

Cultivating Space in Silence
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 First Presbyterian Church, New Bern
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Psalms 62:1-8

- 1 For God alone my soul waits in silence; from him comes my salvation.
 2 He alone is my rock and my salvation, my fortress; I shall never be shaken.
 3 How long will you assail a person, will you batter your victim, all of you,
 as you would a leaning wall, a tottering fence?
 4 Their only plan is to bring down a person of prominence. They take pleasure in
 falsehood; they bless with their mouths, but inwardly they curse.
- 5 For God alone my soul waits in silence, for my hope is from him.
 6 He alone is my rock and my salvation, my fortress; I shall not be shaken.
 7 On God rests my deliverance and my honor; my mighty rock, my refuge is in God.
 8 Trust in him at all times, O people; pour out your heart before him;
 God is a refuge for us.

1 Samuel 3:1-18

- 1 Now the boy Samuel was ministering to the LORD under Eli. The word of the LORD was rare in those days; visions were not widespread.
- 2 At that time Eli, whose eyesight had begun to grow dim so that he could not see, was lying down in his room; 3 the lamp of God had not yet gone out, and Samuel was lying down in the temple of the LORD, where the ark of God was. 4 Then the LORD called, "Samuel! Samuel!" and he said, "Here I am!" 5 and ran to Eli, and said, "Here I am, for you called me." But he said, "I did not call; lie down again." So he went and lay down. 6 The LORD called again, "Samuel!" Samuel got up and went to Eli, and said, "Here I am, for you called me." But he said, "I did not call, my son; lie down again." 7 Now Samuel did not yet know the LORD, and the word of the LORD had not yet been revealed to him. 8 The LORD called Samuel again, a third time. And he got up and went to Eli, and said, "Here I am, for you called me."
- Then Eli perceived that the LORD was calling the boy. 9 Therefore Eli said to Samuel, "Go, lie down; and if he calls you, you shall say, 'Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening.'" So Samuel went and lay down in his place. 10 Now the LORD came and stood there, calling as before, "Samuel! Samuel!" And Samuel said, "Speak, for your servant is listening." 11 Then the LORD said to Samuel, "See, I am about to do something in Israel that will make both ears of anyone who hears of it tingle. 12 On that day I will fulfill against Eli all that I have spoken concerning his house, from beginning to end. 13 For I have told him that I am about to punish his house forever, for the iniquity that he knew, because his sons were blaspheming God, and he did not restrain them. 14 Therefore I swear to the house of Eli that the iniquity of Eli's house shall not be expiated by sacrifice or offering forever."
- 15 Samuel lay there until morning; then he opened the doors of the house of the LORD. Samuel was afraid to tell the vision to Eli. 16 But Eli called Samuel and said, "Samuel, my son."

He said, "Here I am." 17 Eli said, "What was it that he told you? Do not hide it from me. May God do so to you and more also, if you hide anything from me of all that he told you." 18 So Samuel told him everything and hid nothing from him. Then he said, "It is the LORD; let him do what seems good to him."

It is a funeral I will never forget. Not for what I said, but for what I didn't.

The small church I served in West Virginia had much to teach me. One of those things was the planning of funerals. With so many family members who moved away to find work, but still considered this small town their home, they wanted to be buried there. And their funerals were often held until the time of the annual family reunion, better for finances and better for weather. And so, my second summer there, I had two graveside services scheduled for the fourth of July for people I had never met but who knew this place as home.

I wanted to keep things efficient, and so I scheduled them back-to-back. A good idea, I thought. Until the day arrived and I began the first service at the local cemetery only to have the second family arrive just after I had begun. The church member I knew, the one who had been handling the local arrangements for that second service, was in the early stages of Alzheimer's and we did not know it. I would later find out that she had told the family the wrong time. They were there a hour early.

But I did not know that then. There was nothing I could do. We continued with the first service, and as soon as I finished, hoping the family did not notice my distraction as I tried to figure out what was going on, and then I went to the second graveside and quickly began the second service, which went fine until just before the benediction, when a family member took advantage of a pause in my words and asked, "What about Martha?"

Racing is an underestimation of what my mind did in that moment. Martha? Martha? Well, she was the deceased wife of the person whose ashes we were interring. Had I not mentioned her? Had I gotten her name wrong? They were all looking at me, expectantly. I had no idea. Finally, I had to admit, out loud, that I had no idea. "Martha? His wife? What about her?" "Well," someone delicately offered, "we're interring her ashes today, too." Remember the woman who was coordinating the service who was in the early stages of Alzheimer's but we didn't yet know it? She had only told me it was for Robert, not that it was a service for Martha, too. I had no idea.

There was, literally, nothing I could do in that moment to fix it. I had all the words I needed to talk about Robert and speak of his faith and the promise of his baptism. I did not know anything more about Martha than what I had already shared. I had no more words. There was silence. Lots and lots of silence. Until someone spoke. And offered some reflections about Martha. And then someone else. And then another. We heard about her faith and her love and the gratitude that her baptism was now complete. It was easily the most memorable part of that service. Of that day. The part where I did not speak. The silence and what that silence allowed, how God spoke through it.

