

Notes for Teaching at Holy Blossom

Exodus 17:8-13; 33:12-23; I Kings 19:9-18; Nehemiah 8:11; Psalm 46; Psalm 39; Lamentations 3:16-33; Habbakuk 2:20; Zephaniah 1:7; Zech 2:17(13)

I come from a Catholic religious community known for its silence. We are often called the Silent Order. Thomas Merton, the Trappist monk who wrote his best selling autobiography in the late 1940s, wrote also a book about contemporary Trappist life and simply titled it: *The Silent Life*. One of the treasures that monks offer to our world is precisely silence. If you ask the some thirty thousand visitors who turn down the oak allée and come to Mepkin each year what is their principal impression, I would bet the vast majority would say silence and its companion, peace. Our *Constitutions* state it very succinctly: *Silence is counted among the principal monastic values of the Order.*

But we Christian monks did not arrive at this high esteem of silence on our own. We spend about three hours each day reading, pondering, meditating on the Scriptures God has given us. And it is in the Hebrew Scriptures that we find some of the most powerful and key texts which have influenced our theory and our practice of silence. Rabbi Splansky and I want us to look at some of these texts because we believe they can allow us a fresh appreciation of what it means to be human, to be a Jew, and to be in relationship with our God.

Let us begin with one of my personal favorites -- and a favorite of monks throughout the ages. It comes from the cycle of readings around the prophet Elijah and is found in I Kings 19. Elijah has just killed the 450 prophets of Baal and Queen Jezebel has threatened to do the same to Elijah. Before such a powerful

personage, Elijah figures flight is his best option and he flees to the wilderness beyond Beer-sheba. There the angel of the Lord finds him, wakes him from sleep, commands him to eat and drink the food provided and in the strength of that food to make his way to the most holy mountain in Hebrew history, Mount Horeb (Sinai). There he found a cave and spent the night. In the morning the word of the Lord came to him and asked him to come out and stand before the Lord, just as Moses had been commanded to do so on this same mountain centuries before - as recounted in Exodus 33. And just like Moses before him, Elijah experiences very personally the presence and power of the Lord. It is one of the most profound of the theophanies described in the Hebrew Scriptures. Let us read the text using the Tanakh translation.

“And lo, the Lord passed by. There was a great and mighty wind, splitting mountains and shattering rocks by the power of the Lord; but the Lord was not in the wind. After the wind -- an earthquake; but the Lord was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake -- fire; but the Lord was not in the fire. And after the fire -- a soft murmuring sound. When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his mantle about his face and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave.”

The Lord was not in the mighty wind or the earthquake or the fire -- all the elements associated with God's appearance to Moses on Sinai. Instead, we have a new element introduced: *a soft murmuring sound*. The footnote says that others translate the Hebrew as *a still small voice*. Another translation has it as *a sound of sheer silence*, which is actually almost a literal rendering of the Hebrew: *qol damamah daqqa*. קוֹל דַּמָּמָה דַּקָּה

It seems to me that what this text is teaching us about God and our relationship with God, is that God is often hidden in plain

sight. God is present not just in the powerful displays of nature; God is not just present in the big events of our lives, with all the hoopla of music and song and dance. God is also present, God can also be found, when all is still and quiet. When we stand before God in the silence of our hearts -- even hearts that are in grief and/or depression, as Elijah's was. God is present when we present ourselves before God in darkened and quiet places. We like the fanfare. We like the brilliant lights and raucous sounds. But this revelation of God to Elijah on the Holy Mountain shows that dark and quiet places can be privileged places in which to meet God, to commune with God, and to hear God speaking to us in our lives.

I can't tell you how much this passage, these three simple Hebrew words, has meant to me in my life. Instead of bemoaning the lack of thunder and lightning in my life, I have been empowered to seek God in my sorrow, in my confusion, in my despair, and to turn to God in the silence, knowing that God is present there. The silence and the quiet on which we so often find ourselves is holy ground. Just as Moses was commanded to take off his shoes when he saw the burning bush, so Elijah wraps his face in his mantle and stands before the Lord in reverence and awe before this theophany on the holy ground of *sheer silence*. *Qol damamah daqqa.* קוֹל דַּמָּמָה דַּקָּה

This takes courage and humility. For we have to give up our control of the situation, and perhaps more importantly, we have to give up our desire to control God. This is what silence does to us, confronts us with our own insecurity and asks us to trust in someone greater than ourselves. What our text is teaching us is that God is manifested when and where and how God chooses.

