

## Making Room for Silence

Psalm 62

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North Decatur Presbyterian Church

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<sup>1</sup> For God alone my soul waits in silence;  
from God comes my salvation.

<sup>2</sup> God alone is my rock and my salvation,  
my fortress; I shall never be shaken.

<sup>3</sup> How long will you assail a person,  
will you batter your victim, all of you,  
as you would a leaning wall, a tottering  
fence?

<sup>4</sup> Their only plan is to bring down a person  
of prominence.

They take pleasure in falsehood;

they bless with their mouths,  
but inwardly they curse. *Selah*

<sup>5</sup> For God alone my soul waits in silence,  
for my hope is from God.

<sup>6</sup> God alone is my rock and my salvation,  
my fortress; I shall not be shaken.

<sup>7</sup> On God rests my deliverance and my  
honor;

my mighty rock, my refuge is in God.

<sup>8</sup> Trust in God at all times, O people;  
pour out your heart before God;  
God is a refuge for us. *Selah*

In this Psalm 62, the author feels like they are under attack. “How long will you assail a person?” We don’t know if the Psalmist is enduring physical violence, or verbal or emotional attacks. It doesn’t matter. Their experience of the world is threatening, something wants to hurt them.

What do you do when you feel this way? In the Psalm, there’s no talk of a counter-attack or retribution, no planning of revenge. The question is survival: “can I preserve myself when something wants me to come apart?”

The answer comes, not once, but twice: “*For God alone my soul waits... in silence.*” When you feel like you’re coming apart... let your soul wait for God in silence.

It sounds pious. But what can that really *mean*? Is there, beneath your skin, way down deep inside you, below the level of your personality, a “soul?” Is it true that where that soul is, it is safe in God’s care? That God protects your soul like a fortress—so that nothing can touch it?

For the next four weeks, we are walking together into the world of Howard Thurman. Thurman was a Black American mystical theologian who lived in the early and mid 20<sup>th</sup> century. I need to confess that mystics makes me nervous. Their thinking isn’t linear, they don’t make arguments. Thurman is like that—many of his books are collections of meditations, a few paragraphs that make you scratch your head and wonder what his connection was to what we call “the real world.” But Howard Thurman truly was one of America’s most remarkable spiritual personalities. He lived during the Civil Rights struggle, but he never went to the front lines to face the fire hoses. He meditated. He wrote prose poems. But his impact on the civil rights movement was as deep as any other. How could that be?

Just like those who taught the practice of nonviolent resistance, Howard Thurman taught people how to have the spiritual strength to face an enemy. He did that by exploring the interior

of the human consciousness. He found that everything that happens on the outside of us, also happens on the inside. Enemies outside have a parallel within; struggles outside are struggles within. Thurman saw that if you want to change what's outside, you have to figure out what's going on inside. Martin Luther King read Thurman right before the Montgomery bus boycott and leaned heavily on Thurman throughout his adult life.

This idea is so radical: that the world "out there" is not separate from the world "in here." Have you ever wrapped yourself around that idea? Reality isn't external to you. Whatever exists out there—enemies, friends, objects, work, light, dark, peace, war—it exists simultaneously inside of you as your minds make maps of the world and tries to determine relationships between all things. Howard Thurman explored this territory within himself, and he came to know the interior life so well that he became a guide for all of us. How can we ever hope to meet the challenges of a life outside, until we've faced the same challenges inside?

If you think I sound like I'm talking in riddles, I get it. I've been suspicious of mysticism for most of my life. If that's you right now, I get it. Stay with me. Keep your mind open. Even if you've never even thought of yourself as a mystic, by the time we're done with Howard Thurman, I can promise you'll want one of his books by your bedstand.

Where we begin our exploration of Thurman is with this thing called silence. Silence is a curious phenomenon. Most of us are accustomed to thinking about silence as something acoustic. The absence of noise. Silence, we think is the hush of early morning, or late at night. When the din of life settles down. No TV. No podcast. No leaf blowers. Quiet.

People say that silence is harder and harder to find in the world. A couple of years ago, Beth and I made a trip to Olympic National Park west of Seattle, Washington, to a part of the park called the Hoh Rain Forest. We went there not only because it is beautiful, but because it had been identified as one of the quietest places left in the United States—no planes overhead, no industry, nothing... just forest. It's spectacular. But even in the Hoh Rain Forest, you notice something about silence. *It's not silent.* Even in the quietest places, there is noise. Wind gathering leaves. Birds singing. Insects clicking and buzzing. Not just in the quiet parts of the rain forest—it's the same in your chair in the living room. Everything is quiet. But the clock ticks. The heat pump hums. The house creaks. Our world is constantly in motion. It is never still.

