



TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH

on the Branford Green

May you find Christ, Community and Compassion within these historic walls.

God of the Silence

By The Rev. Sharon Gracen

June 23, 2013

I was in Junior High School when Simon and Garfunkel's *The Sounds of Silence* became a hit. It was in the 60s. Popular music was just coming out of the era of songs about 57 Chevies and hound dogs so it seemed very sophisticated to me to have this song about a concept - what is the sound of silence? It was very zen before I knew what zen was. For Simon and Garfunkel silence wasn't a positive thing. Their lyrics are desolate - the silence is a cancerous void in which no genuine communication or connection happens. Modern culture is infected by it and no one dares disturb the sounds of silence.

T.S. Eliot had a different take on silence. This is from his *Four Quartets*;

*I said to my soul, be still, and let the dark come upon you
Which shall be the darkness of God....
I said to my soul, be still, and wait without hope
For hope would be hope for the wrong thing; wait without love,
For love would be love of the wrong thing; there is yet faith
But the faith and the love and the hope are all in the waiting.
Wait without thought, for you are not ready for thought:
So the darkness shall be the light, and the stillness the dancing.*

T.S. Eliot and the prophet Elijah seem to understand the same thing about silence and stillness – they are the place of power, understanding, and deep connection. In every culture and spiritual tradition, there is reverence for silence and stillness. Lao Tzu said, “Silence is a source of Great Strength.” Rumi, the 12th century Persian mystic poet said “In silence there is eloquence. Stop weaving and see how the pattern improves” and “Move outside the tangle of fear-thinking. Live in silence.” From the psalms; “Be still and know that I am God.” Thomas Merton, the 20th century Trappist monk and theologian said, “But there is greater comfort in the substance of silence than in the answer.” Psychologist Wayne Dyer says, “Make peace with silence, and remind yourself that it is in this space that you'll come to remember your spirit. When you're able to transcend an aversion to silence, you'll also transcend many other miseries. And it is in this silence that the remembrance of God will be activated.”

1100 Main Street, Branford, CT 06405

www.trinitybranford.org

203-488-2681

[e-mail rector47@trinitybranford.org](mailto:rector47@trinitybranford.org)



TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH

on the Branford Green

May you find Christ, Community and Compassion within these historic walls.

Speech and silence are one of the greatest tensions for humankind for both involve vulnerability. To become still enough to perceive God's presence and will in your life is to hear something that might scare you. The creation of incessant noise and chatter is one way to numb the vulnerability. If you don't take the time to listen, you don't have to hear the hard stuff. And what of people who work so hard to listen for God's guidance only to find silence that feels like divine indifference. Is it any wonder that the world holds so many people who have given up on a silent God?

Barbara Brown Taylor, long considered one of the best preachers the Episcopal Church has ever produced wrote a powerfully elegant little book called, *When God is Silent*. She traces the ambivalent history of God's discourse with humanity and observes that the silence that we find is the silence we asked for. There was a moment at the foot of Mt. Sinai when Moses had the tablets and God spoke directly to the entire community. It was thunder and crackling lightening, trembling and awe. God finished and within seconds, the people turned to Moses and said, "Well, we don't ever want to do that again, you talk to him for us." As Dr. Taylor points out, God has not spoken to all of us at once ever since. In the Book of Isaiah, there is this poignant lament from God;

*I was ready to be sought out by those who did not ask,
to be found by those who did not seek me.
I said, 'Here I am, here I am',
to a nation that did not call on my name.
I held out my hands all day long
to a rebellious people,
who walk in a way that is not good,
following their own devices;*

Does this mean that God has given up on us? Of course not, Jesus is the evidence of that. But having recoiled in discomfort at the direct presence of God, we now have to work harder to hear what God is saying. It does require us to venture into stillness, to retreat from noise of all kinds. Perhaps that is what God waits for.

I believe that it has become harder and harder for people to engage silence. Prior to the modern era, life was quieter. There was no electronic din, no traffic sounds, no elevator music and a lot fewer people around. Most sounds were those of nature and with those come a kind of serenity. I remember standing near a corn field in Indiana on a hot summer evening. It was so quiet that I could hear the popping of the expanding ears in their husks. I had never heard it before and even though it was quiet, it thrilled me as if I had discovered some long hidden

1100 Main Street, Branford, CT 06405

www.trinitybranford.org

203-488-2681

e-mail rector47@trinitybranford.org



TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH

on the Branford Green

May you find Christ, Community and Compassion within these historic walls.

mystery of sound. Just as we have lost the ability to see the stars because of all the ambient light, we have lost so many subtle sounds to the perpetual noise of our lives. Think of the concept of white noise – we have to create sounds to give ourselves the illusion of quiet. That's got to be some form of insanity. There are chambers developed to be perfectly silent – so quiet that one begins to hear a symphony of heart beat, blood moving through vessels, even our ears make a sound as they search something to hear. This quiet is so extreme that 40 minutes is the longest anyone has been able to endure it. Longer than that, you get a little batty.

But for our purposes here, silence is the necessary opposite of useless noise. Noise is all that distract us from God. Noise is the poor things that we believe about ourselves. Take the wretched demoniac in today's Gospel and most of the stories of Jesus encountering people who were shut off from the divine stillness. Jesus exorcises the voices from their heads, the ones that say I am helpless, I am incurable, I'm not acceptable, and I'm not enough. When those voices are banished, their own story can be heard along with the still small voice that repeats I know you; I love you. And they are healed.

We fill our lives, our days and our moments with sound and busyness. It's a habit. Even as I was writing this sermon, I took a break to make lunch and as soon as I walked into the kitchen, I reached to turn on some music. It takes some watchfulness, mindfulness, to stay out of our habitual desire for noise. It also takes time to become comfortable with stillness. We are all reminded regularly that meditation, time sitting in stillness, is good for us, good for our health, good for our souls but it's a fight to pry ourselves away from the frenzy we maintain. There is another way. We are not condemned to a noise driven isolation. We can escape it at any time. Jesus took time away from the din of his life to sit in stillness and listen for God. What he heard wasn't easy but it sustained him through Gethsemane and Calvary.

So make friends with silence and you will discover hidden wonders that cannot be perceived in the lightening or felt in the earthquake, or heard in the tempest. God waits for you in the stillness.

1100 Main Street, Branford, CT 06405

www.trinitybranford.org

203-488-2681

e-mail rector47@trinitybranford.org