

A Soul Waiting in Silence
Psalm 62:5-12; I Corinthians 7:29-31; Mark 1:14-20

I Corinthians 7:29-31

²⁹I mean, brothers and sisters, the appointed time has grown short;

from now on,

let even those who have spouses be as though they had none,

³⁰and those who mourn as though they were not mourning,

and those who rejoice as though they were not rejoicing,

and those who buy as though they had no possessions,

³¹and those who deal with the world

as though they had no dealings with it.

For the present form of this world is passing away.

Mark 1:14-20

¹⁴Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, ¹⁵and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.”

¹⁶As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea—for they were fishermen. ¹⁷And Jesus said to them, “Follow me and I will make you fish for people.” ¹⁸And immediately they left their nets and followed him.

¹⁹As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets. ²⁰Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him.

Psalm 62:5-12

⁵For God alone my soul waits in silence, for my hope is from him.

⁶He alone is my rock and my salvation, my fortress;

I shall not be shaken.

⁷On God rests my deliverance and my honor;
my mighty rock, my refuge is in God.

⁸Trust in him at all times, O people;
pour out your heart before him;
God is a refuge for us.

⁹Those 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.

¹⁰Put no confidence in extortion, and set no vain hopes on robbery;
if riches increase, do not set your heart on them.

¹¹Once God has spoken; twice have I heard this:
that power belongs to God,

¹²and steadfast love belongs to you, O LORD.
For you repay to all according to their work.

The Sermon

How are you feeling these days? I hope some good things are going on in your life. I know it feels like there are a lot of bad things going on in the world, and there is potential for very bad things to happen. And there is a lot that just feels disheartening and disorienting these days.

You may have heard that there is a government shutdown going on. I'm sure you are just as shocked as I am that each party is blaming the other party; each branch of government is blaming the other branches of government.

I don't think it's fair for me or anyone else to blame anybody for doing what they reasonably believe to be morally right and just.

But meanwhile, a whole lot of people—employed people, unemployed people; sick people, homeless people, endangered people and every other kind of person are now left to try to figure out how to survive on

their own in the face of major setbacks, setbacks that are dire and immediate and personal.

I'm reminded of when this happened once back in the 90s, when a government shutdown had left only a skeleton crew to keep essential government offices operating. That was the word they used: only the most *essential* personnel were kept on; all non-essential workers had to be out of work for a while.

So when the impasse finally ended—as this one will—it was such a relief when all the employees were able to go back to work, and the offices of government got up and running again.

There was a political cartoon that showed a giant office building, and scores of people coming from the parking lot in the morning, going back to work, and they were met with a huge banner across the front of the building with big, happy lettering: “Welcome Back, Non-Essential Personnel!”

I don't know if it's just me, but I worry that a lot of messages are being sent out these days, to various people in our communities, in our country, in the world, even in some churches:

when situations become dire, we know who our essential people are; and while in good and easy times, we're OK with most people, when times become more anxious, some people, and their well-being, become less than essential.

The Bible makes a couple of things clear, in both the Old and the New Testaments.

One is that there is no such thing as a person who is, in God's eyes, non-essential. Jesus died for us all.

The other is that it is incumbent upon God's people—the community of God's people—not to treat any human being, each of whom is made in the image of God, as non-essential.

Deuteronomy 10 in the Old Testament: “For the LORD your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God...who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing. You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt” (Deut. 10:17-19).

The Letter of James in the New Testament: “Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world” (1:27).

Jesus said to those who followed him, “Just as you did it to one of *the least of these*, who are members of my family, you did it to me,” and “just as you did not do it to one of the *least of these*, you did not do it to me” (Matthew 25:40, 45).

In God's eyes, no one is non-essential.

So it's painful to be living in times when so many people are treating so many other people as non-essential: dismissable, negligible, valued only insofar as they can provide wealth and profit for someone else, loved and understood only if they are a member of the immediate family or the same social class or the same race or the same orientation or whatever.

There is bitter rhetoric and bitter actions being taken and bitter treatment of one another. And I think we can be excused for feeling like the times we are living in are unprecedented, and disorienting, maybe a little bit frightening, or a lot frightening.

And it's at times like these when my eye is drawn to those who are faithful enough to remember, and to remind me, that Christians trust the almighty God of the universe,

and that trust is not susceptible to any changes or disturbances that the world can throw at us.

The people of God are not making idle chatter when they say in Psalm 46:

God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.
Therefore we will not fear,
 though the earth should change,
 though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea;
 though its waters roar and foam,
 though the mountains tremble with its tumult” (Ps 46:1-3).