If you sit for a while in this world of tiny noises, after a short time, you begin to notice another noise. It is a voice. You know the one. It's yours. It's the voice in your head.

Most of time, you're not paying attention to the activity that's going on in your brain. But your brain is the most complicated object in the universe and it's constantly at work, processing information, helping you be dynamically responsive to the world. *My feet are cold. I need to renew my car registration. What's for dinner? Are those drapes crooked? What did my mother mean when she said that?* Conscious thoughts. Unconscious impulses. Many of them pushing you to do something or not do something or feel something. The voice in your head is talking all the time.

That's why it's so hard to sit in silence. It's why meditation, or silent prayer, is difficult. Thurman wrote, "the streets of our mind seethe with endless traffic. Our spirits resound with clashing, with noisy silences."

The result is that we don't like silence. We don't like being quiet. We'll do anything to avoid quiet. We'll turn put ear buds in or doom scroll on our phones or leave the TV playing in a room we're not even in, all so we don't have to be quiet. Even when we're with another person, we will rush to fill a lull in the conversation. The honest truth is that we we're afraid of being alone with our thoughts.

We aren't in control of them. Our minds are chaotic places. If we pay attention to the thoughts that come up when we're quiet, things come up that make us feel bad.

- I'm completely overwhelmed...
- I'm sad... about the shape of my life...
- I'm afraid... about our world...
- I'm ashamed... about who I am.

No wonder we're afraid of silence.

For us to risk silence there has to be something to gain.

It's this: according to Thurman, silence is a direct means of connection with God. Thurman experienced it. Mystics and contemplatives in every generation have affirmed it. The Psalmist, apparently, writing 2500 years ago knew it well. Silence is a doorway; that doorway leads to, among other places, God.

Nothing about this is automatic. Every silence you keep isn't profound. You won't enter into an ecstatic union with God after 90 seconds. Silence is not a technique. It is a learned practice. A practice of paying loving attention to the remarkable world within you.

Silence is a learned practice of caring for yourself. In silence, you learn to discern the true from the false, the consequential from the insignificant. In silence, you may discover clarity about who you are and what work is yours to do in the world. In silence, you discern answers to the most important questions in your life. In silence, you may find healing that comes from an experience of deep peace and find release from anxiety and fear.

My hope is that, at least for this month when we are studying Howard Thurman, every single one of you will take up a daily practice of intentional silence. For this first week, try 5 minutes a day. Or 2. Just make time for nothing. It's anathema to the American life. Do it anyway. Pick a time of day, choose a chair, sit in the chair, and be quiet. Pay loving attention to yourself. Pay loving attention to your body; let it release. As you encourage your body to release, then pay loving attention to the voices—to those wild, beguiling thoughts. One by one, as they pop into your head, notice them... and then let them go.

The first week or so, it may be enough for you to simply work on relaxing your body and noticing the thoughts that come into your head. Eventually, you may get familiar enough with the body and the impulsive thoughts, that you might try and listen for a voice from God. Our tradition says God speaks to us, all the time. The fundamental posture of our prayer is not speaking, it is listening. Listening in silence, for the gentle, wordless communication of God.

In the *Inward Journey*, Thurman notes that Jesus shows us what this looks like. Jesus would go away from the crowds to be by himself. Thurman writes magnificently about what Jesus used silence for:

this was the time for the long breath, when all the fragments left by the commonplace, when all the hurts and the big aches could be absorbed, and the mind could be freed of immediate demand, when voices that had been quieted by the long day's work could once more be heard, when there could be the deep sharing of the innermost secrets, and the laying bare of heart and mind.

Thurman shows so clearly what the practice of silence does for Jesus—and I think also for him and for you—a time of slowing, sifting, sorting, settling. Time to lower the heartrate. Time to go through the busyness of the day and gather in what's important and let go of what's not. Time to integrate the day's activity—the hurts and the joys. Time to clarify what matters. Time for you to share what's on our heart, with a God who loves you. God who is so close, they will never let your soul be moved or shaken.

This is the clarity, this is integration, this spiritual strength you need on the inside—that gives you the capacity to engage the world—and all it holds—on the outside.

We've talked this fall about the truth of the Creation—its wholeness, its harmony, its abiding goodness. You see it in the turning of the leaves, in the soaking rain, and in the incremental moments at dawn. That same wholeness, that truth, that abiding goodness is in you. You can find it beneath all the churning, all the false and clamoring voices, in what Thurman calls the Great Silence. There, in Great Silence within, is God, in communion with you.

“For God alone my soul waits in silence.”