THE SILENCE OF GOD

A Sermon by The Rev. H. Paul Santmire
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My sermon this morning is a collage of personal experience. The story came to a head sometime yesterday or the day before. Suddenly it became clear to me that I was feeling at peace with myself, that a kind of contentment was warming my life like a winter sun, that I was even daring to be hopeful about life, at least a little. Now how did that happen?

Maybe you've had the same kind of experience. You've been down, really down. Whether it be the state of the larger world, the pressure of your work, or the strains of working things through with loved ones, sometimes life can be a huge box of noise, screaming at you from many directions; debilitating you, wearing you down to a dull state of psychological and spiritual deafness . . . That's the way I was, just about a week ago.

I had just been deeply moved by Clifford Green's sermon on "The Church and the New Barbarism," concerning our murderous war in Vietnam, and all the rest. Some personal problems had been stirring around, too. I was feeling positively apocalyptic. This is what I wrote in my journal, in part, that night: "Laurel wants us both to go to Washington for the Inauguration, January 20th. Maybe we will. But what if thousands and thousands like us do that!? What difference will our feeble bodies make? How can so few, powerless as we are, stand against all the forces of the Prince of Darkness? Maybe the world is coming to an end. Maybe the Beast is rising one final, horrendous time, to tear away all the flesh from the Body of the Messiah.

That's how I was a week ago, full of apocalyptic gloom. And I guess I still am, in some respects. Yet, as I say, yesterday and the day before, somehow, I found myself at peace, with contentment, even hopeful about life. How could that be?

A number of simple things happened to me, some of which I want to tell you about. Mind you, I am here proposing no theodicy; I'm not attempting to "justify the ways of God to men." I'm just trying to tell you how I managed to get from last Sunday to this Sunday, alive and at peace.

What I think I did was to listen anew to the Silence of God, and not so fervently to the noise of the world.

I was talking to a friend the other day who's an accomplished singer. She was remarking that when you're a good musician the rest, the silence, is as important as the note. When an untrained singer comes upon a rest, she may well simply stop and relax. It's truly an art, my friend said, to feel the rest, to experience its rhythmic vitality. Without the rests, she maintained, music wouldn't be music, it would just be sounds. It wouldn't have any form.

Various mystics have felt likewise about the world as a whole. Unless you can experience the moments of Silence deeply, life is formless, chaotic, cacaphonous, sheer noise. This, for example, is Henry David Thoreau, writing in his Journal (Feb. 9, 1841): "I have been breaking silence these twenty-three years and have hardly made a rent in it. Silence has no end; speech is but the beginning of it." Or, more recently, Thomas Merton in his book, No Man is an Island: "Life is not to be regarded as an uninterrupted flow of words which is finally silenced by death. Its rhythm develops in silence, comes to the surface in moments of necessary expression, returns to deeper silence, culminates in a final declaration, then ascends quietly into the silence of Heaven which resounds with unending praise." (p. 195)

So, I think, this week I was listening anew, at least a little, to the Silence of God, and not so fervently to the noise of the world.

II.

Item: I was downtown this week joining in some picketing organized by the United Farm Workers in behalf of their lettuce boycott. I was feeling pretty dull; and I was there, I guess, out of some uninspired sense of duty. Anyway, it was one of the most vital little demonstrations I've ever been in! The tone was set when one of the organizers smilingly mentioned that his weekly pay ranged from five to ten dollars (compare that to some $300 a week for a Teamster organizer). Then, in the midst of a fervent union song, he led his little band of protesters to the gates of mighty A & P. The A & P man came out, and the organizer said, "I want to talk with you about justice." The Farm Workers' leader was turned away; but he joyously shouted that he'd be back again. I understand that the Farm Workers' movement jis that way, from Caesar Chavez on down. Where, I wondered, did that joy and vitality come from?

