There are so many kinds of quiet in this world.

*There is the silence of a empty room* – the absence of sound and people. Not a breath taken, not a movement at all.

*And there is the kind of silence when a full room becomes totally quiet.*

Listening for a soft voice to speak…
Or anticipating a concert to begin…

or when a group of high school juniors pull out their number 2 pencils,
    turn over the SAT test,
    and start furiously reading…

Frederick Buechner remembers going to a theatre in the early 80’s to see the movie *Ghandi* on its opening weekend.

“It was the usual kind of noisy, restless Saturday night crowd as we sat there waiting for the lights to dim with our popcorn and soda pop, girl friends and boy friends, legs draped over the backs of the empty seats in front of us.”
But by the time the movie came to a close with the flames of Gandhi's funeral pyre filling the entire wide screen, there was not a sound or a movement in that whole theater, and we filed out of there—teenagers and senior citizens alike—in as deep and telling a silence as I have ever been part of.

There is silence that connects us

and silence that separates us.

Silence that we embrace

and silence that we fear

In any relationship, silence can be toxic. The place where pain has seeped in and harsh words spoken and you have no clue whether the relationship can survive the hurt. So you exist in silence. Wondering. Frustrated. Sad. Angry. Bitter. Lost. Stuck.

Or you choose to be silent in order to hurt back. Intentionally give someone the silent treatment as a lesson.

But there are also those tender moments of silence, sitting on a couch with another person, feeling so close that words are not necessary.
It’s a comforting silence.  
A *knowing* silence.

There is the anxious silence that you find  
in the waiting room  
in any Intensive Care Unit.

The sad silence of the nursing home hallway  
where no one ever seems to come out of their rooms.

*And there are beautiful silences.*  
On the top of Lookout Mountain  
early on a fall morning  
when nobody else is around.

Sitting near a still lake on a warm day,  
watching the glassy water.

With God, there is a holy silence.  
The Psalmist writes, “be still and know that I am God.”

There are the holy moments of quiet  
When in the chaos  
God somehow reaches out  
to the crashing sea  
and calms them  
as Jesus did  
when the disciples were literally in a storm.

These holy, quiet moments are  
something beyond what we can explain,  
but comes with a silence full of awe and wonder.

And there is the other kind of silence with God.  
The kind that pushes our faith to the edge.
There are times when we pray and pray and pray,
   Longing for a word, a direction,
   *maybe just a hint of God’s presence*,
   a hint that we are not alone,
   and all we get is a wall of silence in return.

What we need goes way beyond a hint that God is breaking the silence.
We need God to FILL the silence.
Because we know ourselves all to well.
If God doesn’t fill the silence,
We will fill it with things that are nearly as satisfying.

    For the most part,
    we live in a culture that is uncomfortable with silence.

On a hike this summer, I crossed paths
with two different groups of people who had
individuals wearing headphones
with the echoes of music coming from their ear buds..

    Wearing headphones while hiking isn’t wrong.
    But it seemed…odd.

People who say they *love* silence are often put into one of two categories
   An enviable mystic
   Or a suspicious loner

    Because often,
    the silence we experience is the silence of loneliness
    and pain
    and we want anything to keep from experiencing it.

Often when I visit people who live alone in long term care facilities,
I find the tv blaring.
   Rarely is anybody interested in anything particular on television.
   The tv simple serves as background noise.
   As a way to break the silence of life.
And there is not an attempt to turn it off when I come in the room because that noise has become a thing of comfort.

I wonder if our conversations with God are not all that different. If we each had a pie chart representing our God talk Blue pie for the times that we talk about God Green for the times that we talk to God And purple for the times we let God speak to us I wonder what we’d find.

A young seminarian, looking for a way to better connect with God, asked Nadia Bolz-Weber, “Pastor Nadia, what do you do personally to get closer to God?” Before she could even realize it, she blurted out, “What? Nothing. Sounds like a horrible idea to me, trying to get closer to God. Getting closer to God might mean getting told to love someone I don’t even like, or to give away even more of my money. It might mean letting some idea or dream that is dear to me get ripped away.”

Silence, the kind that scripture talks about, isn’t for the sake of silence alone. Silence isn’t just a way to empty ourselves. To be free of the chaos.

The kind of silence our faith calls us into clears the way for God to speak.

Throughout the Bible,
when people sit in silence to listen,
the story doesn’t end with in a simple feeling of being refreshed.

Scriptural silence, the kind where we sit in the presence of God,
is not the Jesus version of a spa day.

