

Silence and Blessings

Ruth 4:7-21

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- 0 dB The threshold of hearing
- 10dB Normal breathing
- 13dB The hum of an incandescent light bulb
- 15dB A pin dropping from a height of 1 centimeter heard at a distance of 1 meter
- 20dB Rustling leaves, a mosquito buzzing in your ear
- 30dB Totally quiet nighttime in desert
- 38dB Average loudness of a horse's whinny
- 40dB Whispering
- 50dB A horse's hoof beats at a walk
- 60dB Normal conversation
- 80dB Garbage disposal, city traffic noise
- 85dB Beginning of hearing damage range, earplugs should be worn
- 125dB Rock and Roll, pain begins

How loud does God need to be to be heard over the ambient noise in your life? For the Reverend Phillips Brooks, who penned the hymn, "O Little Town of Bethlehem," it must have been somewhere around that 38 - 50 decibel range of his horse, winding his way toward Bethlehem on Christmas Eve, 1868, in the relative silence of the desert. And this is what he "heard":

How silently, how silently,
The wondrous gift is given;
So God imparts to human hearts
The blessings of His Heaven.
No ear may hear His coming,
But in this world of sin,
Where meek souls will receive Him still,
The dear Christ enters in.

Or at least that is what he wrote down those three years later, God's message in that desert left indelibly upon his heart. Brooks was profoundly impacted by his

ride to Bethlehem, perhaps because of the very silence he describes in this third stanza of the hymn. He was in an environment in which he could “hear” God speaking. It wasn’t that God spoke 60-decibel words in Brooks’ ear, but rather that God spoke to his spirit just loudly and gracefully enough at a moment when Brooks himself was quiet enough to hear it. Isn’t that the gift of Advent? The chance to lower the ambient noise around you to be able to hear the savior’s coming on Christmas Eve?

Of course, “noise” isn’t just sound, but it’s also fury, and activity, and emotions, and work, and pressure, and expectations. All of that noise of daily life makes it hard for us to receive any kind of message, much less a divine one. When we are going “eight miles a minute for months at a time,” as one of my rock and roll heroes put it, how can we expect to hear or see or experience anything surprising or graceful? It’s not that God can’t speak louder than we can, or can’t keep up with our pace. It’s that God asks us to seek God on God’s own terms, not our own. God gives the gift silently, and calls us to receive it meekly. We want it on our terms. We want God to shout it to us over the din of our lives as we go racing by. But we’ll miss it that way for sure, if we can’t find the “still point” of our lives.

That’s what T.S. Eliot called it in his poem, “Burnt Norton” – the “still point.” “At the still point, there the dance is,” he wrote. Listen to it from its original stanza:

“At the still point of the turning world. Neither flesh nor fleshless;
Neither from nor towards; at the still point, there the dance is,
But neither arrest nor movement. And do not call it fixity,
Where past and future are gathered. Neither movement from nor towards,
Neither ascent nor decline. Except for the point, the still point,
There would be no dance, and there is only the dance.”

That still point is the present, and that’s where we experience God fully. We can live fully only in the present, he says, not in the past nor in the future. But we can’t really live in the present if the noise level around us is too loud, too fast, too chaotic. It’s hard to pay attention to now when we are rushing off to the next thing. It is hard to pay attention to now when we are lamenting too loudly the passing of the good old days. No, the still point is a present that is quiet enough to hear God speaking, to hear and respond to the invitation to the dance.

In the silence of Bethlehem, Ruth heard the invitation to the dance. It came from God through Boaz, this invitation to a connected life, a life with less uncertainty, and greater blessing. Ruth was that Moabite, that foreigner, who decided to follow her mother-in-law back to Israel after their husbands died, leaving them childless, leaving them without protection, without backup. With no other way to support themselves, Ruth took to the fields following the harvesters, picking up what they left behind, hoping it would be enough. Later in the story, she makes herself known to a rich man named Boaz, and as we heard in our reading tonight, everything turns out OK. But back in the fields, picking up what was left behind she must have labored in silence, amidst her thoughts of how life hadn’t

turned out the way she expected it, and her questions about where it might be going. But even with the noise of those thoughts of the past and those questions about the future, she found a still point in the present, a still, silent point on the threshing floor at Boaz' feet late one night, and in that silence, a wondrous gift was given, the possibility of a life she could only have dreamed about. And Boaz for his part, found a still point in the present too. By taking off his sandal, Boaz is honoring the past, and thinking about the future, but he's acting in the present. He honors the tradition, and is looking out for Ruth and Naomi's future, but doesn't leave it to someone else. He takes hold of it himself and receives the blessing.

