

Call to Worship:

Our worship theme this month, is Wonder, and we find our doorway into wonder today through the topic of silence.

When people wonder at the vast expanses of color and shape in Mark Rothko's paintings, and ask him to explain them, his reply is: "Silence is so accurate."

When the Hindu student asks his teacher to explain Brahman, the soul of the world, the teacher remains silent. The student repeats the question again, and again, and but no words of explanation come.

Finally the teacher opens his mouth and says, "I am instructing you now, but you are not listening."¹

Let us listen together, and may wonder be our teacher.

Please rise in body or in spirit for our opening hymn, #226 in the grey hymnal, "People Look East."

Chalice Lighting from Steph Chiha:

Rachel Carson:

"A child's world is fresh and new and beautiful, full of wonder and excitement. It is our misfortune that for most of us that clear-eyed vision, that true instinct for what is beautiful and awe-inspiring is dimmed and even lost before we reach adulthood. If I had influence with the good fairy, who is supposed to preside over the christening of all children, I should ask that her gift to each child in the world be a sense of wonder so indestructible that it would last throughout life, as an unfailing antidote against the boredom and disenchantments of later years, the sterile preoccupation with things that are artificial, the alienation from sources of our strength."

¹ Kagge, *Silence in the Age of Noise*, pg 81

Reading: “Keeping Quiet” by Pablo Neruda

Now we will count to twelve
and we will all keep still.

For once on the face of the earth,
let’s not speak in any language;
let’s stop for one second,
and not move our arms so much.

It would be an exotic moment
without rush, without engines;
we would all be together
in a sudden strangeness.

Fisherman in the cold sea
would not harm whales
and the man gathering salt
would not look at his hurt hands.

Those who prepare green wars,
wars with gas, wars with fire,
victories with no survivors,
would put on clean clothes
and walk about with their brothers
in the shade, doing nothing.

What I want should not be confused
with total inactivity.
Life is what it is about;
I want no truck with death.

If we were not so single-minded
about keeping our lives moving,
and for once could do nothing,
perhaps a huge silence
might interrupt this sadness
of never understanding ourselves
and of threatening ourselves with death.
Perhaps the earth can teach us
as when everything seems dead
and later proves to be alive.

Now I'll count up to twelve
and you keep quiet and I will go.

Sermon: Wonderful Silence

Silence for 12 beats...

Okay, I won't go just yet.
Though it does seem ironic to talk about silence.

What is silence?

Silence in this room means there are no adults speaking.

Silence in this room means we hear shuffling and coughing.

Silence is a baby crying or a child asking a question.

Silence is a car going by and the wind billowing under a flapping tarp.

Silence is the breathing of others and finally, as the silence really sets in, our own breath.

Silence is the heart beating and the blood flowing and the body becoming aware of itself.

The sit bones sitting, the feet bones resting, the shoulders relaxing, the neck noticing the weight of what it holds up, eyes soft, hands up: receiving the silence.

Silence is a doorway into wonder.

Erling Kagge, the Norwegian explorer who was the first to complete the "Three Poles" challenge on foot—the North Pole, South Pole, and the summit of Mount Everest—says we live in an age of noise, and we must carry our silence within us.

We can bring our silence wherever we go.

A few years ago Kagge and his explorer friend Steve Duncan decided to climb to the top of the Williamsburg Bridge in New York City. They ascended in the dark, as all the best journeys begin. He writes,

Gazing out over Queens and Brooklyn all the way to Coney Island, we could detect the sun just below the horizon of the Atlantic. From the very tops of the bridge we watched the city slowly light up, even though the sun remained below the horizon. A few minutes later sunbeams hit where we stood, touched the upper floors of the skyscrapers below us, and then painstakingly began to warm up the city.

[He goes on to say:]

I heard nothing. Below me, the traffic thundered past in four lanes, while the subway pounded rhythmically on its way in and out of the city centre.

I was consumed by all that I saw and I shut out the noise. You cannot wait for it to get quiet. Not in New York, nor anywhere else.

You must create your own silence.

So here is a story about silence.

A priest named Zechariah went to work one day, about 2,000 years ago.

