

# “STILLNESS”

A Sermon Given at the First Parish in Wayland, Mass.

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One of my favorite passages from the Christmas narrative is in the gospel of Luke: “And it came to pass, as the angels were gone away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known to us. And they came with haste, and found Mary, and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger. And when they had seen it, they made known abroad the saying which was told them concerning the child [that he would become a savior]. And all they that heard it wondered at those things which were told them by the shepherds. But Mary kept all these things, and pondered them in her heart. And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen, as it was told unto them.” (Luke 3:15-20)

So picture the scene. There go the shepherds, jabbering away to the world at large – which isn’t surprising when you remember what they said when the angels departed: “Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known to us” – when all that was needed was, “Let’s go.” This is a talkative crowd, these shepherds. They can’t wait to spread the news. But Mary “pondered these things in her heart.”

Beautiful words have been written, imagining what was on her mind. How would you know what to make of it all? I’m still taking the story on its own terms. In Luke, Mary has already been told by an angel, months before, that this child of hers is going to a great king and, in fact, someone who would be called the Son of God. But maybe she’s having second thoughts as to whether greatness of that magnitude is what you’d want for your child. Maybe she’s begun to wonder – quite rightly – if the angel really meant a king who gets to live in a palace or some more problematic assignment. Being a big shot can be dangerous, especially for a Jew in that part of the Roman Empire. Or maybe she’s just pondering how many nice things she’ll have once she and her son move into the palace. We don’t know.

What we know is, she pondered things in her heart. Not even with Joseph. At least that’s the way the story’s written. The shepherds leave, yakking it up, and the stable falls silent except for the baby and the animals.

I want to put in a good word for stillness. I recognize the irony in this. A Hassidic tale comes to mind: “When Rabbi Mendel was in Kotzk, the rabbi of that town asked him: ‘Where did you learn the art of silence?’ He was on the verge of answering the question, but he changed his mind, and practiced his art.” Still, I wouldn’t feel right at pausing for the next eighteen minutes, before announcing the final hymn. There should be something to say in defense of not saying, some talk to make about not talking so much.

It’s funny, I went to the library and searched for books about talking, and the book that deals with the subject most directly makes the case that in contemporary

America, people don't talk enough. We're too busy watching television or working in isolation to get a healthy dose of daily conversation.

That wasn't the case I was looking for. I was looking for an explanation of why we talk as much as we do. I was hoping to hear agreement that it would be okay if we lived with more silence, more pauses amidst all the words.

That case is one I have to make real, real carefully, or we are about to have the worst coffee hour ever. And I really like coffee hour and all the congenial conversation that goes on there. But I understand why some people find it hard to enjoy, and why others of us, loving chatting as much as we may, still want and need to find quieter moments as well, and maybe more often.

It's complicated, because some of us live lives that don't allow for nearly enough talk, or enough talk with other adults. And as Dr. Willem Levelt, director of the Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics in the Netherlands, has noted, "People love to talk. Most of us spend large parts of the day in conversation." It's sad when that love goes unfulfilled, and I'm glad that folks stop by just to talk, or take the chance to talk when we meet somewhere like the supermarket.

"People love to talk." By the way, Dr. Levelt goes on to note that "If we are not talking to others, we are talking to ourselves." [*New York Times*, 9/26/95,C1] So next time you visit the Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics, and you wonder who that is in a tete-a-tete involving only one tete, that's probably Willem.

But his basic observation, that we love to talk, still leaves my curiosity unslaked. Why do we love to talk, and some of us a lot? (For that matter, why do some of us love to talk funny and use words like "unslaked"? But that's another Sunday.)

Over the years I've collected a few explanations about talking's popularity. Bob Newhart said, "Very often we talk to conceal our true feelings." (And he played a psychologist on TV.) Congressman Barney Frank, who has been known to share a word or two on occasion, said, "I find it more interesting when I speak than when I listen." And then there's the character in Kurt Vollegut's novel *Cat's Cradle* who says, "People have to talk about something just to keep their voice boxes in working order, so they'll have good voice boxes in case there's ever anything meaningful to say." (140).

And that's okay with me, though I do sometimes wonder when I'm at a restaurant at the capacity of a person seated at a nearby table to talk for fifteen minutes at a clip or more. Once on a tourist riverboat I watched a woman talk for hours on end to someone I took to be her friend, or she was up till then. I even got a picture of the two, as I pretended to be shooting a castle on a far hillside. I was that impressed.

Hers may be the kind of behavior that caused the novelist Patricia Highsmith to say that she found noisy people incomprehensible. "Consequently, I fear them, and since I fear them, I hate them." [*New York Times Book Review* 9/9/01, 13]

Well, that's going too far, but it would be nice if all of us remembered to let other people have their say. But you'll be glad to know I had something a little deeper in mind for my message this morning than, don't hog all the airtime. Don't -- but of even greater moment, let us accept with welcome, and search out with diligence, times without words, moments of quiet, havens of stillness.

