

"MOUNTAINTOP SILENCE"

A Sermon By

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INTRODUCTION

Back in the Fall of 1988, a rather unusual protest took place in a convent over here in New Jersey. Some of you may remember that four nuns locked themselves in a tiny second-floor infirmary and took a vow of "near silence". They were protesting some new rules put down by their new prioress, Mother Theresa Hewitt. It seems that Mother Theresa Hewitt had introduced bright lights, television, secular videos, recorded music and - horror of horrors - daily sweets into the convent.

The sweets consisted of a tin of candy which was passed around each day and each nun was invited to indulge. In the words of one of the protesting nuns - who, by the way were among the younger sisters in the order - this new prioress was turning monastic life into one "big party"! In order to express their revulsion of these "ungodly changes" these four sisters had locked themselves away. I don't remember the outcome of their protest, but...

DEVELOPMENT

I found a part of myself sympathizing with them. There is much in our "brave new world" from which I would like to withdraw. Reflecting on today's scripture reading, I can sympathize with Simon Peter who wanted to build three booths and stay on the "mountaintop" of Transfiguration in the presence of Jesus and Moses and Elijah. Unfortunately Simon Peter was not given that option and neither are we! We must live in this world of strident and discordant noise. There is no retreat offered to us.

I read somewhere recently about an enterprising salesman down in Fort Lauderdale who realized that each time he drove through a certain tunnel in his city that his radio would go silent. What was he to do? Well...

On the conviction that people prefer any kind of noise to silence this salesman convinced those in authority to have the tunnel wired. And now commercials and public service announcements are broadcast constantly in that tunnel. The only way you can escape is to turn your radio off. And not many do!

THE MOUNTAIN OF TRANSFIGURATION AND THE THREE DISCIPLES

There seems to be no escape from noise in our society. And wouldn't it be nice though, from time to time, to experience what Peter, James and John experienced that day on the Mountain of Transfiguration? They had gone off with Jesus to a secluded spot for a bit of prayer and doubtless - they were not prepared for what happened there!

To me it's interesting to note that on the two occasions when Jesus took Peter, James and John to a secluded spot for prayer, the disciples fell asleep. Was it the walk up the mountain that did it? However, it was the same three who nodded off while Jesus prayed in Gethsemane. This time, however, when they were awakened they experienced something that they'd never forget. They were not only in the presence of Jesus, but also two of the most significant men of the Old Testament - Moses, representing the Law and Elijah, representing the prophets!

Without a doubt, the three disciples must have been stunned. And who wouldn't be? To wake up and find Moses and Elijah standing there. Peter spoke up and declared, "Master....it is well that we are here. Let us make three booths - one for You and one for Moses and one for Elijah!" Good old Peter.

Peter could always be counted on to put in his two cents' worth. About this time a cloud - the symbol of God's presence - moved in and enshrouded them and they were afraid! We really can't blame them. A voice spoke from the cloud,

"This is MY SON. MY CHOSEN. Listen to HIM!"

When the voice had spoken and the cloud departed, Moses and Elijah had disappeared. Luke tells us that in the face of this experience, the three disciples kept silent and told no one anything of what they had seen.

After all, what was there to say? Words are inadequate for some of life's experiences. How can words express what you feel when you first hold your newborn child? What words are adequate to comfort one who has lost their life's partner? And even more strikingly, what can you say when you have been in the presence of the Living God? Luke tells us that they "kept silence and told no one" and that is certainly an appropriate response. Some of us can learn from that

Ralph Harper writes,

"We know that serious things have to be done in silence.
In silence men love, pray, listen, compose, paint, write,
think and suffer...."

Many people are afraid of silence. We grow uncomfortable as the conversation wanes. We begin to fidget in church if the time of silent meditation runs too long. We look up to see what's happened. But there are occasions that demand silence. We wonder...what are some of those occasions. Let me offer three.

SILENCE IN THE PRESENCE OF A MYSTERY

First-off, silence is the best response in the presence of a mystery too

great for our understanding.

I would like to think that this was the situation of the three disciples. They were in the presence of a mystery simply beyond their power to comprehend. James and John had sense enough to keep silent. However, Simon Peter, "not knowing what to say" - Luke tells us, blurted out the suggestion that they try and build three booths and stay on the mountain. His response reminds me of some people I've known. "Not knowing what to say...." But even Peter grew silent as the mystery deepened and intensified.

We may not want to admit it, but there are mysteries in life that demand silence. The mystery of suffering, I feel, is one of these.

In his book, The Light Within You, John Claypool writes of the very painful story of the loss of their young daughter to acute leukemia. Very quickly upon diagnosis of this disease, his daughter had been given a medicine that enabled her to go into remission. For some time she was almost perfectly normal. And naturally, this created many hopes for her family. Had the diagnosis been a mistaken one? Had she experienced the miracle of divine healing for which her mother and father and so many others had been praying?

It was not to be. All these hopes came to an abrupt end, ironically on Easter Sunday morning when the old pains reappeared and she went into a severe relapse that meant hospitalization for some two weeks. Part of that time both of her eyes were swollen shut and pain racked every part of her young body.

John Claypool writes that being with her through those two weeks was a terribly difficult and draining experience. Stretched in every way... physically exhausted...emotionally dissipated...his faith challenged as never before. However, he writes that the worst moment of all came one night when his daughter could get no relief and she asked him,

"When will this leukemia go away?" He answered, "I don't know dear...but we are doing everything in our power to find an answer to cure it."

There was a long silence and then she asked in the darkness,

"Daddy...have you asked God when the leukemia will go away?" Her father - minister hedged a bit and said,

"You know, dear, how we have prayed again and again for God to help us."