There’s an ancient proverb from China that established a place in our own national conscience a few years ago, about a farmer who got a horse, but the horse ran away.

And a neighbor said, “Gee, I’m really sorry about your bad news.” And the farmer said, “Good news, bad news, who’s to say?”

A little bit later, to the farmer’s and everybody else’s astonishment, the horse came back, and not only that, but it brought another horse with it.

And somebody said, “Hey, congratulations on your good news!”

And the farmer said, “Good news, bad news, who’s to say?”

He didn’t need two horses as much as his son needed one horse, so the farmer gave the second horse to his son. Wonderful, a new horse! The son rode the horse for a while, but one morning the horse violently threw him off, and both the son’s legs were broken.

And the neighbor said, “Oh, your poor son; all that suffering, plus now you have to take care of him for a while; he’s laid up in bed... I’m just so sorry for your bad news.”

“Good news, bad news... Who’s to say?”

A few days later, sweeping over the horizon, a battalion from the emperor came riding through the countryside, gathering conscripts for the army to go fight in some war nobody had ever heard of, leaving no young men to tend the land or look after their families or their communities.

They took all the able-bodied young men from every household in the village. But they had no use for a young man with two broken legs. So they moved on and left him and the family alone.

Good news? Bad news? Who’s to say?ⁱ

How are you feeling these days?

How do you get to that kind of equilibrium?

*“For God alone
my soul waits
in silence,
for my hope is from the LORD.*

*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 the LORD;
God is a refuge for us.”*

For God alone, my soul waits in silence.

Silence seems awfully hard to come by these days.

I used to drive my kids to school some mornings, and repeatedly, after a drive of many minutes, which had been full of fervent discussion about my schedule for the day and the priorities and logistics I needed to get sorted out, we would pull up in front of the main entrance to the school,

and only then would I realize that all of that urgent conversation I'd been participating in had taken place inside my head. Outwardly, not a word had been spoken. Even when I wasn't saying anything, there was so much conversation going on inside that the silence wasn't really silence.

It was kind of like they say when you see a swan gliding gracefully across the surface of a calm lake, if you could see the water underneath, you'd see how ferociously their feet are paddling.

And of course, there's an even greater sadness in realizing that I was too busy sorting out all that brouhaha, working through calendars and committee agendas in my head to be able to communicate with my children, and that's time that you don't get back. It wasn't that we were enjoying a reflective silence together. One of us was simply carrying on a business meeting without involving the others.

I noted with something more than a passing interest a few weeks ago that the #1 most popular download for people's listening devices wasn't, for a change, a track by Beyoncé or Adele or Taylor Swift or Blake Shelton. The most popular download, for at least one day, was not by any of those superstars, or anybody else. It was ten minutes of digital silence.

And that's not the first time in the history of recordings that that happened. Back in the days of truck stops with jukeboxes, CBS issued a 7-inch single called "Three Minutes of Silence," conceived specifically for people for whom there was already more than enough commotion going on around them.

Believe me, when your job title is "preacher" and the most popular recording in the country is silence, you pay attention. There are people out there in significant numbers who, for one reason or another, are doing whatever it takes to get even just a few minutes of silence.

The avant-garde composer John Cage once said, "The music is in the silence between the notes."

He published a piece of music, which has been performed on serious classical music stages, called "4'33." It's a piece for piano that calls for the pianist to sit there at the piano for 4 minutes and 33 seconds without touching the keys.ⁱⁱ

The music is in the silence.

Since the late 1960s, there's been an artistically innovative and therefore not terribly popular rock band called King Crimson, made up of exceptionally gifted musicians on the traditional rock instruments of guitar, bass and drums. In concert, they tended to experiment a lot, and one of their improvised pieces was named "Trio" even though there were four of them onstage at the time.

I was heartened to learn that the drummer received one fourth of the royalties as a composer of the piece, despite the fact that while the other musicians were improvising a delicate tune, he held his drumsticks to his chest: he made a conscious decision, on the spot, that the best drum arrangement for that piece was not to play at all.ⁱⁱⁱ

The music is in the silence.

I wonder if part of what contributes to the anxious nature of these days is that it feels like we live in a world where the time that we might have given over to silence—time in long enough segments to allow us to think deeply about life and love and God and meaning and beauty—is being given over to interests who want to use it—and want you and me to use it—for something else.