Yet it is also teaching us that God always envelops us in mercy and faithfulness -- God always assures us that things are not as bleak as we propose. As God did with Moses when he brought him up the Holy Mountain. Moses was complaining that the Lord was not telling him everything, that he didn't know if the Lord would really go forward with them. He wanted more assurance. *The Lord, the Lord, a God compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in kindness and faithfulness.* In this instance with Elijah, God answers each one of Elijah's complaints. Elijah complained that all God's altars were torn down and so God asks Elijah to anoint Hazael, who will punish those who broke them down. Elijah complained that all the Lord's prophets had been killed and God asks Elijah to anoint Jehu, who will punish those who killed the prophets. Elijah had complained that only he was left and God asks him to anoint Elisha who will be a prophet with him and after him.

Silence, *qol damamah daqqa* קֹל דַּמָּמָה דַּקָּקָה, has become the place of God's presence, a place where we may experience God, surrender to God and know the comfort of God's actions in our lives.

A second text to contemplate: Exodus 17:8-13. There is no explicit use of the word "silence" in this passage, and yet it breathes the reality throughout, it seems to me.

Israel is fighting with Amalek at Rephidim. Joshua is told to lead the Israelites into battle, while Moses goes up the mountain to pray to the Lord for their success. No words are given to Moses. All is done in silence. But what happens in this silence is of immense importance. More important than all the weapons of war with which Joshua and the Israelites are fighting. However, gestures are mentioned, principally, the lifting up of Moses' hands.

It is the classic gesture of prayer, the lifting up of the hands. Psalm 141: *Take my prayer as an offering of incense, my upraised hands as an evening sacrifice.* Psalm 28: *listen to my plea for mercy when I cry out to you; when I lift my hands toward your inner sanctuary.* Psalm 63: *I bless you all my life; I lift up my hands, invoking your name.*

So once again we have this connection between silence and prayer. God is present in the silence. God hears our prayers, even without words, when we lift up our hands to God and beg for his mercy, protection and victory.

This same type of silence which exudes confidence in God to do us good and not evil is found in Nehemiah 8:11. When the wall of Jerusalem had been rebuilt, there was a great celebration with all the people. Ezra, the priest and scribe, stood before the people and read from the Torah. As the people listened in silence and rapt attention, they began to experience sorrow at their lack of fidelity to the Torah. Nehemiah jumped in and proclaimed: No, this is not a time for weeping and mourning. This is a day holy to the Lord. Our silence is not to be filled with sadness, but rather joy. It is not the ha-ha type of joy, but the deep down freshness kind of joy. The joy that knows that God is in charge. That God is with us and that his will toward us is mercy and faithfulness. Our silence before God's word and God's Torah is to be filled with this joy and confidence. In trying to quiet the people and encourage such a silent attitude of trust, Nehemiah utters those most consoling words: *your rejoicing in the Lord is the source of your strength.* Silence is not a mournful attitude. Silence is filled with the quiet assurance of God's presence to save, support and enfold us in an environment of safety.

There is a wonderful passage in Lamentations which captures this joyful and trustful silence perfectly. It has been one of my

favorite texts to come back to again and again to renew my appreciation of silence and the special part silence plays in our relationship with God. It is a long text but I know no better way to treat it than to quote the entire passage. It becomes self-explanatory in this way.

He has made my teeth grind on gravel,
and made me cower in ashes;
my soul is bereft of peace;
I have forgotten what happiness is;
so I say, "Gone is my glory,
and all that I had hoped for from the LORD."
The thought of my affliction and my homelessness
is wormwood and gall!
My soul continually thinks of it
and is bowed down within me.

But this I call to mind,
and therefore I have hope:
The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases,
his mercies never come to an end;
they are new every morning;
great is your faithfulness.
"The LORD is my portion," says my soul,
"therefore I will hope in him."

The LORD is good to those who wait for him,
to the soul that seeks him.
It is good that one should wait quietly (silently)
for the salvation of the LORD.

