

**Saint Alban's Church, Cape Elizabeth  
Sunday, November 27, 2016**

**Psalm 46  
Revelation 8:1-4**

### **A Season for Silence**

**Permit me a moment to say "Thank you" to Tim, for the privilege of this pulpit this morning. As one now sixteen years into retirement, I do cherish such occasional opportunities to preach the Word. Always keeping in mind, of course, having already exceeded what they call in the UK my "sell-by" date, the wise old saying that cautions us, "The older you get, the better you were." Anyway, I'm back again, a somber, black clad Presbyterian among the bright and colorful Episcopalians. By the way, it might surprise some of you to learn that the queen, yes, Queen Elizabeth herself, is a Presbyterian; a Presbyterian at least some of the time. You see, as head of the established state church, the moment her majesty crosses the border into Scotland she automatically, by some miracle of theological transubstantiation, changes from an Anglican to a Presbyterian. Then when she crosses the border south again, she is once more an Episcopalian. Don't ask me how they do it. That's just the way it is. And you thought Downton Abbey was complicated.**

**Well, enough of that. It's time to turn again to the scriptures; but first a brief word of prayer:**

**O come, O come, Emmanuel; and ransom captive Israel. O come, O come, Emmanuel; and ransom all that is captive, all that is darkness, all that mourns in lonely exile here within us this day, this darkening season of the year. O come, O come, Emmanuel; God with us. Amen**

**In Psalm 46, verse 10:**

**Be still, and know that I am God.**

And in the Revelation of Saint John, the eighth chapter, that first verse:

When the Lamb opened the seventh seal, there was silence  
in heaven about the space of half an hour.

I've been having problems with hearing lately. No, it's not just with my wife. She keeps telling me, by the way, that it's a problem with listening, not hearing. But now all sorts of other people have joined in; kids and grandkids, neighbors, even complete strangers - they're not enunciating properly anymore, they keep mumbling all the time. And, by the way, looking around this sanctuary, I suspect I'm not alone, that there are at least a few of you out there who share this problem. Everything is basically far too noisy – isn't it? This twenty first century world, this daily life we find ourselves living, it's all too discordant, distracting, and far too loud. Oh I realize that in this coming holiday season the din may be lightened up a bit by the ringing of sleigh bells, the playing of favorite carols, but these festive sounds, far from transforming, merely add seasonal flavoring to the ongoing cacophony and clamor.

This can be such a loud season, this Advent, a deafening, most disturbing season. So that when Saint John, in Revelation, tells us that, "...there was silence in heaven for about half an hour." we begin to envy those angels and saints up there, we begin to realize that we are experiencing a veritable drought, a desert, a dearth, in fact, a dearth of silence.

Indeed it can seem at times as if we are actually afraid today, afraid of silence; as if we find silence, many of us, so threatening that wherever we are; at home, in the car, in stores, in the elevator, even holding on the telephone, we have to have sound, something to amuse, to distract, to protect us from sheer and utter emptiness. "Le silence..." wrote French philosopher Blaise Pascal - as he

contemplated the starry heavens – Le silence eternal de ces espaces infinis m'effraie, “The eternal silence of these infinite spaces terrifies me.” For silence - don't you see? – silence asks questions of us, questions we would rather not face, questions to which we have no answer.

Yet if we are to believe these scriptures of ours, if we are to pay heed to these hymns and songs, the Advent and Christmas carols we will be singing, silence is an integral part, essential to everything we will be celebrating over these next weeks. Listen again to the words:

The world in solemn stillness lay, to hear the angels sing.

Or again:

O little town of Bethlehem, How still we see thee lie;  
 Above thy deep and dreamless sleep the silent stars go by.  
 How silently, how silently, the wondrous gift is given!  
 So God imparts to human hearts the blessings of his heaven.

And, of course, in the most beloved of them all:

Silent night, holy night! All is calm, all is bright...

In the nativity narrative itself, those familiar words of Saint Luke, we learn that amid all the hustle and din of busy Bethlehem it was only the shepherds, out on the silent hills, who could hear the angels' song, could heed the call to seek their King in a manger. What is it, then, about silence, what is it that makes it such an essential part of these Advent days we launch out upon this morning?

Three things very briefly; and first, silence allows us to hear. It permits us to listen. One of the reasons we have so little silence today is that we all have too much to say. Do you recall, on the Mount of Transfiguration, when Peter, James and John are confronted, dazzled by the revelation of Christ in all his glory, all Peter can do is to blurt out his ridiculous plans for a building program? And the Lord God

replies from the cloud, “This is my beloved son. Listen to him! Listen to him.” Maybe it’s time to stop making our points, claiming our rights, blowing our own horns, and to begin listening; listening to our own selves for a start, we might be appalled at what we hear; listening to other people certainly, for they have much to tell, much that we need to know – wasn’t that part of the lesson of this recent election season? - listening to the voices of the dispossessed, the marginalized, yes, the alien, outcast, and stranger too; for in that kind of hearing, as old Ebenezer Scrooge learned – you remember - on a fateful Christmas Eve almost two hundred years ago, , lies the beginning of our hope, perhaps our only true hope for salvation.

