

Micah 5: 2-5a

Luke 1: 39-55

### **How Silently, How Silently**

Where is the quietest place that you've ever been:

where road noise is at a minimum; where the drone of planes

and the blare of trains don't register;

where cell phones don't ping or ring;

where people speak to one another in whispers?

It was pretty quiet on the night that it started snowing here two weeks ago,

wasn't it?

One place that comes to my mind is Muir Woods National Monument,

just north of San Francisco, where towering redwood trees

create the green dome of a natural cathedral above.

It's hard to speak there, because you feel so small and so young,

gazing up at these 1,000 year old wonders of the world.

People look upwards in awe, cameras quietly click, brooks barely babble.

Some get married there, but go elsewhere to party.

Hush is observed, allowing the redwoods to tell their own stories.

The other place that I remember is Green Bank, West Virginia,

deep in the Appalachian Mountains,

home to the world's largest steerable radio telescope,

alongside other smaller radio telescopes that bloom like sunflowers

in the valley.

Green Bank sits in the middle of a national radio quiet zone, a 13,000-square-mile swath of countryside far from the noise and distractions of human life.

It's relative isolation is such that the massive Robert C. Byrd radio telescope, towering 500 feet above the valley floor, large enough to cradle a football field, can listen for the music of the spheres: pulsars, gas clouds and galaxies emitting radio pulses from distant outer space.

The telescopes are extremely susceptible to electronic interference, therefore, the handful of residents of Green Bank must forego modern conveniences such as cell phones, televisions and even wireless internet routers to allow the radio telescopes to do their job of listening.

We took our family to visit there when we lived and worked in West Virginia.

It's such a quiet place; it's as quiet as a prayer.

When the busy world is hushed there,

it feels like giant ears are listening for the cosmic whispers of God.

(Ingber, Sasha. Life in the Quiet Zone: "West Virginia Town Avoids Electronics for Silence". *National Geographic*, October 11, 2014)

He never says a mumblin' word. Did you notice?

Mary can't stop glorifying God and rejoicing with her words;

her verbal cup runneth over in response to the great things God has done for her.

Joseph, on the other hand, never says a mumblin' word.

Before God, he stands mute in Scripture.

"He is the patriarch of silence. Not one word of his is to be found

in any of the Gospels." (Corbin, Allain. *The History of Silence*, p. 66)

In Matthew's Gospel, when he perceives the Lord's angel in a dream,  
Joseph responds silently and obediently to the angel's command and warning  
to take Mary as his wife, to name their Spirit child, Jesus,  
and to flee with his holy family to Egypt for safety. (Matthew 1: 20 – 2:15)

He does exactly as the Lord requires; he listens and he obeys (*shema*).

And here in Luke's Gospel, Joseph is almost an add-on, standing quietly outside the  
ebullient dyad of Mary and Elizabeth; just as he also stood quietly outside the  
arcing triangle of Spirit, mother and Son.

Luke says, "Joseph *also* went up from Nazareth in Galilee to Judea  
to the town of David...to register with Mary who pledged to be married to him,  
and was expecting a child"; (Luke 2: 4-5) not his child, but a child.

Joseph is an "also" in Luke's nativity tale. Why, I wonder?

My aunt June used to say that people always loved, her younger sister,  
my mother, more than they loved her; they doted on her,  
clamored for her attention, invited her to their parties and homes.

"Oh, you can come, too, June," they would say politely to my aunt.

She said she always felt like an "also" when my mother was around.

But she was a very protective *also* of her younger sister!

Perhaps that is Joseph's role *also*:

to protect what God hath wrought in the one he loves.

Or perhaps his task is simply to listen and obey, in order to bear witness.

Perhaps we all are *alsoes* in the miraculous drama of God assuming our human form.

Perhaps we all *also* should observe hush, to give space for the holy ones

to tell their own stories.

Luke says, "And the shepherds find Joseph in Bethlehem with Mary and the baby  
in the manger" (Luke 2: 16), silently standing watch.

Nineteenth-century Catholic saint and poet Charles de Foucauld says of the holy couple,  
"Mary and Joseph believed that they would never again be able to enjoy Him...  
in a silence so perfect...

so they turned to sit by Jesus in the manger, silent and content."