Zechariah was old, and had been a respected priest for a long time.

Priests of King Herod's time were very important people.

They alone were allowed to enter the sanctuary room of the temple, the Holy room next to the Holy of Holies.

The Holy of Holies was the room where once, long ago, God's presence had been, and might appear once again.

So priests were allowed in the room *near* the room where God's presence had once been, and to pray and offer incense in worship.

Imagine if all of you came into this room, and once you were here, I was like, "Bye, suckers!" and went to a totally other room for an hour to pray by myself, while you stayed here and waited, and when I came back, the service was finished.

"You keep quiet and I will go."

So Zechariah enters the sanctuary room, alone, begins to pray, and whoosh! An angel of the Lord appears before him.

Zechariah is terrified, overwhelmed with fear.

We imagine angels as beautiful beings in flowing robes with lovely faces and white wings.

But the Bible describes angels as terrifying beings with thousands of eyes, six wings, tongues of flame, and voices like thunder.

The angel says in its fiery tongue what angels always say to terrified humans: “Fear not! Do not be afraid!”

And then the angel tells Zechariah some astonishing news. Elizabeth, Zechariah’s wife, who has never been able to have children in all the decades they have been married, will bear a child.

They will name the child John—not Zechariah Jr.

John will be a prophet, filled with the Holy Spirit, he will bring joy and wisdom to many, and walk in the ways of Elijah.

Now Zechariah is a priest; a holy man of faith; a true believer. Does Zechariah listen silently in awe, and ponder all these things in his heart?

Is his spirit filled with wonder and hope and joy?

Not quite.

Zechariah—I imagine him cowering on the floor—he looks up, and he says to the angel:

“Yeah, right. How am I supposed to believe this? I am too old, and my wife is too old to have a child.”

The angel—THE angel Gabriel, is understandably taken aback. He rolls his thousands of eyes.

He thunders: “Zechariah. I am GABRIEL, I stand in the presence of God!”

He thinks this should shame Zechariah, who can only stand in the room near the room that once, long ago, had known the presence of God.

But Zechariah is unimpressed. “Mnyeh.”
Gabriel turns to go, but before he does, he tells Zechariah:
“Because you did not believe my words, you will become mute,
unable to speak, until the day these things occur.”
And then the room is empty and silent.

As David Whyte says, “Silence does not end skepticism but
makes it irrelevant.”
Zechariah opens his mouth, but nothing comes out.
He stumbles out of the sanctuary and a crowd of people stare at
him. He motions to them frantically.
They stare. He moves his arms. He cannot speak.
The room is silent.
The silence of no adults speaking.

Here is how Claus Helberg, the Norwegian war hero who
became a mountain guide, protected silence in the pursuit of
wonder.
Imagine following your guide as you emerge from a cabin high
in the Norwegian mountains in the early morning light. The
mountains covered in snow, the sky, the valley, the thaw, the
colors returning to the earth as winter retreats, everything had
seemed dead and now is proving to be alive.
The group is awe-struck.
Imagine that moment as you gaze at the beauty and your hands
move and then your mouth starts to open and then: Helberg

hands each person a slip of paper on which it is written, “*Yes, it is totally amazing.*”²

Yes, it is totally amazing.

Silence can honor our wonder in ways that words cannot.

Writer John Fosse says “Silence goes together with wonder, but it also has a kind of majesty to it, like an ocean, or like an endless snowy expanse. And whoever does not stand in wonder at this majesty fears it. And this is most likely why many are afraid of silence (and why there is music everywhere, *everywhere.*)”³

Elizabeth, Zechariah’s elderly wife, conceived a child.

Yes, it is totally amazing.

When the angel came again, he did not appear to Joseph, Mary’s fiancé. He appeared to Mary.

Perhaps he had learned something about direct communication.

When the angel appeared before Mary, like Zechariah she too was afraid, and the angel said: “Fear not!”

And Mary stood in wonder at his majesty.

And he told her that she would conceive a child, and would name that child Jesus, and he would be holy.

And Mary, confused, scared, wondering, says: “Here I am.”