When Elijah the prophet fled for his life, hid in that cave high on Mount Horeb, God caused to pass before him all the terrible grandeur of earthquake, wind and fire, but the Lord was not in any of these signs. Finally there came what the Hebrew describes as qol dmamah dakah, traditionally translated "a still, small voice." But what the Hebrew actually says is "a sound of thin silence" (repeat). And in the sound of silence (Yes, Simon and Garfunkel) in that sound of thin silence the Lord God speaks to Elijah, and renews his call to service, to courage and to faith. Yes, it is in the silence, only in the silence, that we will hear again the voice of God.

But silence not only allows us to hear; it also permits us to see. One of the effects of the constant pandemonium we exist in today- and by the way, take a look at that word pandemonium, it literally means "demons everywhere" - but one result of this is that we never really see; we never pay proper attention to what is going on around us. Willa Cather in her novel "Death Comes for the Archbishop" has these lines:

**Where there is great love there are always miracles... Miracles...rest not so much upon faces or voices or healing power coming suddenly near to us from afar off, but upon our perceptions being made finer, so that for a moment our eyes can see and our ears can hear what is there about us always.**

**This gift of silence, no longer threatening but an inviting silence, opens the door to that kind of seeing, to that entire everyday realm of the miraculous. Frederick Buechner writes somewhere of a class he taught late one November afternoon, at Philips Exeter. As he entered the classroom there was the customary hubbub of some twenty or more teenage boys getting ready to settle down. But then, on impulse, he did a curious thing. He reached out and snapped off the lights. And there outside the tall, westward facing windows, was one of those spectacular winter sunsets, spread wide across the darkening sky. “The entire sky on fire...” as Buechner puts it, “...like the end of the world or the beginning of the world.” A deep silence descended on that classroom. No one spoke for at least twenty minutes until the last light had faded; surely a miracle in that gathering of lively youngsters. All attention was focused on an even greater miracle; the ordinary, everyday amazement of sunset.**

**Silence, then, allows us to hear. Silence permits us to see. And in the third place it is silence that allows us to believe. Did you ever try to catch the news on one of those amazing AM/FM, Short, Medium and Long Wave Citizens Band radios? You move so carefully across the dial becoming more and more bewildered as station piles on top of station, yes, language upon language too, until you realize that although you can hear practically everything, you can understand absolutely nothing. So long as we try to listen to every single thing, there is little chance we**

will find the one thing we truly need to hear. But if we can know the gift of silence, if we can permit, then somehow cultivate, those moments of genuine solitude when, as the Psalmist puts it, “deep calls unto deep,” then we will find ourselves and know ourselves within the context of a vast and holy infinity.

O Sabbath rest by Galilee! O calm of hills above,  
Where Jesus knelt to share with thee  
The silence of eternity, Interpreted by love!

Whittier’s splendid last line:

The silence of eternity... interpreted by love.

Maybe it’s time for a confession. For years, more years than I care to remember, this Advent season was a pressured, tense, anxious time for me as a pastor. There was simply too much to get done. Advent study and prayer groups; all kinds of children’s events, decorating the sanctuary, hanging the greens, choir concerts, holiday fairs and bazaars, parties for staff, teachers, church leaders; scripture readers and candle lighters, to be selected and trained, nativity scene characters to be lined up. And then those sermons; five, six, seven or more in a month, a month when the sanctuary – especially in NYC - would be welcoming many visitors, first time worshippers, potential new members. But then it struck me one year- as I sat down to write a sermon for Christmas Eve - it’s not what I say that is vital, but what we all hear. It’s not so much the words, but the silences, beneath, between, within and all around those words, that will reveal the mystery, that mystery that lies beyond all words, the mystery of Word made flesh and lodged within the human heart.

Just last Sunday Mhairi and I sat in Merrill Auditorium listening to the Portland Symphony’s splendid presentation of Sibelius’ Fifth Symphony. And the entire symphony, but especially that glorious resounding finale, was punctuated by a

series of massive, you could almost call them “crashing” silences. They interrupted the ongoing flow of the music, they made you stop a moment and reflect on what you had just heard. They made you eager, on edge, leaning forward in your seat in expectation of what was to emerge. Listen to these words from the program notes:

**The ending is simply remarkable. After long minutes of dense, continuous sound, the clarifying lens of silence suddenly appears, (the clarifying lens of silence – did you hear?) punctuated by short, sharp, climactic chords. The time between these chords seems agonizingly long, but vital too: it is the breathtaking silence that gives the chords their sense of resolution. (Repeat last phrase)**

**How did that Psalmist put it again?**

**Be still, and know that I am God.**

**So find some time, please find time for silence this Advent. Grant yourself a minute, or better ten, or twenty, maybe even thirty of them, there beside the tree, before the fire, along the shore with only the wind in the pines and the cry of the seabirds, in a darkened room at sunset. Don't tell me that you don't have time. What do you think your time was given for? Don't put it off till later. It's already later... later than you think.**

**And when you come, at the last, to sing of “Silent Night,” to kneel beside the manger and adore, may you find peace, may you know joy, may you be touched by the mystery and wonder of Emmanuel, God with us.**

**Let us pray:**

**Teach us to listen, Lord, and to wait; to seek out the quiet places in our days, our lives, our minds, our very souls.  
Then join us there, speak to us in the silence. Amen.**