

THE  
PLYMOUTH  
PULPIT

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“PRAYING SILENTLY”

PSALM 62

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THE EIGHTH SUNDAY OF PENTECOST

*For God alone my soul waits in silence.  
From God comes my salvation.  
God alone is my rock and my salvation, my fortress.  
I shall never be shaken.*

*How long will you assail a person,  
will you batter your victim, all of you,  
as you would a leaning wall, a tottering fence?  
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.*

*For God alone my soul waits in silence,  
for my hope is from God.  
God alone is my rock and my salvation, my fortress.  
I shall not be shaken.*

*On God rests my deliverance and my honor;  
my mighty rock, my refuge is in God.*

*Trust in God at all times, O people.*

*Pour out your heart before God.*

*God is a refuge for us.*

*Those of low estate, are but a breath,  
those of high estate, are a delusion.*

*In the balances they go up.*

*They are together lighter than a breath.*

*Put no confidence in extortion,  
and set no vain hopes on robbery.*

*If riches increase,  
do not set your heart on them.  
Once God has spoken.  
Twice have I heard this:  
that power belongs to God,  
and steadfast love belongs to you, O Lord.  
For you repay to all according to their work.*

*—Psalm 62*

Years ago, some members of my church began a Monday night meditation group. They invited me to come to the first meeting, but I had a conflict. I was reading a book, or something. They kept inviting me until finally I thought, “I don’t think meditation is my thing, but maybe I haven’t given it enough of a try.”

They met in a room at the church that I would not have recognized. They took out the chairs and replaced them with rugs. The lights were off, but there were 200 candles burning.

We were to pray silently with mantras—thinking the same words over and over as a prayer without speaking. I chose the simplest mantra—“Jesus, Christ.” I was to pray “Jesus”

when I inhaled, and “Christ” when I exhaled. So I began breathing and silently praying, “Jesus.” “Christ.”

We were not supposed to think, but a thought crossed my mind. Theologically speaking should it be the other way around—inhaling Christ, and exhaling Jesus? Or maybe not.

I told myself to stop thinking—just be still. “Jesus.” “Christ.”

After another minute—or maybe it was less—I thought, “I wonder why Jesus never suggested this. Maybe God thinks this is silly. I can’t picture St. Peter preaching at Pentecost, ‘Men of Israel, be really quiet. I want you to breathe like this.’”

We were silent for 30 minutes. I tried. I really tried, but by the end, I was trying to decide whether to buy potato chips or ice cream on the way home.

When the leader asked us to share what we had experienced in the silence one person said, “I felt hope being born in my heart.”

Another said, “I was surrounded by a bright blue light.”

A third said, “I felt myself reaching out to touch God.”

I chose not to share that I had decided on Ruffles and picante sauce.

I am not good at being quiet. I am used to background noise. Most of us are. Our lives are noisy. The symphony of our days begins with a phone interrupting our sleep and continues with a phone that is constantly threatening to interrupt. The crying baby is always in the row right behind you. Muzak—the imitation music that follows us through public places—is indisputable evidence of human depravity.

Most homes are loud. Some days the volume is at ten from dawn until well after dark. The racket starts early and stays late. We have come to expect babbling screens, pulsating music, and whirring gadgets. People who sell vacuum cleaners say that loud ones still sell better than quiet ones. Does that make sense?

Brooklyn is not as loud as Manhattan, but it is loud. People crowd into every nook and cranny. When there is a quiet spot, then five people are rushing to get it.

Most jobs are loud. For the constant noise where some of us work, we might as well be jackhammer operators. Some of us have wished for a quiet job, like a librarian, but libraries are not as quiet as they used to be. We wear head phones to create our own private noise.

The sheer volume of our days does more to us than we realize. Noise keeps us focused on things that are unimportant. We end up deaf to what we need to hear.

Someone said life can be described in three words—"hurry, worry, and bury." When we feel like time is a stop watch, time is money, or life is a race against time, we need a better way. The demands on us leave us little time alone, but we need to get away from the job, the I-phone, and other people.

We need breathing room for our souls.

An explorer in Africa hires locals to carry his supplies to a new location. He is in a hurry, and pushes hard two days in a row. The third day he is ready to leave again, but they are not. They will not move.

He asks, "Why aren't we moving?"

One of the men explains, “We’re waiting for our souls to catch up with our bodies.”

Some days our souls lag behind. Our souls need the silence that is deeper than the noise, but we have a hard time being quiet. You come to the end of a long day. The dishes are done. You are by yourself. It is a perfect time to sit for a few minutes thinking quietly. Here is a chance to meditate on the day’s events—what was good, what was not, what you could have done differently, and what you hope for tomorrow.

So what do we usually do? We turn on the computer. We sit in front of a screen. We ignore the option of silence. We idealize rustic settings, but when we finally go to the cabin on the lake we take our computers and phones, so that if the silence gets to be too much we can get out of it.

Maybe we have confused silence with loneliness and ended up leery of one of God’s best gifts. Silence is more than the absence of noise. Silence can be listening to God. It is hard to turn down the volume, but we can learn to listen to the sacred silence that sustains and refreshes.