When people sit to listen to God in scripture,
   they are moved.
   They are shaped.
   They are given directions.
   They are reminded of God’s power.
   They are pushed to respond to God’s love and care in real, tangible ways.

I think that’s why we don’t do it very often
when life seems to be going along just fine.
   Silence tends to push us out of our place of comfort.

Elijah was literally scared for his life.
He was hopeless.
He wanted to give up, hibernate for the winter as he sat at the edge of a cave on a mountain, listening for the voice of God.
   He looked for God in the wind
   And in an earthquake
   And in fire
      But encountered God’s voice in the sound of sheer silence.
God gave Elijah everything he needed to live that day
   To get out of his own pain and fear
   AND THEN, God gave Elijah instructions –
      told Elijah how to keep following God over days and weeks
to come to bring justice to God’s world.

Isaiah describes God who does not grow weary
God who will never be faint.

For those who are exhausted and ready to give up on life, Isaiah shares the promise of God who will carry them through.
   **Listen to me in silence….**
   **Renew your strength.**
Come close to me first.  
And then it is your turn to speak.

Silence is about making ourselves available to God.  
It creates space and place for God to show up  
And God speaks a word that we can’t speak.  
Words we can’t often imagine.  
Words that give us a way forward.

What is the word God has to say in the silence of our deepest grief,  
when our tears have run out,  
and we have laid down on our beds once again?

What word does God have to say as another boat of migrants,  
looking for a chance at life, drown at sea?

What word does God have to say after the sound of guns took over a concert hall while a country watches in horrified disbelief?

Sometimes – like for Elijah – God showed up in sheer silence.  
And other times, God comes thundering in.
Sometimes God speaks words of comfort to the deepest places of our hearts. And sometimes God speaks deep convictions that we are called to act out justice in this world.

I look out here,
and I see a deep and thoughtful group of people,
and I see a group of people who love words.
We often fill the silence.
We fill it up, quite often, with really good things.
But it leaves me wondering…
what deeper place does God have for us?
In what way might dislocating quiet be a gift for us?

It is often in silence where God changes the conversation. Where God changes OUR conversations.

We listen in silence,

we hear God’s voice,

and something new arises.

* * * * * *

The great Irish poet Seamus Heaney died two years ago at age 74.

After collapsing on a Dublin street,
he was rushed to a hospital
and then taken into the operating suite,
where he died before surgery could take place.

Minutes before he died, Seamus Heaney,
the poet who loved and mastered language,
communicated his very last words on this earth
in a text message
sent to his wife, Marie.
Two words in Latin: "Noli timere," which means, "Do not be afraid."

Heaney learned these words from Jesus,
from the story of Easter.
"Do not be afraid."

Heaney was raised in the Catholic Church,
but he had his quarrels with the church and with faith.

Nevertheless, there at the end of his life,
these old words came back to him.
His mortality drew him toward God,
toward the promise that our restless lives find their rest in God and
that we are surrounded by the promise of God's grace.
So, "noli timere; do not be afraid." iii

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After having a long conversation with someone debating whether to get involved in church, Fred Craddock gave this advice…

“Don’t make a career out of looking for God.
There are people who do that.
Too intense a search pushes away the very thing you search for.
Like trying too hard to have a good time.
You just work at it so hard you’re tired and have no fun.
Like trying to go to sleep: I must go to sleep,
I work so hard at going to sleep, I can’t go to sleep.
Like trying to make a friend,
just pressing so hard to have a good friend, you drive everybody away
and reduce them to silence.
Don’t do that.
If you were asking me how to find peace of mind,
I would say to you: let God find you.
After all you’re not the only one searching.
You’re searching for God, that’s true,
but God is searching for you.” iv

God is searching for you because God has something to say to you.
More than emptying ourselves.
It’s putting all our attention to the almighty God who directs our steps.

At the end of the day, God speaks into our silence.  
Promises that uplift  
And promises that challenge…

Don’t be afraid.

Do not worry.

I am with you.

I will deliver all who have need from oppression and violence and redeem their lives.
I will give you rest.

Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.

You will see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living.
Be still. Take heart. And wait for the Lord.

Ruth and Katie sing “Draw Me Near”...

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1 Frederick Buechner, from his daily devotionals, http://frederickbuechner.com/content/telling-silence, Originally published in The Clown in the Belfry
2 Nadia Bolz-Weber, Accidental Saints, 8
3 From a sermon by Tom Long on Day1, “Numbering Our Days,” November 8th, 2015, http://day1.org/6894-numbering_our_days__faith__science_series_part_7
4 Sermon by Fred Craddock, “Seek and You Shall Be Found,” based on Matthew 14:22-33, found in his collected sermons