

The sound of sheer silence

The Rev. Stephen Crippen

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A few years ago I received a piece of advice from a fellow deacon, who got it from a priest friend of ours: if you're preaching and you think you're going to cry, if you think you're going to lose it, just...*think about baseball.*

So as I deliver this, my last sermon in your midst as a member of your staff and a deacon assigned to this parish, I'll occasionally be thinking about runs-batted-in and fly-balls and outfielders gnawing on chewing tobacco.

Stephanie has invited me both to preach this morning and to offer final comments at the coffee hour, so I don't want to make this sermon about my leaving...or at least it won't be *all* about that. But it has proved impossible not to hear my story speaking loudly to me through today's readings and Gospel. And so, asking your forbearance, I may let myself into this homily a little more than I usually do.

This has been an emotional time, and one way I've coped with it is to create a little appointment on my Google calendar, at 7:00 a.m. each day. The appointment is called, simply, "Health," and it's not an *appointment* per se, it's really just a notation on my calendar that reminds me to do at least one healthy thing today, and write it down in the comment section of the appointment slot. "Walked 4.6 miles," I wrote three times last week. And then, on Friday, I wrote, "I spent some time in silence." That's it. No intense workout, no radical improvement in my diet, just...some time in silence.

Silence is healthy—it goes under the category of "health"—not just for therapeutic reasons—you know, that 'silence is golden,' that being quiet is a way to still the heart and focus the mind, to get in touch with spiritual matters, or God. That was all there in my silence, but what really made it healthy—and what I really noticed more than anything else—was the uncomfortable thoughts and feelings that came up—and all too often come up—in the silence.

We heard this morning in our first reading that "[the word of the LORD] said [to Elijah], 'Go out and stand on the mountain before the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by.'" And...you know the story. God was not in the wind, or the earthquake, or the fire, but in the "sound of sheer silence." And "when Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave." In my reading, Elijah shuddered a little as he wrapped his face in his mantle. He shuddered because if God is in the "sheer silence," then God is perhaps more unsettling, more unnerving, more frightening than if God were simply appearing in a sound-and-light show. This is because, in the silence, the secrets and shadows of my heart can be seen. In the silence, the awkward or awful truths of my life, of my self, can be discerned. And God is there. I don't know about Elijah, but I would shudder as I wrap my face in my mantle.

Elijah's story of meeting God in the silence was chosen to be read alongside today's Gospel, another story of God (this time in Jesus) "passing by." Jesus, unlike God appearing to Elijah, appears to his disciples in what I would call a pretty spectacular way—walking on water, and not just water, but roiling, stormy water. And yet I wonder if you can see the similarity in the stories: look past the surreal image of Jesus walking on water, and can you see how roiling water and "sheer silence" are matching images? Poor Peter eagerly tries to walk toward Jesus, only to become afraid and sink beneath the waves. Silence can do that too. It can confront us with our deepest fears, our deepest sorrows, our deepest regrets. It can stir our conscience and disturb our hearts. Silence and roiling waters: they have a lot in common.

And there are different kinds of silences. Let's start with a comparatively easy one: there is the silence of solemnity. This is

the silence we experience, say, at the moment just before the priest plunges a child into the waters of Holy Baptism, or the moment when two people celebrate the sacrament of their union—it's the solemnity before the party, the sometimes euphoric silence that says, "This is a life-changing moment." God is in that silence.

Then there's the silence one must keep in order to truly listen to another person. As a counselor, I can tell you that this silence can be hard to come by. To truly listen to another person's story—particularly if you are in conflict with that person—to truly listen, you have to let down your defenses, you have to notice and disregard your resistance and reactivity, you have to let go of your *self* in a powerful way so that you can have a true encounter with the Other. If you've harmed someone and they're telling you about their pain, it can be excruciatingly hard to let go of your guilt and defensiveness just long enough to truly hear them. And if you yourself have been harmed or betrayed, it is, if anything, harder still to allow yourself to listen to the story of the person who grieved you. But God is in that silence.

There is, of course, the silence that stirs our conscience. I would hardly be a deacon if I didn't mention this one. This is the silence that confronts you with your complicity in systems of oppression, or—to borrow from the confession we will be saying in a few moments—the silence that makes us aware of "the evil we have done, and the evil done on our behalf." It's unfashionable to say this in churches these days, but we *are* guilty of many things, right, friends? As the saying goes, "mistakes were made," and the silent witness of our conscience will confront us with this ugly reality. It is the silence of remorse, and also the silence of ethical discernment. And God is in that silence.

And finally, here's a particularly dreadful silence: maybe you'll think this is weird, but I've wondered a few times, as I've walked through cemeteries, if the cheerful mechanical sound of the groundskeeper's lawn mower can be heard below the ground, if it somehow penetrates the immense sound of the silence of the grave. Our beloved dead were surrounded for years by the delightful and dreadful sounds of life—by music, by lively conversation, by laughter, cries of despair, and everything in between...by the Blue Angels (!)...and finally, we pray, by the peaceful sounds of a merciful and holy death at the very end. But now, our beloved dead rest in the all-encompassing silence of the grave. They also rest in God, and we pray that light perpetual may shine upon them—earnestly do we pray this!—but there are still these aching absences. There is the silence in our own lives of that beloved person who has departed from our midst. And there is all too often the silence of regret for a life not fully lived, or a fully-lived life cut short. And God is in that silence.

Jesus stretches out his arm and rescues Peter from drowning beneath his own fears and doubts, but not before Peter himself chooses to step off the comparatively safe boat and into the choppy waves of the sea. God meets us in the sometimes-awful silence, but God also bids us walk into that silence, take that step off the boat. When we do so, we have no guarantee that we won't sink. In fact, we probably *will* sink. But God is there in those roiling waters—in these Baptismal waters—and God's rebuke of our lack of faith is offered, in my hearing, with gentleness and love: when Peter began to sink, "Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, 'You of little faith, why did you doubt?'" This is not a scolding. It is a reminder that though God does *not* protect us from suffering and death, or even from our own worst selves, God *does* protect us from despair.

My departure today from your midst will create a kind of silence. It is a very small death, in a way. The silence will simply be the reality that we are no longer in the same boat, as it were. I'll be in a nearby boat—and how dearly I wish I could tell you which one, but the logistics of my new assignment have still not been ironed out!—but it's nearby. And yet, it also is far. I feel a real loss, leaving you. I feel a silence descending, even as I know that all of us are heading into a noisy and adventurous future. As I go, I shudder a little and wrap my face in my mantle. And I carry you on my heart, and in prayer. I thank you, so much, for your grace, and your hospitality, and your companionship—your breaking bread with me so joyfully during this time.

And yes, God is in this silence too.

The Rev. Stephen D. Crippen
St. Stephen's Episcopal Church, Seattle
www.ststephens-seattle.org