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Grace Cathedral, San Francisco, CA Y48
2 Advent (Year C) 11:00 a.m., 3:00 p.m., 6:00 p.m.
Sunday 9 December 2018

Baruch 5:1-9
Canticle 16 (Lk. 1: 68-79)
Philippians 1: 3-11
Luke 3:1-6

Prophets of the Silences

"I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine..." (Phil. 1).

Let this Advent be for listening. In the silence above the static hear the voice of God and repent. I offer you three short chapters on silence, static and wholeheartedness.

1. Silence. On a clear October night in 2003 Gordon Hempton awoke to a deep thumping noise. An auditory ecologist who makes his living by recording sounds ranging from the flutter of butterfly wings to coyote pups and waterfalls, he thought he was hearing a new class of supertanker offshore from his home on the Olympic Peninsula in Washington State. It turned out that although Hempton's consuming passion was listening to the world, he was losing his hearing.

Hempton's life went into a nosedive. Suddenly he was cut off from what he loved most. He couldn't work and fell into debt. But then after many months his hearing miraculously returned to normal. When it did he knew that nothing would ever be quite the same. He dedicated his life to protecting the natural soundscape or, more precisely, what he calls silence.

Hempton writes that, "Silence is not the absence of something but the presence of everything... Silence can be found and silence can find you."¹ We will never experience silence in the world if we cannot hear it within ourselves. There is a reason that we never evolved earlids and that the audio cortex never sleeps. A deep connection exists between silence and a creature's feeling of safety. That is the reason wild animals do not linger long at a river whose sound masks the approach of predators.

Furthermore Hempton points out that just as species are rapidly going extinct, places of natural silence are too. A silence of longer than fifteen minutes has become incredibly rare in North America and is entirely gone in Europe. Mostly because of air traffic, there are fewer than a dozen quiet places left in the U.S. And so his dream is that by preserving silence around a single square inch in Olympic National Park a new respect for silence might be introduced into human life again.

I want to say one last thing about this. Hempton thinks of silence in two ways. First, there is what he calls inner silence. This is a feeling that we carry with us wherever we go. It is a kind of sacred silence that orients us and reminds us of the difference between right and wrong. Second, there is outer silence. This happens in a naturally quiet place that invites us to open our senses and to feel our connection to everything. Outer silence replenishes our inner silence. It fills us "with gratitude and patience."²

2. Static. "In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar... the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the wilderness" (Lk. 3). In the wilderness, in the presence of a silence we no longer experience, God speaks. My daughter teaches Sunday school here at Grace Cathedral. She says that prophets are people who come so close to God and God comes so close to them that they know what is most important. They know what to do. John the Baptist is a prophet of the silences.³

This was the second year of Donald Trump's presidency, when Mitch McConnell was senate majority leader and Jerry Brown was governor of California, when Joel Osteen and Franklin Graham were high priests of American religion. To us these might seem to be the most important facts of our time. But for God this is just static.

This week I made a new friend. Nathan's father was a Lutheran pastor who moved his family to Addis Ababa Ethiopia a few days after the communist Derg took power. Nathan remembers driving to school and seeing corpses along the side of the road with signs around their necks. Thousands of people were simply executed in the night.

These same communists were the ones who chose the man who became be the Ethiopian pope. As a result for years many people believed that the government and the church were irreparably compromised. This was also the situation in ancient Palestine and its whole chain of command from the Roman emperor to the local high priest who collaborated with his officials.

The situation seemed hopeless. Where was the word of God to go? To describe this Luke uses the Greek word *egeneto*. It is related to our words *beget*, *gene*, *generate*. As in those times, today the word comes into being, it is begotten, in the same places where it always has been, in the silences removed from the places of power.

Last week on the First Sunday of Advent we celebrated the beginning of a new church year. For the next twelve months we will be closely following the sophisticated, cosmopolitan Gospel of Luke. The word *gospel* means good news. These poetic and practical stories were meant to be read aloud. Their purpose is to provoke hearers to re-examine their lives, to repent and believe, and ultimately to change the world.⁴

The gospel is a kind of story-telling technology for transforming the self. The problem is that we have such strong expectations for what these stories mean that we too easily miss the point. Furthermore, the words have gotten worn out in the retelling.

Everything we need to hear today is in one line. John "went into all the region about the Jordan preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (Lk. 3). The word we translate as repentance is really metanoia it is a transformation of heart, mind and soul. The word for forgiveness is aphesis; it means to be released from captivity or slavery. The word sin is hamartia and means to miss the mark as an archer might miss the target.

