silence and the Word: Negative Theology and Incarnation*, 185-200)

But it is not without an invitation to a better future. The terror of Calvary is an invitation to the seeker of faith to eschew Christian triumphalism that preaches simple victories over death and makes enemies of other faiths. In the places marked by the memory of the departed, the weight of silence asks us to step into the “unbearable ambiguity” and the selfless charity that defined Jesus’s final days.

(MacKinnon, Donald as quoted in article above)

In such a silence, it has been my experience that absence and presence co-mingle in possibility. We may not return to our former state, but we may yet meet our Beloved in a new form like the women and disciples who encountered the resurrected Christ. We may yet find others to bear burdens and embrace joys. We may make a community with whom we can practice the hope of resurrection.

This time of year along with singing carols, it is also a tradition to read the royal proclamation of Isaiah 9:6:

*For a child has been born for us,  
a son given to us;  
authority rests upon his shoulders;  
and he is named  
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,  
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.* (Isaiah 9:6, NRSV)

Perhaps, this year, we should be reading further into the Book of Isaiah, in a section known as Second Isaiah, which seems to be written in a different historical context than First Isaiah. Second Isaiah was written in the same e-ra as the 39th Psalm. It was composed at the

same time as wisdom literature like Ecclesiastes, which recognizes there is a season for everything, to be born and to die, to mourn and to laugh, to speak and to keep quiet.

The exiles have returned from Babylon to Israel, and are trying to restore the Temple. They are recovering from the trauma of defeat and destruction. They are asking how these experiences relate to Yahweh's will. The prophet's words take the form of poetry infused with a silence that held both their present experience of terror and their future hope for a restoration-- too far out to see clearly. According to church historian, Diarmaid MacCullough the verses began as a witness to hold the collective trauma and to preserve the history of a community's wounds, but over time, an image of a silent, suffering servant emerged in the imaginations of the readers. This possible messiah was anointed not just by divine power but through human vulnerability.

(MacCullough, Diarmaid, *Silence: A Christian History*, pp.22-23)

For Christians, this is the Christ child for whom we wait. This is the Christ who waits with us through the traumas of our births, the sufferings of our lives, and the last words of our deaths. This is the Christ that waits on us when we leave all these things and our world behind and enter fully into the peace of God.

When my daughter was born and put on a ventilator for several months, I remember reading that trauma was the recognition that "We are living one breath away from the unbearable."

When we become constantly aware of our mortality and the tenuous nature of our existence, trauma begins to affect how we think, feel and act. A world-wide pandemic of a respiratory virus that literally has taken away the breath of 5.3 million people around the globe has understandably affected how we worship and express what we believe.

Some of this shift in consciousness and behavior is good. We take more precautions when we are sick, not to spread our germs. We have paid more attention to the social fabric that binds us together. We have paid forward more resources to those who are vulnerable and marginalized. Some shifts are different and difficult to process. We are still figuring out who we will be, what we will believe, and how we will express these things both literally and figuratively.

Trauma affects the Brocas area, the left frontal lobe, which holds the language centers of the brain. This allows us to narrate what we are experiencing. But when we feel threatened by a near-death experience or abuse, our fight or flight instinct kicks in. The limbic system - which is the seat of our emotions -- ignites and the amygdala floods our bodies with hormones and neurochemicals that drive up our pulse and reactivity. Meanwhile the higher thinking part of our minds which controls our executive functioning shuts down. In order to survive, we become instinct and intuition. We postpone the effort to make sense of what could end our existence if the threat of death succeeds.

(van der Kolk, Bessel, *The Body Keeps Score*).

I have heard more than a few people express a loss of language to describe what they feel and believe now. Some continue to feel a loss in spiritual imagination and religious inclination that set in during the first few weeks or months of the pandemic. I empathize deeply with this. In many ways, religion is a language. It is a symbolic realm of ritual, music and words. Even the habit of church-going is an act of meaning-making and expression of some belief you wish to embody. These actions are not our relationship to God, but nevertheless, they are powerful outward expressions of our intentions to be in relationship with the Divine..

It makes sense to me then that in a period in which I feel we have all experienced a collective trauma, that I hear more confessions like:

“I don’t have the words to pray anymore.”

“Church isn’t the same for me now.”

“The liturgy and the people feel unfamiliar. I keep expecting to feel the way I did, but I don’t.”

“I find I need more time in open spaces, out in nature, or more time to sit in silence.”

“I don’t know how I did so much before. My schedule was packed including Sundays. I need a sabbath from the performance of doing and believing it all...”

Does any of this sound familiar? It does for me. On one level, it sounds like a form of social anxiety. I can hear in the concerns, some of the anxiety and isolation I heard from my own kids upon facing the return to in-person school. They wondered if they could be who they once were. They worried others expected them to be something they were not anymore. Of course, as they got in the habit of going to class again and reconnected with friends, some of their estrangement disappeared.

