

God's First Language is Silence

Sermon by Christopher Epting

New Song Episcopal Church, December 30, 2018

Christmas 1 (C)

On the First Sunday after Christmas Day, we always have the Johannine Prologue as our Gospel Reading as the church tries to provide some theological content to the sweetly human story of babies and birthdays, mothers and manglers. The first eighteen or so verses of the Fourth Gospel have always fascinated biblical scholars.

When I was in seminary (which was right after St. Paul graduated!) the popular scholarly opinion was Rudolf Bultmann's -- that the Prologue was an early Gnostic Christian hymn which had been quoted and adapted by John to reach out to Greek speaking philosophical types to convey the **eternal** significance of Jesus, The Word was with God, and the Word was God.

Most scholars today reject that understanding and believe that the concept of "the Word" (Logos in the Greek) was a very **Jewish** understanding. God's "Word" is to be found all the way through the Hebrew Scriptures, starting with the Book of Genesis in which God "speaks" the creation into being. God "said," Let there be light and there was light!

And the prophets were understood as proclaiming God's "word", God's will, to the people of Israel. And, finally, there is the Wisdom tradition of Proverbs and the Wisdom of Solomon where "the Word" was another way of describing God's "Wisdom".

In **this** kind of literature "wisdom" was given almost a human, or at least personal, character and often seen as being feminine in nature – Sophia...Wisdom. It was this "Wisdom," this "Word," this eternal principle of rationality, that John saw "incarnated" (en-fleshed) in the man Jesus. "And the Word became flesh and

dwelt among us,” he wrote. And we will sing in our offertory hymn today, “**Good** is the flesh that the Word has become.”

Whenever I read John’s Prologue, I am reminded of the famous insight of the 16th Century Spanish mystic, St. John of the Cross, Juan de la Cruz, who once wrote: “The Father uttered one Word, and that Word was His Son. He utters Him forever in everlasting silence. In silence the soul must hear him”

We would probably be a little more sensitive in our use of language today and might render this quote something like: “God uttered one Word, and that Word was Jesus Christ. God utters the Christ forever in everlasting silence. In silence the soul must hear.” Whichever way we wish to state this, the point is the same: **God’s first language is silence!** And, if we want to grow in our relationship with God, we need to find times and places for silence in our lives.

That is, without a doubt, easier said than done in today’s busy, noisy world! We wake up to our phone’s alarm, check our email and messages; turn on the TV news while making our coffee, listen to the car radio while driving to work, and spend our day peering into one kind of computer screen or another – perhaps one we received as a Christmas present last week!

It’s not even surprising anymore to have to step out of the way of someone walking down the street staring into their phone while at the same time listening through ear buds to their play list. Or to observe a table full of four friends having lunch together, while each one is giving his or her phone their undivided attention.

I recently read a book by Nebraska’s Republican Senator Ben Sasse entitled *Them: why we hate each other and how to heal?* He makes the usual point about our political tribalism and what it is doing to our country, but probes deeper to ask about the deep seated loneliness so many people today feel, and the loss of our sense of community –

From declining participation in everything from Rotary clubs to softball leagues to church membership... and how we seek to make up for that in some of the ways I just described above – social media and play lists. Senator Sasse recommends a

spiritual discipline I have since adopted – **turn the damn phone off!...** for one hour a day, one day a week, and one week a year. It's a beginning!

And that actually reminds me of a similar discipline suggested by my spiritual mentor, Alan Jones, years ago. To seek out times and places for silence – one hour each day, a “Sabbath” day each week, and at least a three or four day retreat each year. I would commend that pattern to you as we prepare to enter this **New Year**.

Spend 20 minutes, twice each day, being quiet. You might use the simple method of Centering Prayer (which a number of us here at New Song practice). Sit quietly and comfortably in the awareness of God's presence; use a simple sacred word like “Peace” to return to that presence when your mind wanders. And that's all there is to it! But do it daily...

Or, learn the Lectio Divina method of Bible reading in four steps: 1) read a passage of Scripture, 2) focus in and meditate on one word or phrase which jumped out at you, 3) talk to God about it in prayer, and 4) rest in silence for a few minutes at the end.

Or, find some other way to center down into silence and rest in the Presence of God – with no agenda, no particular request or desire, just happy to “be still, and know that God **IS** God....and that we are not.

It will be the best gift you receive this Christmas.

For God uttered one Word and that Word was Jesus Christ. God utters the Christ forever in everlasting silence. In silence the soul must hear!