

A Sermon
Rev. W. Kevin Holder
Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
December 1, 2019

Filling the Silence

Luke 1:26-38

"Silent night, holy night / All is calm, all is bright." We often sing that serene hymn during Christmas Eve worship. But on the journey from here to Christmas Eve silence, we have to pass through a lot of sound. The sounds of the season. The Salvation Army bell. The "Hallelujah Chorus." Carolers on the front porch. Commercials about the latest holiday sales. Car horns in a crowded parking lot. Toys that roar, whistle, bang, and beep.

In one scene from "How the Grinch Stole Christmas," the Grinch stands there on Christmas Eve, hating the Whos, anticipating what their celebration will be like the next morning if he doesn't do something to stop Christmas from coming. "All the Who girls and boys would wake bright and early. They'd rush for their toys! And then! Oh, the noise! Oh, the Noise! Noise! Noise! Noise! That's one thing he hated! The NOISE! NOISE! NOISE! NOISE!" What's more, "They'd sing! And they'd sing! And they'd SING! SING! SING! SING! And the more the Grinch thought of this Who-Christmas-Sing, The more the Grinch thought, "I must stop this whole thing!" "Why, for fifty-three years I've put up with it now!" "I MUST stop this Christmas from coming! . . . But HOW?" For the Grinch, shutting down Christmas would include silencing the sounds. Finally, some peace and quiet.

But where would Christmas be without its songs? Would it even really be Christmas? I know that Luke's Gospel certainly wouldn't be the same if we stopped the music, especially in the opening chapters. Near the end of the second chapter, Simeon takes the baby Jesus in his arms and starts singing: "Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you now dismiss your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen your salvation. . ." (vv. 29-30). Prior to that, at the birth of Jesus, the choir of angels belts out: "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests" (v. 14). Back up a little further, and we hear Mary, during her visit with Elizabeth, break into a song of rejoicing: "My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior . . ." (vv. 46b-47). Tuning into the opening scenes of Luke is like turning on an episode of "Galileans Got Talent."

But before Mary starts singing, she probably also spends some time in silence. Mary is more than just musical. She's also meditative. Though there are times when Mary raises her voice in rejoicing or proclamation, Luke also notes her quietness of spirit and her inward orientation. At the birth of Jesus, while the shepherds were taking the news to the streets and posting updates on social media, Mary kept more to herself. She "treasured up all these things and pondered them in her mind" (2:19). And years later, after hearing twelve-year-old Jesus tell her and Joseph that they should have expected to find him in his Father's house, they return home, where Mary "treasured all these things in her heart" (2:51).

There's a time for vocalizing your response to the arrival and action of God. And there's a time for practicing silence, making room for the presence and power of God to do what God wants to do. And in today's text, what God plans to do comes in the form of an announcement. God breaks his silence and speaks into the life of a young, soon-to-be-married woman, telling her that she will give birth to a Savior. Now, it's not as if Mary is unaccustomed to listening to God. She's portrayed by Luke as pious, thoughtful, worshipful, faithful to Jewish law and practice. So she's no stranger to the need for

attentiveness to God. But she certainly wasn't expecting this kind of message: "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the Holy one to be born will be called the Son of God" (v. 35). News like that is enough to drive you to some stillness, solitude, and reflection. So before she set off to visit cousin Elizabeth, perhaps Mary spent time silently processing God's word to her and her obedient response to it.

In some parts of the Christian faith, Mary is viewed as a model for the contemplative life, a life focused on cultivating an intimate personal relationship with God. And one of the keys to this life of increasing union with the Lord is the practice of silence. Yet we live in a world where noise proliferates and silence gets harder and harder to find and experience.

Several years ago, author George Prochnik wrote a book titled *In Pursuit of Silence: Listening for Meaning in a World of Noise*. He said: "I think we're seeing noise tied to a host of problems of the age—problems of attention, aggression, insomnia, and general stress. Noise is now the default position as a society. But I believe we have to make an effort to build a passionate case for silence." What a revealing statement, that "Noise is now the default position as a society."¹

During a phone call with a representative from my bank, we reached a point in our conversation where the representative said, "Can I put you on hold for just a moment while I do some further research on that question?" Usually they put on some relaxing music, or maybe another one of their advertisements, that you can listen to while you wait. In this case, it was more like the faint sound of the person typing on their keyboard. Whatever it was, it was definitely a few minutes of down time. Normally, when the representative comes back on the line, they'll say something like, "I apologize for the wait. Thank you for your patience." But this time the person said, "Mr. Holder, I apologize for the quiet time." And I thought to myself, only in our contemporary setting, where our lives are so filled with sound, would someone apologize for the fact that there were even a few moments of quiet time.

