



Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina
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MARCH 17, 2019
THE SECOND SUNDAY IN LENT
SIGHT, SOUND AND SILENCE: STILL LENT

Sounds of Faith: Silence
I Kings 19:8-13; Luke 5:12-16

(Silence for a minute or two.)

What do you do with silence?

Frank Valli sang that “silence is golden,” but sometimes it feels like lead. Sometimes silence just sits there, heavy and annoying. At other times we want silence, especially when the noise around us is overwhelming. How many movies, plays, and teachers have used that single word to bring order to chaos and quiet to a cacophony? SILENCE! All becomes quiet. Silence can be an irritant and it can be a gift.

As odd as it sounds (that statement itself is odd), silence is not merely an absence of sound. As with noise itself, there are many kinds of silence. There is:

- the silence of an early morning, before the alarm goes off, the sun comes up, and everyone begins to stir;
- the silence of night when day recedes, noise vanishes, and quiet wraps around you like a warm blanket;
- the silence that allows you to hear other sounds: birds, crickets, frogs, wind, rain, the sounds of creation;
- the silence after a violent storm—whether caused by nature or by human devastation;
- the silence when a fussy baby finally goes to sleep;
- the silence after an agitated teenager or adult slams the door and leaves the house;
- the silence at the end of a glorious piece of music, a stunning drama, or a profound speech;

- the silence that follows when the doctor says, “The tests have come back positive.”;
- the silence that takes over when that blessed word is spoken: “Cured!”;
- The silence of a sanctuary when you sit alone and pray;
- the silence of a written exam;
- the silence of a home the day after a funeral;
- the silence of a sunrise, a sunset, or a rainbow.

The wonderful thing about silence is that it opens our awareness to hear sounds that we otherwise might miss such as:

- the sound of our hearts beating—either gently or anxiously;
- the sound of our breathing—whether easy or labored;
- the sound of the room, the building, outdoors—wherever we are;
- and, according to scripture . . . the sounds of God.

After Elijah exposed the false beliefs of the prophets of Ba'al and made a sacrifice of them, he went on the run, fearing the wrath of Queen Jezebel. The once bold and brash prophet became a whimpering fugitive as he lamented his fate in the wilderness. He eventually found refuge in a cave in the holy mountain. There he was instructed to step outside for God was about to pass by. Elijah stood at the mouth of the cave and witnessed a windstorm so fierce it split rocks in two. He heard and felt an earthquake that shook the foundations of the earth. And he felt the heat of a fire that scorched the mountain and everything on it. Yet, God was not present in any of these violent manifestations of power which the ancients (and we) often attributed to God. It was not until all was silent that Elijah could hear the quiet whispers of God which brought him to his knees and made it possible for him to stand in faithfulness again. In silence, we often hear God.

Every year we follow Jesus into the wilderness—the wild, creative, fertile places of life. He was alone, but there was plenty of noise from animal life, wind, and rain—the normal sounds of the wilderness. He reflected, he fasted, he prayed. He might have sung the songs of his faith or even talked out loud as he turned ideas over in his mind—things we all do when no one else is around. Above all, however, his time in the wilderness was a time for silence and for listening.

Part of what Jesus heard as his retreat came to an end was the Tempter's voice. He heard that urge to abandon his loyalty to God and hand over his trust to a desire for temporal needs like food, pleasure, or possessions, things that are not evil and are, in fact, gifts from God. But they are not God.

He heard an invitation to follow his desire for power and influence and status, a call we often hear. He also heard the temptation to worship something that seemed more immediate and tangible than God, a whisper we have all heard.

Throughout those forty days, in the silence that helped prepare him for the life ahead, Jesus also heard the scriptures of his people, the values taught by his parents, and the admonitions of his rabbis. Had he not listened in the silence, he might not have been able to stand firm and resistant to the Tempter. Had he not listened in the silence, he might not have been prepared for all of the forms the Tempter would take in the years ahead. He valued the silence. He learned from it. He listened to it. He fortified his faith with it and the silence provided him with wisdom and strength.

Silence can be a significant part of our Lenten journey. Silence can help us listen and grow in faith in a variety of ways.

Joe Miller was a hospital chaplain when he stopped by a room to visit with a patient. They were interrupted by a phlebotomist who needed to draw blood. Joe sat silently and watched as a total of five people attempted to find a vein they could use. After a surgeon finally filled the precious vial and left behind an exhausted and hurting patient, the man turned to Joe and said, “Thanks for sharing my pain.”¹ Silence can bring comfort.

I can identify with Roland Wrinkle who calls himself “a fixer, a problem-solver.” As an attorney, he was always able to come up with a plan to reach

¹Joe Miller, “Reflection on Silence,” *The Christian Century* (August 29, 2018), 22-23.

a satisfactory result. Friends at church often came to him for advice. His family trusted that he had all the answers. In some ways he did . . . until his nine year old daughter developed severe psychological problems which took her through a succession of psychiatric institutions and group homes. On one occasion, when she called her dad and began to complain about everything at the facility she was in, Roland started to offer his usual gems of advice. But he didn't. He remained silent and listened to her ramble on. When she finished her litany of woes, with uncharacteristic hope, she said to her father, "Thanks for listening to me, Dad. That really helped. I feel much better now."² Silence can offer understanding.