The writer of Psalm 62 has been through a difficult time. The bullies are driving him insane. He has been battered and mistreated. Haven't we all? He is bitter about the way lies outrun the truth and the way people say one thing in front of you and another behind your back. He made enough money to hang out with the rich people, but he discovered they are no different from the poor.

Then in the silence, the Psalmist discovers that God is in the quiet beyond the noise, and that God is waiting to care for troubled souls. The Psalmist writes this hymn to be sung in worship:

My soul waits in silence for God.

My heart waits on God.

I am all over the place, rushing here and there, but my need for God is never going to change.

So many forces push us away from what matters, away from gratitude, away from love, and away from trust.

My soul waits in silence for God.

My heart waits on God.

God is my hope and help.

The song closes with, What's temporary goes away so quickly. God alone is eternal. It is hard to explain, but we can feel God with us. We can give our lives to God in the silence. We can have an anchor that holds despite the chaos around us. We can let our soul wait in silence for God alone. We find our way to our own souls in silence.

Getting lost is so easy that we need to be still and find ourselves again. We learn who we are in silence. Being ourselves is easier in a quiet moment. Most of us need to be alone in order to take off the masks we wear in public. Solitude breeds sincerity.

We need the experience of silence that encourages creativity. Silence interrupts our ordinary patterns and helps us live beneath the noise. Without solitude it is virtually impossible to lead a thoughtful life.

Our days are filled with experiences, but sheer busyness pushes us away from life. We have decisions to make that should make us go looking for quiet places. Your sweetie—the one you have been dating for a while—is starting to look at you as if deciding if you are the one. Do you want to be the one?

What about your career? Should you stay where you are or look for something else? How much of yourself do you give to your work? What do you want to do for the next ten years? How will you know when it is time to retire? How do you know what is worth your time when you are retired?

What about your place in the church? How can you help Plymouth be more like Christ? How are you going to live out your faith?

Sometimes it is in silence that we remember who we are supposed to be. Most of our clearest thinking happens in solitude. We make our worst decisions when it is noisy. When we get into an argument, we are usually too fast to speak and too slow to slow down. We often regret the words we speak in haste.

Dag Hammarskjold said, "The more faithfully you listen to the voice within you, the better you will hear what is sounding outside."

Silence helps us understand what is real. We listen carefully and slow down enough to appreciate an amazing child, a delicious meal,

and an inspiring book. We need silence to take long loving looks at what matters. Silence moves us beyond selfishness. Look carefully at something in creation—the East River, the tree closest to your front door, a summer rain—and realize that appreciating anything makes us a little less selfish.

Read the news of the latest incident of racial violence, the latest story of refugee children being turned away, or the latest political debate and think about it in the light of faith. What might God be saying?

Solitude with God is not easy. God may lead us to think about the environment, greed, or poverty. When we are silent, God not only rests that part of us that is tired, but awakens that part of us that is asleep.

Throughout Christian history, mystics have argued that worship should not be filled with words, because God speaks in the quiet. For Quakers silence is the primary means of worship. Solitude gives God space to speak. When worship leaders in churches like ours decide to include more silence in their services, some people are uncomfortable.

I invited an eighty-year-old friend who had not been to church in twenty years to come to a service where I was preaching.

Afterwards, she let me know that she was not impressed with the sermon. The singing did not overwhelm her either. But her major disappointment was the time of silence.

She said, "When I saw in the order of worship that there would be silence I was overjoyed. I looked forward to the holy silence of a congregation, but then it only lasted a minute. You cut it off before it even began."

I tried to defend myself, "Silence is uncomfortable for a lot of people."

"Well, it shouldn't be."

She was right. Magnificent things happen in silence. We reevaluate concerns. We change our attitude. We understand our friends. We examine our fears. We become less angry.

We see the big picture. We get past the trivial. We discover possibilities. We find hope.

We remember the past and understand it better. We choose directions for the future.

We let faith move to the center of our lives.  
We feel an unspeakable holiness fill an empty place.

St. Augustine said, “God is ready and waiting to give us good things, but our hands are too full to receive them.”

Silence is a way to open our hands and let go. Silence is a way to fall in love with God. For us to experience silence, we will have to pursue silence. It is unlikely that anyone is going to tell us when it is time to turn down the volume.

We need a haven—the quiet of our bedroom, the kitchen table, the park, and the walk around the block. We need to take advantage of the quiet moments in our day: the minutes before everyone else awakens, the first cup of coffee, and the trip to work.

We need to take a few minutes before we go to sleep to listen to the quiet. Those precious opportunities for solitude are usually lost. Even if it feels strange, be still for a moment, be quiet, knowing that it may take a while to appreciate the silence.

We could end up saying, “Why am I doing this? This is such a waste. I have so much to do. I’ve got to get going.”

But if we stick to it, from time to time, we will feel God with us. Right now, in this sacred moment, listen. Wait for God in the silence, for the silence that washes away the busyness and quiets the noise. Let your soul wait in silence for God. Be still, listen, hope, and pray.

*Sermon © Rev. Brett Younger*

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