My experience sounds similar to one described by Marilyn Chandler McEntyre. She writes:

Several years ago, I was told by an amused friend who worked for a large corporation about a coworker's effort to still one bit of unnecessary noise. Having received several complaints about the invasive Muzak that filled the ears of the hapless folk on hold, the in-house phone managers replaced the tunes with this message: "Your call has been received and a representative will be with you as soon as possible. In the meantime, silence will be provided."²

We're certainly in an atmosphere where, if there's going to be silence, we have to be intentional about it. Silence is less and less likely to just happen. Someone has to purposefully provide it, or we have to plan it, create it, or work at it.

This can be just as true in the life of the church as in other settings. In our congregational worship, we usually create more space for sound than for silence. Our services are typically filled with conversation, music, songs, verbal announcements, audible prayers, video narration, teachers, and preachers. In our gatherings, we value the spoken word. And rightfully so. After all, we're here to offer praise and thanks to the God who speaks the world into existence and who has spoken to us most of all through Jesus Christ. Christ is the Word of God. He is God's fullest and most decisive act communication to us about his will and purpose for us and for the world. So there's something about sound, in its various forms, in our worship, that's consistent with the very nature of the gospel.

But the same Bible that tells us to “make a joyful noise unto the Lord” (Ps. 100:1, KJV) also commands us, at various points, to be still and silent. And in numerous Scripture passages, even when silence isn’t explicitly commanded, it’s inferred or modeled for us. For example, the psalmist describes what sounds like a regular frame of mind for him when he says: “For God alone my soul waits in silence, for my hope is from him” (62:5).

When we incorporate silence into our worship services, and practice noise-free periods of stillness, we’re acknowledging our utter dependence on the grace of God, spoken into our lives through Jesus. Before we say a single word in worship, God has already addressed us with his mercy. No wonder that in many ways, the best and first response we can offer is to be still before the Lord, and to contemplate such underserved love showing up among us, in order to save us.

A church in England once produced a CD for the congregation that became a remarkable hit. The CD featured a full 30-minute track that included a spoken introduction, closing words, and in between, 28 minutes of silence. Not perfect silence. It was a recording of the church’s atmosphere, with the ambient sounds of footsteps, voices, background traffic noise, but for the most part, silence. An article in a Taiwanese newspaper called the CD a “half-hour of absolutely nothing.” Yet according to the church, customers from across the world were snatching it up.³

It’s easy to mistake silence as a form of nothing, as if it’s just the absence of speech or the omission of sound. Maybe that’s why we’re often so inclined to want to fill the silence with words or other sounds. We’re so accustomed to some kind of machine whirring or humming in the background, or a device that’s ringing, pinging, dinging, or chiming. Plus, our world is so saturated with various forms of media, particularly radio and television, that the one thing we can’t tolerate is “dead air time.” As Marilyn McEntyre has put it, “Silence, like prime time and airwaves, has become a commodity to be bought, sold, filled, framed, and obliterated: a “nothing” that must be made into a “something.”⁴

But silence already is a something. And the nothingness, the emptiness, is what makes it that way. Silence is the sacred space where God can come in to dwell in us and do what God wants to do in our lives. This was part of Mary’s experience when Gabriel showed up in her space with a message about what God planned to do. Understandably, Mary struggled with an announcement like this, wrestling with how it could happen, and what it would mean for her. But her faith-filled response, “let it be,” was ultimately her way of welcoming God’s presence and receiving God’s action.

In much the same way, practicing silence and being in a receptive, listening mode toward God, is critical to having Christ come and dwell in you. Stillness, which helps cultivate openness, makes room within you, so that you can be filled with more of Jesus. Over the course of months, Jesus took shape, literally, in Mary’s womb. And Jesus wants to take shape in you as well, and in our church. But our noisy lives and noisy world can quickly fill up the sacred space that’s meant to be a residence for the Lord. So when you practice silence, individually and together, you’re using one of God’s best gifts in order to say yes to God and to what he wants to do in you.

¹ Prochnik is quoted in Holly Pevzner, “Silence,” Real Simple website (July 2011).

² Marilyn Chandler McEntyre, “Silence Is to Dwell In.” Christianity Today website. August 10, 2000. Accessed November 27, 2019 <<https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2000/august7/5.62.html>>.

³ Chris Parsons, “St. Peter’s Church Records CD of ‘the Sound of Silence.’” Yahoo News (October 18, 2012).

⁴ McEntyre, “Silence Is to Dwell In.”