

The Joy of Silence

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Robert D. Flanagan for the
First Sunday in Lent, Year C, Luke 4:1-13

“After his baptism, Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness.”

Where I live, Europeans have settled on the land for three hundred years. I’m certain indigenous people dwelled in the area for hundreds of years before them. I often wonder about the life of John Taylor, who built a home on our land in the early 1700s—the remnants of his house are long gone. I think about the deep appreciation of silence he had to have had.

He was, however, not alone. He had neighbors, but the machinery of our modern age didn’t exist. So while sounds of human life—axes, horses, dogs, and voices—would have echoed around the small valleys and hills. He would have endured long periods of quiet and silence.

One of the reasons I enjoy living where I do is its silence. It’s refreshing. Few planes fly overhead. When they do, they’re too high to hear their engines. Cars, trucks, and tractors pass by on the road next to our home but not too frequently. When the wind blows from the north, I can hear the whirr of wheels coming from the state route that’s about a mile away. On occasion, I’ll also hear a train whistle as the train makes its way through New Milford, four or five miles away. My life includes long periods of silence, and it’s a joy.

I suspect you experience long periods of silence as well. Living in this area is much the same as Bridgewater. When I’m in the parish house by myself during the week, I rarely hear a vehicle pass the church. You don’t have the noise of planes either. Maybe you’ll hear an occasional cow moo or a horse whinny, but you experience silence.

When the Holy Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness, Jesus would have experienced long periods of silence. The gospel accounts do not mention the silence. It was, perhaps, a pedestrian occurrence, not worth mentioning. Luke’s account is more interested in the devil’s testing or tempting of Jesus. The silence of the wilderness, however, strengthened Jesus for his encounter with the devil.

In her work *Silence: A User’s Guide*, Anglican solitary Maggie Ross describes the work of silence. She writes, “To do the work of silence transfigures lives” (221). Silence orients people “toward the reality and beauty of darkness, unknowing, and beholding that enables the person to receive life afresh, newly created in each moment” (Ibid.). Jesus’s work of silence allowed him to transform himself from the son of Mary and Joseph to his role of Son of God. He, likely, entered into the darkness and unknowing, piercing the veil between here and heaven. He gained a singular focus during his work of silence in the wilderness. It was a joy for him.

He must have experienced his time in the wilderness as a joy because he communed with God, felt divine love, became empowered for his mission, and focused on bringing the Good

News of God's salvation to all. The Holy Spirit also led Jesus into the desert to have him battle with the forces of evil and darkness.

Christian monastics traveled to the desert as well. They might have been led by the Holy Spirit or drawn to the silence of the wilderness. They did not travel there for peace but to battle their physical needs and demons, "often represented in terrifying bodily form" (Byassee, 1-2). They felt, at times, they were participating in a cosmic war between good and evil. From their small stone cells, their work of silence was primarily, however, a "pursuit of an unbridled life with God, in all its severe intimacy" (Ibid.). In the silence, they sought divine joy.

We can experience silence the way Jesus and the men and women of the desert did. Silence can be a place of "ruthless honesty" (Ross, 221). We can "strip out the lies" we tell ourselves (Ibid.). We can also see ourselves in new ways. We can discover parts of us for which we need self-forgiveness. We can "allow God's forgiveness to flow through" us (Ibid.). Ross explains that within the work of silence is "life, transfiguration, death, and resurrection" (222).

In Lent, and perhaps beyond, I want us to do the work of silence in our liturgy. During the Eucharistic Prayer, we have a powerful, maybe the most powerful, moment of silence. When I break the consecrated bread, the Body of Christ, I will pause. For me, it's a time to reflect on the sacrifice that Christ made and the privilege I have been entrusted with to lead us in remembering Christ's death on the cross.

I invite you to join me in the work of silence. At the moment following the breaking of the bread, think about your life and your relationship with Jesus on the cross. Think about the power of his sacrifice. Think about his self-offering. Think about God witnessing of his son's death. Then, hold those thoughts close as you come forward to receive the body of Christ. Think about consuming the Body and Blood of Christ and the closeness of God as you bring Christ within you.

I hope that in our work of silence, you may experience God afresh and anew.

Source:

Byassee, Jason. *An Introduction to the Desert Fathers*. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2007.

Ross, Maggie. *Silence: A User's Guide: Volume 1: Process*. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2014.