This whole story is about how you can be released from what constrains, dehumanizes and destroys you and how you can help others to become free too. In the Book of Exodus the Hebrew word for Egypt is mitzrayim. It means literally the narrow place. Do you remember this summer when the Thai youth soccer team spent weeks trapped in a cave that was filling up with water? You can imagine how terrifying it would be to come to a narrow place and not know if you can make it through.

That is mitzrayim. For us the narrow place might be despair at our politics, fear of deportation, racism, homophobia, mental illness, addiction, job and housing insecurity or family conflict. Whatever might be holding you back right now, Jesus brings us the New Exodus, the real freedom to flourish in the way that God created us to.

3. Wholeheartedness. My last point is that seeing the world in terms of sin and repentance is a kind of technique for breaking the forces that hold us captive. Brené Brown is an Episcopalian and a university professor in Texas. She began her career by studying how people derive meaning from their relationships. The more she talked to people about connection and love the more she heard about alienation and heartbreak. This led to a huge breakthrough.⁵

Brown defines shame as the fear of being disconnected from others. Every person experiences this. It is the voice inside us that says, "if they knew what I have done, they would never speak to me again," or, "I don't deserve to be loved," "they prefer her to me." The more we deny our shame or ignore it, the more powerful its hold on us. It leads us to view vulnerability as weakness and to hide who we really are.

When we hate our self it is hard not to constantly despise others. Shame isolates and brings out the worst in us. Just think of the most upsetting things you have seen on

Twitter. This week in our discussion of the book *White Fragility* we talked about how white shame makes it difficult to have racial reconciliation in our country.⁶

Brown contrasts shame and guilt. Shame is a pervasive feeling of inadequacy that says, "I *am* bad." Guilt on the other hand means *doing* something bad. It leads us to say, "I made a mistake." These are really two different ways of being. On the one hand there is blame, defensiveness and denial. On the other hand there is what Brown calls wholeheartedness. Although most people associate vulnerability with weakness, vulnerability is key to this way of living. It is how we love with our whole heart.

Fear of being ridiculed, dismissed or ignored does not stop wholehearted people like this from seeking connection to others. They take risks. They are not afraid to say, "I love you," or, "I'm sorry," or, "forgive me." Wholehearted people embrace the idea that what makes them vulnerable or imperfect is also what makes them beautiful.

The language of Jesus enables us to live in this better, more silent place. Sin as missing the mark, repentance as the constant process of changing our hearts, and, forgiveness as release from captivity – these basic ideas help us to see ourselves as children of God. They give us the confidence of someone who believes that nothing can irrevocably alienate us from God.

This week at George H.W. Bush's funeral Alan Simpson talked about his friend's wholeheartedness. He said, "George... never hated anyone... Hatred corrodes the container it's carried in."⁷ This week for homework I invite you to drain your container of hatred. Try forgiving someone – it could be someone in public life like the president, or the person who lives next door to you.

In the presence of everything, discover the Holy Spirit that penetrates the static. Let repentance be your path out of shame. Enter into a wholehearted life in Christ. Come close to God so that you will know what is most important, so that you will know what to do. Let this Advent be for listening. Let silence find you.

¹ Gordon Hempton with John Grossmann, *One Square Inch of Silence: One Man's Search for Silence in a Noisy World* (NY: Free Press, 2009) 2

² *Ibid.*, 31.

³ Melia taught the Godly Play lesson on the prophets for 1 Advent last week.

⁴ This paragraph and next from: Matt and Liz Boulton, "Peace & Freedom: SALT's Lectionary Commentary for Advent Week Two," SALT, 5 December 2018.

⁵ 3 Epiphany (1-26-14) A. See "The Courage to Be Vulnerable," *On Being*, 21 November 2012. Also her TED talks:

Brené Brown, "The Power of Vulnerability TEDxHouston," December 2010,

Brené Brown, "Listening to Shame," TED, March 2012.

<http://www.onbeing.org/program/transcript/4932>

http://www.ted.com/talks/brene_brown_on_vulnerability.html

http://www.ted.com/talks/brene_brown_listening_to_shame.html

⁶ Robin DiAngelo *White Fragility: Why It's So Hard for White People to Talk about Racism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2018).

⁷ Alan Simpson, "Eulogy for George H.W. Bush," National Cathedral, Wednesday 5 December 2018. <https://www.townandcountrymag.com/society/politics/a25412509/alan-simpson-george-hw-bush-funeral-eulogy-transcript/>