Something that never would have happened had there not been silence.

As people of faith, what we are looking for is God's presence, God's guidance, God's voice. And sometimes, it can only come if we are silent.

The Psalmist waits in silence, trusting completely that God will be there.¹

Samuel heard God because he was listening, in the silence.

Violinist Isaac Stern would tell students² "Anyone can play the notes, he would tell students; music is what goes on in between the notes."

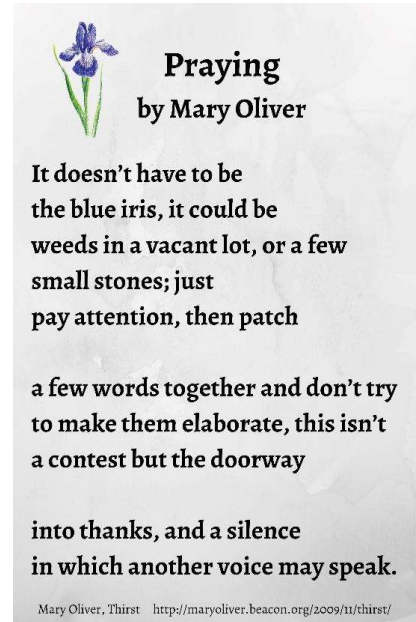
Or as Mary Oliver wrote about prayer, "a silence into which another voice can speak."

That kind of silence doesn't come naturally in our world today, if it ever did. We find ourselves, and sometimes we find for ourselves, surrounded by sounds and speech.

Baptist pastor Guy Sayles observes:³

Noise and nausea share etymological roots, and the sickness needs regular treatment.... Often, the way I create silence is by walking... Yesterday, it took me a couple of hours on the move before my mind cleared and my heart rested. It doesn't always take so long, but my soul was a town hall meeting.... My ego would prefer that I avoid solitude and silence. It's easier for my impression-managing, image-projecting, self-justifying, and self-centered persona to stay in charge if I never leave the stage, never take off the mask, and never look in the mirror made of quiet. One of the desert Monastics... said that silence is the cross on which we must crucify our egos. It's a cross I need to take up daily.

Like Guy, sometimes silence is a regular part of our spiritual disciplines and lives. Sometimes it comes through desperation, as it did for me. If that's the case for you, don't feel bad. It turns out, it probably took desperation to make it happen. In her book about silence, Ruth Haley Barton writes, "As strange as it may sound, desperation is a really good thing in the spiritual life. Desperation causes us to be open to radical solutions.... [Like silence] A concrete way of opening to the presence



¹ Bland, Dave. 1980. "Exegesis of Psalm 62." *Restoration Quarterly* 23 (2): 82-95.

<https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a6h&AN=ATLA0000792581&site=ehost-liv>

² <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/02/25/arts/music/isaac-stern-memorial-concert-with-yo-yo-ma-and-emanuel-ax.html>
<https://www.americamagazine.org/issue/349/other-things/between-notes>

³ Guy Sayles, "Creating quiet: Noise and nausea share etymological roots." *The Christian Century*, November 17, 2017.
<https://www.christiancentury.org/blog-post/cblogs-network/creating-quiet>

⁴ Ruth Haley Barton, *Solitude and Silence: Experiencing God's Transforming Presence*. Downer's Grove: IVP Press, 2010. Pages 30-31.

of God beyond human effort and beyond the human constructs that cannot fully contain the divine.”

God cultivates faith space within us in silence.

When was the last time you found yourselves in this kind of silent, faithful, space?

In writing about the importance of silence to the life of faith, Rowan Williams suggests that there are different kinds of silence. There is the silence I experienced graveside, when we just don't have words.

There is the silence that arrives when the grief is too much, the news too hard, the heaviness overwhelming.

And there is the silence that comes in a pause after something glorious. A symphony where the conductor holds up the baton to allow the notes to settle before the applause begins.

Or, the murmured amen that makes it way through a congregation after that silence, when a music has inspired glory to God, recognizing what has brought God glory.

Williams says that, faced with these things:

the silence that emerges is not the silence of mute resentment. 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 that territory where we can't get on top of something—we can't domesticate, organize, control. This is a necessary aspect of being human, a necessary aspect of faith and, if my reading of the Gospels is right, a necessary dimension of our following of Christ, part of what the Holy Spirit makes possible in us as we are made more Christlike.

We cannot control it, we cannot manage it, but we can welcome it. Recognize it. Listen for it and to it. The voice of God, speaking in our midst, when we are silent enough to teach our hearts to hear. In a world where we are surrounded by surround sound, how are we creating the places where God can speak, and where we can listen? Knowing that sometimes, we will be like the Psalmist, resting in it completely. Other times we will be like Samuel, taking many tries before hearing what God is saying and even requiring some instruction. We also remember Jesus, who was often silent, sought out quiet spaces, and did not feel the need to speak every time he was addressed.

God cultivates faithful space in silence.

In the words of Wendell Berry,

“best of any song
is birdsong in the silence,
but first,
you must have the silence.”⁵

⁵ Wendell Berry. [A Timbered Choir](#)