That doesn't have to mean solitude. Indeed, the philosopher E. M. Cioran went so far as to write that "True contact between beings is established only by mute presence, by

apparent non-communication, by that mysterious and wordless exchange which resembles inward prayer.” [*The Trouble with Being Born*, 7]

Maybe. At least we know that for many of us, our closest connections just don't require a whole lot of talk. The freedom to talk is really nice, but so is the freedom from talking at all, if there's nothing that needs to be said that breaks the blessed silence. As Spinoza said, “The world would be happier if [people] had the same capacity to be silent that they have to speak.” Carl Jung would have agreed. He said, “Silence is for me a healing which makes my life worth living. Talking is often a torment for me, and I need many days of silence to recover from the futility of words.”

Those two quotations are in a nice collection compiled by Dale Salwak and lent to me by Erin. It's titled, *The Wonders of Solitude*, which is a somewhat different subject than silence or stillness, but closely related, as Salwak notes. For him, solitude is when we “remove ourselves from our peripheral concerns, from the pressures of a madly active world, and return to the center where life is sacred...” [3] “This is not to say that solitude always requires our absence from other people. Some of our most meaningful times with others have been spent in shared silence while walking along a beach, sitting on the steps, reading.” [5-6]

Salwak's sort of solitude doesn't require one's being alone. Nor does it require silence. “With friends, relatives, even strangers – at home, at work, in houses of worship, in business, in marriage, on a crowded street – we can still retire within ourselves and be immersed in solitude. Indeed, some people seek out crowds so that anonymity can help them feel alone.” [6]

But silence can help, and he devotes his final chapter to its power. That's where we find the writer Norman Cousins saying, “Silence must be comprehended as not solely the absence of sound. It is the natural environment for serenity and contemplation. Life without silence is life without privacy. The difference between sanity and madness is the quality of our thoughts. Silence is on the side of sanity.” [87]

Religion has long spoken of the importance of stillness. Some of the best-known passages in the world's religion concern stillness. In Taoism, one is enjoined to

Empty yourself of everything.

Let the mind rest at peace.

The ten thousand things rise and fall while the Self watches their return.

They grow and flourish and return to the source.

Returning to the source is stillness, which is the way of nature. (Lao Tze)

And in Jewish and Christian scripture, there is the story of Elijah's encounter with God. The word of God has told him to stand before God. This was on Horeb, the mount of God. “And, behold, the Lord passed by, and a great and strong wind rent the mountains, and brake in pieces the rocks 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: and after the earthquake a fire; but the Lord was not in the fire: and after the fire a still small voice.” [1 Kings 19:11-12 KJV] And at that, Elijah went out and had his conversation with God, God of the still small voice.

I know that passage is perplexing to people who think of “still” as altogether quiet, allowing for not even a small voice. A still voice would be a mime's. And that is

the usual meaning of stillness. But still can also mean “hushed, soft, or low in sound,” like the voice of God to Elijah. A recent translation [New English] refers to it as a “low murmuring sound.”

There’s another definition of stillness that pertains to the way I think of it myself. To be still is to be “characterized by little or no commotion or agitation; tranquil; calm; serene: as, the *still* water of the lake.” [Webster’s New World Dictionary] Or the stillness any of us might hope to possess, at least at times.

Before closing, let me acknowledge another point of view. I know from personal experience that some of you wish people like me would spend less time pondering in our hearts and more time saying what’s on our minds, for Peter sake. And there’s the character in the book, *The Late George Apley*, who reports that “The hour and a half at Church was a period of complete quiescence and, must I say it frankly, an interval of such boredom as I have never known since.” [John P. Marquand, p. 37]

But yet quiescence, stillness, remains a goal I think most of us hope to have more of, wherever it may be found. Here, for instance. Or even on the train.

I serve on a committee that meets at UUA headquarters. One of our members comes up from Princeton, where she lives. She takes the train. She told me on Thursday that she came up in the quiet car. It is a car that people who want to chat are encouraged to avoid. Cell phone conversations are forbidden. It’s the quiet car. Amtrak says, “Many northeast corridor trains have a ‘quiet car,’ where customers are asked not to use cellular phones, pagers, or the sound feature of laptop computers, and to speak only in subdued tones. This provides a quiet atmosphere for those who want to work or rest without distractions.” Just the place to do some pondering in one’s heart.

It’s enough to make me head off for Washington. But wait, any of us can have that atmosphere and without the sound of wheels. In the weeks and months and years ahead, once we’re done celebrating the Patriots win in the Super Bowl, I hope we can all find enough silence for our spirits. As much as we may enjoy camaraderie and conversation, I hope we can all find enough stillness for our souls.