It is obvious from this beautiful text and the other texts at which we have been looking, that silence is not primarily an

absence, but a presence. It is not the lack of words or sounds or noise, but a pregnant environment. In other words, it is not emptiness, but fullness. What a great paradox. Silence as fullness.

Silence in the Hebrew Scriptures often is a response of reverence and awe. What happens when some great dignitary walks into a room? For example, when a judge enters a courtroom, what do we do? We all rise and are suddenly silent. In other contexts it is possible there might be an initial cheering, but silence is our usual attitude before those who wield power and authority. So too, with the Lord God. Habakkuk 2:20: *The Lord is in his holy Abode (temple: hekhal) -- Be silent before him all the earth!* And, Zephaniah 1:7: *Be silent before my Lord God, for the day of the Lord is approaching.* And, Zechariah 2:17: *Be silent, all flesh, before the Lord! For he is roused from his holy habitation.*

As our final text, let us look at Psalm 46. It is the text I mentioned initially to Rabbi Splansky and she immediately said: We Jews are not good at silence. (Actually, we Christians are not better!!) It seems to me it sums up so much of what we have seen about silence as fullness, not emptiness; presence, not absence. So we should not be surprised that this psalm is a great psalm of confidence in God, a psalm that says emphatically: All is in God's hands. The seas may rage, the mountains quake, the nations roar, but God has the last word. Everything and everyone will bow before him. He topples kingdoms, he puts a stop to wars, breaking the bow and snapping the spear. So our refrain will always be: *The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our haven.*

And in the midst of such an outburst of exuberant confidence the psalmist cries out in the voice of God: *Be still* (rafah, רָפָא)

and know that I am God. Supreme among the nations, supreme on the earth.

The command *Rafah*, to be still, to be silent, is not meant as a call to fall down in worship and subservience, but is a call to total trust in God, total reverence and awe before the Lord who loves us, has mercy on us, is all caring and protective of his people. It comes from a root meaning to abandon, to let fall, but in the context it means to surrender all our anxieties, to abandon any and all mistrust in God and to remain still, to remain silent, to remain totally surrendered to the God who loves us. It echoes so many of the texts we have treated this morning. As one commentator expresses it: *The assurance of the Lord's unfailing protective presence (יְהוָה לֹא יַשְׁכֵּחַ, "he will not fail you,") constitutes the basis for an appeal to both the nation (Deut 31:6) and individuals (Joshua, Deut 31:8) to be strong and courageous.*

We can pile texts upon texts to show this. **Deut. 4:31** Because the LORD your God is a merciful God, he will neither abandon you nor destroy you; he will not forget the covenant with your ancestors that he swore to them.

Josh. 10:6 And the Gibeonites sent to Joshua at the camp in Gilgal, saying, "Do not abandon your servants; come up to us quickly, and save us, and help us; for all the kings of the Amorites who live in the hill country are gathered against us."

Psa. 138:8 The LORD will fulfill his purpose for me;
your steadfast love, O LORD, endures forever.
Do not forsake the work of your hands.

Deut. 31:6 Be strong and bold; have no fear or dread of them, because it is the LORD your God who goes with you; he will not fail you or forsake you."

Deut. 31:8 It is the LORD who goes before you. He will be with you; he will not fail you or forsake you. Do not fear or be dismayed."

Josh. 1:5 No one shall be able to stand against you all the days of your life. As I was with Moses, so I will be with you; I will not fail you or forsake you.

1Chr. 28:20 David said further to his son Solomon, "Be strong and of good courage, and act. Do not be afraid or dismayed; for the LORD God, my God, is with you. He will not fail you or forsake you, until all the work for the service of the house of the LORD is finished.

And so just as God will not fail us or abandon us, so we can let go, surrender, be still and silent before the Lord whose presence fills our lives.

What a journey we have been on this morning! God is found in silence. It is holy ground -- just as the wonders of a storm and earthquake and fire can be vehicles of God's presence. Our texts ask us to be still and silent before the Lord. Our texts ask us to cultivate a total trust in God's presence and action in our world and in our lives. Our texts ask us to have a healthy reverence and awe before the Lord God. Our texts ask us to relax, to rejoice in the God who is mercy and faithfulness and to allow such a God a prime place in our lives, our hopes and our dreams.