

**First Reading – 1 Kings 19:1-13a (excerpt below is verses 11-13a)**

<sup>11</sup> “Go out and stand on the mountain before the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by.” Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake; <sup>12</sup> and after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence. <sup>13</sup> When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave.

Our Christmas Carol that is paired with our passages this week is “Silent Night, Holy Night.” When I hear these words sung, a sense of peace often takes hold of me. I see a blackened sky filled with the hush of stars; the night air feels cold against my cheeks and those standing round are only visible by the dancing flames from a sea of candles. Even though voices join together to sing these beautiful words there is always a deep silence within me that experiences anew this mystery we call God. Yes, all is calm; all is bright, as the dawn of redeeming enfolds me each and every Christmas Eve as this song is sung.

What memories come to bear for you when you hear or sing this beloved Christmas carol? As we begin to explore this week’s Advent Candle, named Holy Silence, hear these words from the **Second Reading - The Gospel of Luke 4:42-44:**

<sup>42</sup> The next morning Jesus went out to a place where he could be alone, and crowds came looking for him. When they found him, they tried to stop him from leaving. <sup>43</sup> But Jesus said, “People in other towns must hear the good news about God’s kingdom. That’s why I was sent.” <sup>44</sup> So he kept on preaching in the Jewish meeting places in Judea.

Love’s pure light...radiant beams...all is calm, all is bright...dawn of redeeming grace...heavenly peace. I don’t know what words touch you most deeply when you sing or hear this beloved carol. I only know that this carol brings to mind the river of grace I have come to experience in silence. Yet, silence, as we know, is so counter culture.

I don’t know about you, but I just go crazy when I pull into a gas station and get bombarded with news from a video display that I didn’t ask for. I mean I use to cherish those few moments of silence with the mindless job of pumping gas. Of course, the same thing happens whether you are in line at a bank or at grocery store these days. I went to Pieology the other day and now they have TV screens, or maybe they always have had TV screens here in Redlands. The one near my Cerritos home doesn’t. Just about anywhere you go news and noise stream from the digital airwaves.

And then there are all our electronic gadgets, enabling others to find you anywhere and anytime. With digital feeds, you can be updated on the latest breaking news through your smart phone. Or emergency alerts can be broadcast, as they were last Thursday night due to extreme fire danger with the winds whipping. And with text messaging and twitter feeds you can be incessantly interrupted with the whereabouts of your family and friends! I am sure you have seen the family together at a meal in a restaurant, but not really. Each member with eyes fixated on a screen with their own personal brand of music being piped into their ears.

In our cultural context, our lives are filled with anything but silence. It's filled with noise, noise and more noise from sources we often do not even request. Like the bass booming from the car stopped next to you at a stop sign or traffic light.

So, if holy silence has the possibility of being a river of grace for us, we will have to choose silence. We will have to intentionally disconnect from the noise of our world.

My first intentional experience of disconnecting from the noise of the world happened while I was a seminary student. I enrolled in a week-long retreat known as *Companions on the Inner Way* for class credit. I remember talking to my husband about the fact that the retreat had a practice of silence from the closing of evening prayer to after breakfast. He commented, "You mean no talking, no TV, just silence?" I said, "That's right!" His next words were, "I am glad you are the one who is going and not me!"

Well, I thought I was ready for silence. That first night, I found it pretty easy to quietly slip from evening prayers into my bed clothes and read a little before turning out the lights. But when the sun arose and I walked to breakfast I still remember my cheerfully loud, "Good morning," that startled a more seasoned *Companions* participant. She smiled graciously in return as we then walked together in silence to breakfast.

At that point, I wondered what I had gotten myself into. Silence at night is one thing, but in the morning, it was entirely different. Especially, eating together with others, yet no conversations allowed! I did not realize that for me conversation was part of the seasoning for a meal. That first morning, I uncomfortably sat at a table figuring out that this silence thing was going to be more of challenge than I had anticipated.

Another thing I quickly learned was that a practice of silence was far more than keeping one's mouth shut or shutting out the noise of the external world. Holy silence is learning how to stop the incessant noise of one's mind, of one's inner world. This was far harder; although my desire to hear God's still small voice motivated me to keep giving it a try as the week progressed.

I remember an epiphany moment during the retreat that was only possible when both the noise of the outer world and my inner world had subsided. I was walking the grounds of the retreat center and happened upon a statue of Mary caressing her infant son. I sat in silence, no words, no buzzing thoughts and just gazed at the statute. I noticed the gentleness of Mary's caress and gaze on her infant son as the early morning breeze whispered. The sun was warming the day as it advanced to fully engulf the statute. I sensed a calm welling up within me as the world around me slowed and eventually stood still. I don't remember how long I sat in silence before tears began to gently fall down my cheeks. In that suspended moment of silence, I understood at a deep level just how much God loved me. God loved me like a mother who would not forsake her child.

I knew first-hand how fierce and complete a mother's love was, for I remembered love overwhelming me when my twin sons were born. It was a love that so deep that knew I would willingly lay down my life for them. That day, in the holy silence, I knew in a new and marvelous way that I was God's, holy and beloved daughter. My first *Companions on the Inner Way* retreat taught me that silence can be a river of grace.

Yet, silence is something many of us run from. We fear what we might hear in the silence. We fear that God will speak something we don't want to hear. As Macrina Wiederkehr writes, "Silence is dark and mysterious, it is a foreign land." Yet, silence is also the place she

says where we are given new eyes and where we can see more clearly who we are. She even suggests that you and I should practice leaping into silence, as I did on that first Companions Retreat years ago. We should leap trusting that we might very well experience a river of grace.

Jesus knew the value of silence. In our New Testament text, we heard that at daybreak he departed and went to a deserted place, a place that may have been occupied earlier, but would not be at this time of the day. Let me share with you the various ways biblical translators interpret the actions of Jesus at daybreak in this passage. Jesus went to a deserted place, a desert place, a lonely spot, a secluded place, a place where he could be alone, a desolate place, to be alone. These interpretations vary, yet what they have in common is Jesus' desire to be set apart from others and to intentionally place himself before God. Throughout the gospels we read that Jesus intentionally set himself apart from others. He intentionally set himself apart to pray, to converse with God and to listen for God's still small voice.

Elijah on the other hand just ran. When King Ahab's wife, Jezebel, wanted him dead, Elijah didn't practice leaping into the mysterious foreign land of holy silence. No, he filled his head with thoughts of ending it all, hoping God would put him out of his misery. Elijah was a highly successful prophet, but he didn't seek God for a resolve to his situation. He took matters into his own hands and ran for dear life and then hoped to quickly die before Jezebel could get his hands on him.

Did you notice God's response to his fear, to his swirling inner thoughts of wanting to it all to end? An angel of God sent him on a 40-day sojourn. Only then did God come to him. And God did not come in a fierce wind or an earthquake or a fire, but in the sheer silence.

What is your experience of sheer silence? Is silence frightening for you? Is silence a river of grace you?

Setting aside time to be silent is a spiritual practice of mine. I intentionally come before the mystery I call God who claims me as a beloved daughter. I intentionally set aside my agenda and open myself to what concerns God. And when I do this, I never know what epiphany God may have in store for me, like that blessed morn when I understood more clearly just how much God loves me. God loves me like a mother.

Silence is sacred space for me. It is where I hear the rustlings of what concerns God in my life, in this church, in the community I live, and in the world all around me.

"Jesus went to a place where he could be alone [with God]." May you find a place to be alone with God, for sheer silence can be a river of grace, where God speaks deeply into our lives, if only, we will brave dipping our toes in the river. Amen.