² Silence in the Age of Noise, pg 94

³ Ibid. pg 11

Before the angel left he told her some more shocking news.
Her elder cousin Elizabeth had conceived in a similarly
miraculous way, and was in her 6th month of pregnancy.
Mary travels with haste to Elizabeth and Zechariah's house.
When Elizabeth hears Mary say hello,
her child leaps in her womb.

I love this part of the story.

It passes the Bechdel test.

Two pregnant women, embracing, blessed by God,
one too old to bear children, the other too young,
their children leaping for joy in their wombs,
their wombs the dark place where life begins,
the dark place where miracles happen,
the dark place where what once seemed dead proves to be alive.
And Mary sings her song of prophetic praise, she sings,
"My soul magnifies the Lord," known as The Magnificat.

Mary and Elizabeth stay together for three months. The babies
in their wombs float in the darkness, listening to the rush of
blood flowing, their mother's heart beating, their mother's
muffled voices sounding like whale calls across a long distance.
The kind of silence you find underwater.
The kind of silence you find when Zechariah cannot speak.

After Elizabeth gives birth she announces on his naming day
that the child is to be named John.

Her friends and family are happy for her, but they chide her.
No one in the family has ever had that name.

He should be named Zechariah, after his father.

They don't listen to Elizabeth. It is as though she is silent.

They turn to Zechariah.

“What do *you* want to name the baby?” they ask.

Zechariah, still mute, motions with his hands. They bring him something to write on. He writes down, “His name is John.”

The scripture says, “And all were amazed.”

“Yes, it is totally amazing.”

Holding his baby, lesson learned, Zechariah sings his prophetic song, so many months after Mary sang hers (Luke 1:76-79):

“And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High;

for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways...

By the tender mercy of our God,

the dawn from on high will break upon us,

to give light to those who sit in darkness

and in the shadow of death,

to guide our feet into the way of peace.”

As Erling Kagge stood atop the Williamsburg Bridge,
he felt “a deep pleasure inside... watching the sun rise from the Atlantic Ocean to light up the city.”

He says if he was in charge, he'd ask everyone to be thankful every time the sun rises.

But, as he stood there giving thanks for the increasing light of the sun, there was also an increasing chance that the police would soon spot them.

He writes,

“There's no way to ask permission for undertaking such a climb, so we had no choice but to descend quickly.

[His friend,] who was more experienced in [urban exploration], reminded [Kagge] that [their] expedition would really be at an end if they realized the traffic on the bridge had stopped and things suddenly got truly silent. In that case, it would mean the police had closed off the bridge and were on their way towards [them].”

When Jesus was born we imagine it was a silent night, a holy night. But what was in that silence?

It was filled, perhaps, with the deep breathing and groaning of childbirth, the kind of screams that leave your ears ringing in the silence that follows.

It was filled with the crying of a new baby.

It was filled with the sounds of animals, the shuffling of feet, the sound of cloth layering on cloth as the baby is swaddled, the snuffling of the baby nursing, the wordless humming of his mother.

Wonderful silence.

“Yes, it is totally amazing.”

Soon after Jesus is born his parents are warned they must quickly depart.

The threat of King Herod was close and getting closer.

True silence would mean Herod’s police had closed off the roads and were on their way towards them.

True silence is what happened when Herod’s police could not find the child they sought and so they killed every young child in the city.

...Perhaps a huge silence
might interrupt this sadness
of never understanding ourselves
and of threatening ourselves with death.
Perhaps the earth can teach us
as when everything seems dead
and later proves to be alive.

Empire thinks power is majestic. Empire only knows fear.
But Empire does not understand the majesty of a silent night, the
darkness of the womb, how the grandest of loves can arrive in
the smallest of bodies.

Empire does not know wonder.

Empire fears silence and darkness.

But we know that it is from silence and darkness that all miracles are grown and born.

By the tender mercy of our God,
the dawn from on high will break upon us,
to give light to those who sit in darkness
and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the way of peace.

Now I'll count up to twelve
and you keep quiet and I will go.

.....*Amen.*

Closing Hymn: O Come, O Come Emmanuel grey 225