But she persisted,

"Have you asked God when it will go away? What did He say?"

Claypool asks,

"How do you respond to such childlike directness at a time when the very heavens themselves seem utterly silent?"

There are some questions without an answer. Let me try to say something to you that I hope you will remember. When I - as your pastor - come to you in the hospital...or to the funeral home...in an hour in which you have experienced a great loss, a great tragedy....please do not expect me to come with a lot of glib, ready-made answers.

I will be there for you. I will sit with you. I will struggle with you to find meaning. I will listen quietly to you. I will pray with you, but please do not expect me to have all the answers. I will try to restrain myself from giving answers of which I am unsure. His ways are not our ways. Some questions have no answers. No easy answers. Such times demand a measure of silence. I believe we can but "wait on the Lord" and trust that though we see through a glass darkly, that one day we will see face to face....(to borrow from St. Paul) Silence in the presence of mystery. This is one occasion that demands silence. Here is another.

SILENCE IN THE PRESENCE OF SOMETHING / SOMEONE GREATER

In the second place, silence is the best response when we are in the presence of something or of someone greater than ourselves.

We need that kind of inspiration from time to time....to ponder a masterpiece or to sit at the foot of a "legend". At times like that we do not chatter on. But we sit quietly and expectantly and reverently...with a longing to "soak" up as much of the greatness of that moment as we possibly can!

In the early years of this century, a young stage actress spent two years

in Europe. So much of this time was spent in concert halls and doing the art museums. Later on in life when asked why she had given so much time to things that were really not directly related to her successful career, she said,

"I wanted to expose myself to the best, so
I would always know what was better."

Not a bad idea for us to follow. This, of course, is one reason why we come to worship. Albert Schweitzer, in his autobiography, said that one of the main things that his parents did for him as a child was to take him to church worship, even though he was too young to understand much of what was going on. He claimed that it was not important that children understand everything, but what is important (according to Schweitzer) is,

"That they shall feel something of what is
serious and solemn."...as they grow up..

Picture...if you can...Peter and James and John as they contemplated what it meant to be up on that "mountaintop" in the presence not only of Jesus, but also of Moses and Elijah...and then to "top it all off"...to hear the voice of God as well! No wonder they "kept silence". For here was dust encountering divinity. The temporal in the presence of the eternal. The imperfect face to face with Holiness itself. Oh, how we need such experiences today. And such experiences demand silence. And in that silence, there is great power.

It reminds me of what the historians have written about Napoleon and how on the night before a great battle, Napoleon's commanders all went to their commander's tent "one by one". Reportedly, it was a strange procession, for no one said a word as they came into the presence of Napoleon. Each man simply looked into his commander's eyes, shook his hand, then turned and walked out of the tent ready to lay down his life for his beloved general.

Silence, first, is appropriate in the presence of a mystery too great for our understanding. Second, it is appropriate in the presence of something or someone greater than we, ourselves. One thought more, point three.

SILENCE IS THE BEST RESPONSE IF WE WOULD HEAR GOD'S VOICE

And that is that
silence is the

best response if we would hear the voice of God.

Benjamin Franklin, as a young man, they say was a bit arrogant in his opinions and wanted to do most of the talking in his conversations with his friends. He was quick to tell people where they were wrong that they began crossing to the other side of the street to avoid speaking to him. We all know the type. A Quaker friend took Franklin to one side and kindly informed him of this unpardonable fault and convinced "gentle Ben" by mentioning several instances in which he had rudely dismissed the opinions of others. Ben Franklin was so stricken by this "revelation" that half a century later, when he was 79 years young, he wrote these words in his famous autobiography,

"Considering that in conversation, knowledge was obtained rather by the use of the ears than of the tongue, I gave SILENCE second place among the virtues I determined to cultivate."

An excellent step on Franklin's part...and our part, too. I love those lines.

Now, just for a moment here this morning...try to put yourself in the place of God when it comes to prayer. How frustrating it must be for God when we come to Him in prayer, supposedly seeking His guidance and then proceed to do all the talking. We all have friends who love to talk...who never seem to stop talking...to listen. How frustrating they can be! We often make our requests to God and then move on to other things without ever giving God a chance to say something...anything...to us in return. Either that or we drown Him out in the noises and sounds with which we surround ourselves daily.

Wrote Everlyn Underhill,

"The voice of God is a gentle voice...and we can't hear it when it is in competition with other voices...."

CLOSING THOUGHTS

There's a time for silence. A time for shutting out all conflicting noises. A time to slow down...and to stop talking and to listen. Lent is that type of time. And maybe those four Catholic sisters over in Jersey were on to something. Maybe we would do well to lock ourselves away from time to time...not in protest, of course, but in prayer...in meditation...reflection. To listen. In silence. For the gentle voice of God.

Up there on the mountaintop, Peter and James and John were silent. They heard the voice of God speak, "This is My Son. My Chosen. Listen to Him". This is our word for Lent. And now let those lines of Frances Havergal be our closing prayer. Shall we pray:

"Master, speak! Thy servant heareth,
Waiting for Thy gracious word.
Longing for Thy voice that cheereth;
Master, let it now be heard.

I am listening, Lord, for Thee -
What hast thou to say to me?"

PRAYER Speak, Lord...to each of us the word we need to hear. Move in our hearts. Let these coming days of Lent provide us with a mountaintop experience when we feel Your nearness and hear Your voice speaking to us with a clarity and a certainty and in a way that we have never felt or heard it before. Visit our sick with the assurance of Your care. Encircle the bereaved with Your healing, comforting presence. Point out markers along the way to those who may be in danger of losing their way. All in the spirit of Christ, we now pray. Amen.