(Foucauld, Charles. *Nouveaux Ecrits Spirituels* (Paris, 1950), p. 31)

How silently, how silently!

Gordon Hempton is an acoustic ecologist; (Dewey Lawson would like this story!)

a collector of sound all over the world,

searching for the few quiet places left, where silence prevails.

He grew up being a listener, like Joseph,

before acoustic audiology as a field of study even existed.

I heard him speak in a podcast with Krista Tippett for her program,

*The On Being Project*.

Hempton claims there are only twelve truly quiet places left in the United States.

None of them is protected, which is why he insists that silence  
is an endangered species.

One of them is the Hoh Rain Forest at Olympic National Park in Washington,

home to some of the nation's tallest trees, like Muir Woods.

"Quiet is the think-tank of the soul," Hempton says.

"Quiet is quieting...and listening is our sense of security.

When we're in a relatively quiet place, we can hear that all the information is in. So quiet places generally tend to be secure places...they calm us. They are places where we can feel secure, secure enough that we can open up and be receptive and listen. And when we're truly listening, we also have to anticipate that we might be changed by what we have heard."

(<https://onbeing.org/programs/gordon-hempton-silence-and-the-presence-of-everything/>)

Going back to Joseph, perhaps he, too; he, *also*, was truly listening throughout his journey with Mary, knowing that he might be changed, that the world might be changed, by what he heard and observed.

Hempton does not define silence in terms of the absence of sound, but rather as an absence of modern noise, like the silence at Green Bank; silence from all sounds that have nothing to do with the natural acoustic system of the world.

"Silence," he says, "is presence, and what it means to be in a place."

I like that thought: silence as presence.

And I wonder if this accounts for Joseph's silence in the presence of the profound mystery of God's incarnation?

When Jesus took on our flesh and blood, and was born into our world as a poor, vulnerable, powerless little child, perhaps Joseph wondered what this world was coming to, and *also* about his place in this new world order.

Silence is not absence; silence is presence; silence is noticing God's presence with us, in ways that radically might change our world for the good.

A few quotes from the infinitely wise Rowan Williams, former Archbishop of Canterbury:

“Moments of silence are so very important,” he says,

“not only for our humanity in general, but for our Christian humanity  
in particular...

If we’re silent in the face of death and suffering, depth and beauty,

it’s not because we have been shut up....it’s because we’ve been opened up.

It’s a recognition of something that all human beings, powerful and powerless,

sooner or later share – being up against what can’t be mastered and managed.

And ultimately everybody is silent in the face of the utterly unmanageable,

which is God. ”

In Jesus, Williams notes, his powerlessness is turned around so that

silence becomes a place in the world where the mystery of God is present.

“In a small way, that’s what happens when we seek to be truly and fully silent

or let ourselves be silenced by the mystery of God.

We become a place where the mystery of God happens,” Williams says.

(Williams, Rowan. “Silence the Face of Mystery”. *The Christian Century*,

August 29, 2018)

Of course the irony or paradox of all of this, is that as I write,

workmen are in our house, breaking down and tearing out our bathroom fixtures

in order to replace them; not exactly a silent endeavor.

Gordon Hempton, the acoustic ecologist so obsessed with sound and quiet,

experienced a dramatic loss of hearing in 2012.

Although he continues to struggle with his hearing loss, he says

it's opened all of his other senses to everything coming in,

which verifies what Rowan Williams says about silence.

And, as we speak, the National Science Foundation is considering closing

the National Radio Astronomy Observatory in Green Bank for budgetary reasons.

Yet that is the theme of Mary's song, isn't it: that things are not as they seem;

that our souls rejoice, either verbally, like Mary, or silently, like Joseph.

Why? Because unmanageable God has managed to take notice

of our needful human condition, being born into our imperfect nature as Jesus:

to be like us; to be with us; to be for us; to dare suffer to redeem us;

to offer us rebirth and the gift of a whole new creation.

How silently, how silently, that wondrous gift is given. Thanks be to God. Amen.

- Marilyn T. Hedgpeth
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