But the confessions also echo my own feelings in the early years during my daughter’s medical fragility. I remember feeling overwhelmed by the sheer volume of words in our Presbyterian worship. It seemed like we were gathering together to describe and explain God rather than simply be in awe-ful wonder.

At home or in prayer groups, I found the moments of silence to be worshipful as they were a chance to be in the loving presence of the divine and others. Did you know that natural silence is not complete absence of noise but the muted sounds of creation all around us?

In quiet contemplation, I felt connected to an energetic field that could span the universe and eternity... But in the sanctuary, I felt the gap between what was said and what could not be put into words.

Noticing I didn’t preach, someone asked me “have you lost your faith?” I told them it felt like quite the opposite, that having stared into the abyss of near death and near loss, I felt my faith as an undeniable trust in the face of uncertainty. I can still remember the polite shock when I answered, “what I have lost is my language for belief.”

“Unnameable, unthinkable God,” prays Stephen Mitchell’s translation of Psalm 39, “lord of the living and the dead, you know how fragile is everything we love.”

(Mitchell, Stephen, *A Book of Psalms*, pp. 22-3)

When my daughter was still a toddler, breathing through a tracheostomy and unable to speak, I went to see a theologian who had written about her own loss of language after a period of trauma. For three years, she suffered constant migraines rendering it impossible to read until the danger she experienced had passed.

(This biographical detail is also explained in the book she wrote after that period)

(Farley, Wendy, *The Wounding and Healing of Desire*, Introduction)

She told me “I don’t think anyone who has walked through the fire, ever experiences religion the same.” Friends, we have all walked through a fire together for the last 21 months. It is ok that we are not the same. And if we walk through this time of transition with an intention of presence and listening, the rituals and the language of our religious life as individuals and a congregation may feel different and difficult. But they also may come to burn through some half-truths and habits that are not serving each of us well.

Across several translations, Psalm 39 speaks to the silence that accompanies trauma by confessing that the words the psalmist once had fail her now. The King James Version proclaims “I was mute with silence, I held my peace even from good.” When the psalmist finally speaks to God, she asks “what is the measure of my days, that I may know how frail I am? You have made my days as handbreadths,...even at our best, humankind is but vapor.”

“And now Lord, what do I wait for?” asks the author of Psalm 39. It is a question worthy of our Advent season for it is rooted in humankind’s constant struggle with uncertainty and our fear of the passing of time.

Let us be mindful in the long nights of winter, that it is not the triumphalism of Easter’s resurrection we are counting the days for right now. What we wait for is the tender emerging of an infant in all his wonder and vulnerability to encounter the world in its beauty and its pain anew.

This Christ child, like many of you, won’t have the words to speak of his experience and his beliefs for many years after his entry into the world. When he does find his voice, he becomes the prophet who stands for the poor and oppressed, challenges the corruption of authorities, and teaches his followers how to heal and to pray.

But there will be times:

like in the discernment of solitary prayer,  
in the face of temptation,  
during his own suffering  
And in his immediate death,  
that he dwells in silence.

The silence of Christ is as important as the sermons he preached. For in them, Christ teaches us not to fear our wounds, our doubts and our loss of things to say. The love of Christ and the

hope of resurrection run deeper than the toxic positivity that pervades our culture and infects our belief systems with its cheap compassion and simple solutions.

There is an Arthurian legend of the Holy Grail that speaks of the many pilgrims who sought to find the cup from which Jesus drank at the Last Supper and which Joseph of Arimathea used to collect his blood at the crucifixion. The grail was rumored to offer its recipient eternal life. The knight who guarded it lived for what seemed forever but grew in age and frailty. He was known as the Fisher King. When pilgrims found him, he was feeble and wounded. Yet, no one could defeat him with force nor convince him to hand it over through pleading their case. Only the one who recognized the knight's wounds and asked, "What have you been through?" could gain access to the grail, the cup of eternal life.

Perhaps, you will not manage a "Merry Christmas this year," Perhaps, all you can manage is a "What have you been through?" But that, dear Beloveds, that question is still an authentic message of Christ's light in the world.

It is as sincere an expression of faith as the question of the psalmist, who asks:  
"And now, Lord, what do we wait for? Our hope is in you."

Do we wait to restore our faith in humankind? Do we wait for the next promise of eternal health? Do we wait for the former glory of our religious life? Do we wait for the perfect words to replace the memory of our speechless terror?

Or do we accept the silence, the doubt and the wounds as expressions of the Love that we have known for each other and for a God who loves us?

Let us pray:

*On a silent, holy night, you grant us a brief existence. May we receive it gratefully and gratefully give it back. Turn towards us, touch our spirits, O God, stay beside us, until the moment when each of us must step out into the final darkness -- through a silent, holy night. Amen.*

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