In the spring of 2013, Ellen Nugent Harris got the call every parent fears. Her daughter had been killed in an accident while studying in Taiwan. Immediately, she said, a silence enveloped her, shutting her off from everything she had counted on, including her faith. When she told her friends that she could no longer pray, one of them stepped into her silence and came once a week for a year and a half to pray the prayers she could not voice. Eventually, she got to a place where she could begin to read the Bible again and to speak her own prayers. By sharing her silence, her friend had helped sustain her faith.³ Silence can be a place of companionship.

Ann Beams remembers her friend, a fellow minister who always made a point to be supportive of his colleagues. He served on committees, he attended special events, he built friendships across matters of disagreement. His world went dark when the governing body of his denomination took actions against his congregation that included charges and meetings and unwanted publicity. He was not shunned by his colleagues, but no one went out of their way to support him.

When his congregation was cleared of any wrongdoing, everyone congratulated him and acted as before. During a meeting, however, he asked to speak. He did not mention anything about the horror he had experienced. Instead, he talked about "the silence at the center of the noise—about the phone that never rang . . . his feeling of being deserted by friends in faith." He asked, "Where were you? . . . I didn't expect you to take a stand alongside me. It wasn't your battle. I did expect your friendship, your offers of a prayer, a shared cup of coffee. We could have talked about something else. Or we

²Roland Wrinkle, "Reflection on Silence," *The Christian Century* (August 29, 2018), 20.

³Ellen Nugent Harris, "Reflection on Silence," *The Christian Century* (August 29, 2018), 23.

could just sit together for a bit, not saying anything. Where were you?”⁴ Silence can be lonely and frightening.

Many of us can empathize with Lyn Pace who was shy and uncomfortable speaking up as a young man. In college, his inability to share his thoughts in classes or social situations became a real problem. His silence was a detriment for him and sometimes a hindrance for people around him. A professor finally recognized his problem and taught him, of all things, how to be intentionally silent. He helped him understand that silence has many forms and uses and how each can offer help or harm. Through contemplative practices like meditation, Lyn found his voice and the courage to speak his thoughts, to share his ideas, and to voice his concerns. Today he is a college chaplain who helps other young people learn to speak up as well.⁵ Silence can teach us to speak when the right words are needed.

Jesus’ excursion into the wilderness after his baptism was not his only retreat to silence. Often after a busy day of teaching and healing, Jesus went off alone. On occasion, he may have done nothing but take a nap or sit silently, listening to the sounds of the earth, sounds that were resonant with his own spirit. Most likely it was to pray, to reflect, to listen, and to hear God in the silence. Maybe he was also listening to himself.

Silence is a multi-faceted gift and Lent is a good opportunity to explore it. It is good for us to pay attention to silence. It is a good opportunity to create times of silence so that we can better hear what is around us and within us and beyond us. What did you hear when we gave our offerings in silence? Were you more aware of yourself, of the people around you, of God? Was that silence a comfort or an irritant? Did something come into your awareness that you wanted to think about more? Was there something that you quickly pushed away? Who knows what we fail to hear when we are not silent? Who knows what we might discover when we become comfortable with the silence God offers us.

During this Lenten season, as an intentional practice of faith, invite silence into your life. Pay attention to when it happens, how it feels, and what you hear? What do you learn? What do you fear? In what ways do you encounter God? The psalmist urges us to “Be still and know that I am God” (Psalm 46:10). When we pay attention, we realize that silence is all around us in its many forms. What will you do with the silence?

⁴Ann Beams, “Reflection on Silence,” *The Christian Century* (August 29, 2018), 23.

⁵Lyn Pace, “Reflection on Silence,” *The Christian Century* (August 29, 2018), 22.

March 17, 2019

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

We know that the question you asked of Elijah, O God, could easily be asked of us. "What are you doing here?" is a question we ought to ask of ourselves more often. May that question be our prayer today.

We are here to worship and praise you, O God. We know that we did not simply sprout from the earth like the plants that are waiting for Spring. We praise you as our Creator, the one who made us in your image with grand thoughts, amazing abilities, and large hearts. We thank you for this amazing world in which we live and pray for the wisdom to care for it. We thank you for the opportunities that are ours and for the abilities to live life worthy of your generosity.

We are here to remember our friends and ourselves in our time of need. We realize that you are already aware of our concerns and already providing what we need. We do not seek to be greedy or selfish. We desire only to live in health with the ability to enjoy and contribute to life. Help us to do so, we pray. Help us also to get beyond the fears that beset us, the anxiety that dogs us, and the lack of trust that diminishes us. Bless us, we pray.

We are here to mourn with our sisters and brothers in New Zealand and everywhere else in the world that hatred seeks to squelch love. We pray for the families and friends of loved ones who died and for the welfare of the injured in body and in spirit. We pray for the ones who are responsible for such an offense against life and your creative love. May justice be done and may they learn love instead of destruction. May we learn these lessons as well.

We are here, O God, because our hearts are restless until we find our rest in you. As we walk the path of Lent to the joy of Easter morning, guide us, we pray. Teach us to look and listen and to be awed by the wonder and mystery of your love which we know through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.