Item: It was after supper, and the children were getting in our hair. I decided I would salvage something from the time somehow, and take the kids for a ride in their new wagon. It was very cold, so we had to put on heavy winter clothing. Now, I ask you, have you ever seen anything more precious than a one-year-old and a three-year-old, with a hundred layers of clothing on them, plunked in a little wagon?! We went by the lake, where we ventured out onto the ice. This was the first time for either one on any ice. Out toward the middle, a dozen students were happily careening around on their skates. At one point the three-year-old sat down on the ice, then looked up at the crisp, starry sky, with the moon caressing everything all around us, and said, "Dad, do you see the moon? Dad! Do you see the moon!" Until she said it, I don't think I had.

Item: I had hurried over to my office to get some desk work done that had been weigning on me for weeks. In Schneider I saw a friend there with a cup of coffee, and for some reason I gravitated to the coffee pot and then to his table. We talked a little about the hectic pace of life, and the superficial ways of so many people who work so compulsively. He asked me how I was, how I was feeling. He wanted to hear. He told me, too, how he was, how he was managing to hold together what, in my judgment, is a beautiful life, yet without any of the visible signs of success so treasured by our society. "I love life," he said. At one point, he instanced Jesus as a case in point. "The man had many messages," my friend mused, "Yet I suppose the most important was hope. You know, the Resurrection--whatever kind of interpretation you put on it. Hope." I asked myself later: by what Grace had I been so privileged to be called away from my administrative busyness to encounter some beautiful personal Truth?

This is enough, I think, to tell you what I mean. The world i£ cacaphonous. Our history, especially in recent decades, from Dachau to Vietnam, has been like some hideous noise box at times. I do not want to deny the reality of the noise for a moment. Nor, surely, do I want to deny the anguish of those who say, as I sometimes say myself, that this is a godless world.

But at. the same time I want to give testimony to the moments of Divine Silence that have punctuated my life, this week and in times gone by, moments when the surface dissonance has somehow subsided, and I've been grasped by a joy and a vitality and an acceptance, powerful and not of my own making.

III.

This kind of spiritual adventure, I think, from the loud noise of world history into the Silence of God--without explaining away or denying the noise—is characteristic of biblical faith.

Remember the experience of the prophet Elijah: "And behold, the Lord passed by, and a great and strong wind rent the mountains, and broke in pieces the rocks before the Lord, but

the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a still small voice." (I Kings 19:llf.) The cacaphony of existence is punctuated by the still small voice. That is where the ultimate Life Force is to be found, according to the Bible.

This biblical motif comes to its sobering fulfillment finally in the Silence of the dead Messiah on the Cross: no huge cosmic revelations by God, no sending of divisions of angels to set things straight, only the suffering love of a wholly compassionate, wholly human, human being. Out of that pregnant Silence, according to the New Testament, comes the new life of the Resurrection.

There is, I repeat, no ultimately compelling logic or comprehensive metaphysics in this theology of Silence. There is no explanation why the sometimes murderous cacaphony. All there is is the testimony that in the midst of that noise, in moments of silence, you and I can find power and peace and joy, and that those moments are somehow a clue to the Whole--the silence of Heaven, resounding with unending praise, that Merton talks about.

IV.

The contemporary avante garde composer, John Cage, has written a piece for piano and orchestra called 4'33. Cage, as you probably know better than I, is one of those composers who is seeking to take the "music" of everyday sounds with a new kind of seriousness. For this particular piece, the performer makes his way to the piano in front of the orchestra, and then he sits there without playing a note, with the orchestra silent, for four minutes and thirty-three seconds. This is Cage's way of saying, I take it, that there is, music in the silence of ordinary experience.

So I invite you this morning to listen anew to the still small voice of ordinary experience, to open yourself anew to what can be for you, as it has been for me, an experience of the power and mercy of God. Allow the noise of the world to subside a little. Hear the music of God in the simple moments of Silence.

Maybe then, when our ears are much better tutored, we'll begin to hear afresh even greater strains, from the cosmic symphony of Divine Grace; which the saints have always heard, permeating this world. Maybe then, we'll understand more fully, some of us perhaps for the first time--what the Gospel writer means when he writes: "from his fulness have we all received grace upon grace." (John 1:16)