This is not the only story in the Bible that shows us God's presence in silent, still moments. Remember the story of Elijah when he was on the run from King Ahab, and he takes refuge in that cave, and calls out to God for help. And God says, "Go out and stand on the mountain before the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by." And so Elijah does, and along comes a great wind, so strong that it split mountains, and then an earthquake, and then fire, but God was not in any of these. And after the fire there came a sound of sheer silence, a still point, that caused Elijah to pay attention in a new way, and then he heard God say, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" and then he receives the blessing and comfort and instructions he needed. And let's not forget Mary, the mother of Jesus, when the shepherds descend on her in Bethlehem, all excited about the news of the birth of the savior. If that weren't chaotic enough, there was a baby crying, and visits from family and

the census going on around them, the animals in the stable, so many things adding to the ambient noise level of Mary's life, and yet what does she do? She finds a silent, still point and "treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart," and, we must believe, received a blessing in her silence.

Those stories come from a long time ago, when in some ways the world was a quieter place, when you could more easily find a place to enter into that still point. It gets a little harder every generation, I think, but we still need to seek it out. At the beginning of the industrial era, when things were really starting to get a lot louder, in a great many ways, a woman named Caroline Stephen found what she needed at a Quaker meeting. This is how she experienced it:

"On one never-to-be-forgotten Sunday morning, I found myself one of a small company of silent worshippers who were content to sit down together without words, that each one might feel after and draw near to the Divine Presence, unhindered at least, if not helped, by any human utterance. Utterance I knew was free, should the words be given; and, before the meeting was over, a sentence or two were uttered in great simplicity by an old and apparently untaught man, rising in his place amongst the rest of us. I did not pay much attention to the words he spoke, and I have no recollection of their purport. My whole soul was filled with the unutterable peace of the undisturbed opportunity for communion with God, with the sense that at last I had found a place where I might, without the faintest suspicion of insincerity, join with others in simply seeking His presence. To sit

down in silence could at the least pledge me to nothing; it might open to me (as it did that morning) the very gate of heaven. And, since that day, now more than seventeen years ago, Friends' meetings have indeed been to me the greatest of outward helps to a fuller and fuller entrance into the spirit from which they have sprung; the place of the most soul-subduing, faith-restoring, strengthening, and peaceful communion, in feeding upon the bread of life, that I have ever known."

Whether she described it in the same way or not, Caroline Stephens' silence led her to Bethlehem, to the house of bread, to dancing with Christ, to blessing. Like Ruth and Elijah and Mary, she pursued the meekness found in silence, and lowered the ambient noise level around her to the point at which she could hear God speaking. I don't think we need to be Quakers to find what Caroline Stephens found, but I do think we need to be intentional about finding some silence, finding a still point to hear the invitation to the dance. In Advent, we spend a lot of time looking back – looking back to prophets and the manger and the angels. And we look ahead to Christ's second coming in glory, whenever that may be. But it is also important that we look for that still point in the present, in the midst of it all – that place, that hour, that balance where we lower the threshold of our perception of God and we take hold of the blessing, the dance, that is offered. Advent gives us the chance to put into action the suggestion of the great humorist Will Rogers who said, "Never miss a good chance to shut up." Advent gives us the space to cultivate meekness, the kind Brooks tells us God is looking for.

Yes, the gift of Christ is given silently, as silently as the Holy Spirit visited Mary, and as silently as Jesus was raised from the dead in the tomb, so silently, that we might not even notice in our noisy lives. The world around is already noisy enough, but then on top of that we tend to fill our lives so full of noise that it is a wonder we can hear anything God might be trying to say to us. What is the ambient noise level needed to cultivate the meekness of your soul? Let me suggest that it is the level just quiet enough to hear God speaking. It will be different for different people, of course, but that still point is there for each of us. May God bless us with an Advent quiet enough to receive the blessings the season celebrates. Amen.