Almost 100 years ago, Max Ehrmann began his poem *Desiderata* with the lines:

“Go placidly amid the noise and haste,
and remember what peace there may be in silence...
Avoid loud and aggressive persons,
they are vexations to the spirit.”^{iv}

Everyone is entitled to go home and enjoy whatever voices you like to listen to. It is not my, or anyone’s place, to tell you what is acceptable or unacceptable to have on your TV or radio or computer screen or bookshelf or whatever.

If you are a liberal getting jacked up by MSNBC; or if you are a conservative going home and mainlining Fox News; God bless you. You have that absolute right. I wouldn’t judge anybody, whichever side of the aisle they find more appealing.

(By the way, my favorite book title ever was what David Brinkley named a collection of his short essays: “*Everyone is Entitled to My Opinion.*”)

If you’re listening to conservative or liberal or any other brand of opinion-oriented media, terrific.

I am only asking you to do so with the full awareness that our prejudices and fears and cynicism and suspicion—our *anxieties* are being stoked by

people who have a vested interest, financial, political, and otherwise, in doing exactly that.

Outrage is the order of the day, and outrageous angles, outrageous agendas, outrageous lies are being dished up all the time to serve that purpose.

And whether you are saving up, for next Thanksgiving when you have to sit next to your irritating know-it-all cousin, a great quote from Sean Hannity or Lawrence O'Donnell; whether you adore Donald Trump, or long for Barack Obama; or if you're just one of the vast majority of people who are somewhere in the middle,

we are all subject to overlapping industries, that need you and me to give up our time for silence, and thinking, and meditating, and praying, and letting our minds wander and think for ourselves.

That is the real estate that each of us owns and controls, no matter how rich or poor, no matter what skills we have or don't have, or whether our senses are failing us or at their peak:

that time of silence is each person's own piece of property, and there are people, and companies, who are begging you, enticing you, demanding you to allow them into that territory to mine and exploit it for themselves.

It is their job to get you and me to hand over the time we could be spending in silence, and exchange it for listening to loud and aggressive persons who mean to be vexations to our spirits.

It doesn't mean everything you hear is necessarily wrong. As long as there is injustice in the world, or poverty or suffering, somebody has to sound the alarm and wake us from our mental slumber.

I'm just suggesting, along with Max Ehrmann, who ended *Desiderata* with this plea:

“Whatever your labors and aspirations,
in the noisy confusion of life keep peace with your soul.
With all its sham, drudgery, and broken dreams,
it is still a beautiful world.
Be cheerful.
Strive to be happy.”^v

So Paul could say with a straight face,

“Corinthians,
from now on,
let even those who have spouses be as though they had none;
and those who mourn, as though they were not mourning;
and those who rejoice, as though they were not rejoicing;
and those who buy, as though they had no possessions;
and those who deal with the world,
as though they had no dealings with it.
Because the appointed time has grown short,
and the present form of this world is passing away.”

Something made by God—something tremendous,
something wonderful, something beautiful
is coming, and in fact is already happening.

Jesus came into Galilee saying, “This is the time,
God’s kingdom has now come near;
turn around, and believe in the good news.”

And he said to Simon and Andrew, “Follow me,
and I’ll have you fishing for people.”

And he called James and John from their father’s fishing boat,

and they went with him.

If it feels like these times in our social circumstances, our political world, are unprecedented and unpredictable and something on a huge scale just is not right, that may be the case.

But above and around and encompassing that anxious world—that broken world in need of reparation, reparation that is done by human beings called to do so by their Creator—something even vaster is already happening.

Christians are responsible for sharing both of those stories:

What is not right in the world right now,

and the story that is higher and larger and more profound and more real than any reality you and I can see.

*Once God has spoken; twice have I heard this:
that power belongs to God,
and steadfast love belongs to you, O LORD.*

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ⁱ Evelyn Theiss, “Parable of a Chinese farmer: How an ancient story resonates in today's hard times” (The Plain Dealer, updated February 13, 2009 at 1:19 PM)

ⁱⁱ Kirk McElhearn “Listen Different: Add Silence to your iTunes and iPod Playlists” Aug 15, 2013 <https://www.kirkville.com/listen-different-adding-silence-to-your-itunes-and-ipod-playlists/>

ⁱⁱⁱ Bill Bruford, *The Autobiography* (London: Jawbone Press, 2009), 326

^{iv} Max Ehrmann, “Desiderata,” in *The Desiderata of Faith*. New York: Crown, 1996. Note that a common inscription is misleading: this was written in the 1920s, not the late 1600s.

^v Ehrmann, “Desiderata”