

# The Great Silence

A sermon by Rev. Joe Hoffman

*Nov. 26, 2006*

We have a blessing we sometimes sing at our house at mealtime. It is one that Noel wrote, and I like it very much. It goes like this:

Winter, spring, summer and fall;  
We thank you God for them all.  
Circles of seasons surround us  
Reminding us of your care.

I like to sing this as the seasons change. Most recently, we have sung it as the leaves have fallen and the trees have become tall, stark statues against a barren landscape. This is a time when the plush of green and the abundance of harvest are stripped away and we have the bare essentials left. And as I watch through the windows from the inside warmth of our house, I have a sense deep inside of me that this is enough. That all is well. That God is still God of all creation.

The church has circles of seasons too. We call them liturgical seasons. Advent, Christmas and Epiphany. Then Lent and Easter. And then Pentecost. Today we are at the end of the liturgical year. The last Sunday of Pentecost. The last Sunday of a long season also known as ordinary time. But it ends today with Reign of Christ Sunday – which celebrates with loud trumpet blasts the reign of Jesus on Earth. Some churches will have lots of pomp and ceremony today. But I think in these times that we live that it is important that we listen not so much for the loud blasts of trumpet that claim Christ at the center – although I do affirm this – but I also know what we have done to others in the name of Jesus. We have fought world wars – Christian against Christian – destroying life and community. We have started wars against terrorists in the name of Jesus and at the expense of all that Jesus was about. We have excluded and oppressed those who didn't meet our particular understanding of faith. No, I think instead of loud trumpet blasts we might more closely attend to the whispers of the promise of liberation, justice, truth and peace.

The promises of God have not been fulfilled in the palaces of royalty, but so often at the very edge of the power of empire. This is where there has been room to pay attention and to notice that God was imagining something different than what was in place. God had other ideas of what the realm of life could be. Suffering, hard times does that to people. They get to wondering. They have visions and dreams. They experience the presence of angels. And they find courage to live as if God could really make things be different.

I remember an encounter I had with this Mystery. I was very young – I would say maybe 4 years old. I was asleep in the dark of night in my bed. Suddenly I woke up and sat up, and sitting at the foot of my bed was this person, this presence. I had never met this person before, and I was afraid. I called out to my mom and dad, whose bedroom was beside mine – but they did not come. I was afraid, because this was different. But my fear began to go away as I realized this person

was not there to hurt me. This person never spoke, but I began to feel the warmth of their presence. I remember them as a glow in a dark room. And in time, I was able to lie back down and go to sleep. When I woke up in the morning, my room was normal again. But I was not.

I am sure that I was visited that night by an angel. I can't promise it. It could have been a dream, but it was different from any dream experience I have ever had. For me it was mystery, and it was an angel saying – don't be afraid Joe. Trust what you know deep inside.

Next Sunday we begin the season of Advent. There will be a focus on covenant and promise – and angels help to bring the good news. There will be a connection to the great rulers of the past – and especially David. But the promise of One who is to come will be fulfilled in a sleepy little town where people of power are not paying much attention. God comes in the silence of the night, not as flaming torch but as flickering candle. God comes in our wildest imaginations and we are invited to help give birth to what we have imagined.

Our dreams are grounded in knowing that God is our beginning and our ending. Alpha and Omega. What else is there that matters? Circles of seasons surround us, and all of it is beauty. Love is all around us.

I heard a wonderful story on NPR a week or so ago. It was about a church service in San Francisco. The church is City of Refuge UCC, a church that really is on the margins of society, a church where every member understands what it means to be on the edge of life – not just a few sitting here and there in the pew. It is the norm of the community. Yvette Flunder is the pastor of this unusual people, and she believes the spirit is still alive. She brings a Pentecostal passion to her preaching and her vision.

On this particular day there was a time of celebration in the service. A well known and loved transgendered person came dancing down the aisle and up to Rev. Flunder, and as he danced he whispered something to her. The man telling the story did not hear what was said, but he knew instinctively what the words were. He gave credit to the spirit of God in the room and said to Yvette Flunder later – I know what that person said to you. She said – you do? He said, yes I know. That person whispered to you “Thank you for saving my life! “ And Yvette smiled a knowing smile as a tear fell from her eyes. She was the angel for this man. She lived and helped give birth to the good news he needed to hear.

The whisper is what we must listen for in the great silence. God is coming again. And again and again and again. God is still speaking truth into being. God is still loving peace into possibility. God is in the silence that cares for the covenant when the empire overlords and overrules us. God is in the world making all things new still.

As we move into Advent and next week, we will slowly begin to hear the voice of angels as they come to Mary and Joseph, and to shepherds watching their flocks in the fields. They will whisper a promise and they will proclaim good news to those who are able to hear, and then they will say

– be not afraid. For the good news comes in the face of those who do not understand such promises. The good news does not set well with those who think they have power over us. But be not afraid of their power. God was and is and always shall be, and God’s whisper has more power than the most powerful bombs of war. More power than the violence of hatred and ignorance. Listen in the silence and know in your heart what Earth has known from the very start. God is coming again. And again. Listen.

Catherine Keller in her book *God and Power* says “The Second Coming signals a second chance for the losers of history, for the victims of oppression or of dissipation.” (slightly adapted, p. 54) The last shall be first, and finally will have their chance. And Sid Fowler, editor of *Out in Scripture for the Human Rights Campaign* and also a UCC minister and editor of many curriculum pieces for our denomination, says about this time we are in and this text from Revelation - "I want God to be the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and end. I don't want those who oppress and discriminate to have the last word spoken.... I don't want God to wipe out the persecutor, but rather to make good on the promise to dwell with us and to 'wipe away every tear.' Death, mourning and pain be no more." (Revelation 21:4)

The promise is not for victory over those who oppress us – but victory with them as we all learn how to live in peace together. There can be no peace that does not include everyone. That does not invite everyone. That does not transform everyone.

As we today put out the Pentecost flame that has brightened our spirits during this long season of the church year, we now enter into the darkness of Advent as a seed or a bulb enters the dark soil of Earth. Waiting for life to break forth. We wait too. We wait again. We anticipate some more. We listen to the great silence that so often we avoid with our noise and our technology and our busyness. We wait not by standing in line to buy the latest gadgets that are on the Christmas market, but by being silent and still. We listen now – remembering the gift of the angels who said – be not afraid – we listen deeply to what is real. God is with us as God has always been with us.

As we now listen together, hear again parts of the psalm that Clare read so well for us a few minutes ago:

Enter into the Silence, into the Heart of Truth;  
For herein lies the Great Mystery where life is ever unfolding.  
Herein the Divine Plan is made known.

Listen for the music of the Holy Word  
in the resounding Silence of the universe.

May you be drawn into the Heart of Love.

Know that all is working toward healing and wholeness.  
And may the healing power of love lift you from the limitations of fear and ignorance  
and into the arms of freedom.

Be not afraid of the Silence  
for Wisdom's voice is heard there.

Learn to listen well. For beyond the silence and stillness within,  
you will come to know a profound and dazzling Silence

Blessings of the Great Silence be with you as you help to rebuild  
the heart of the world with love.  
(from Psalms for Praying, Psalm 132)

The circle of seasons brings us to the darkness of Advent. We prepare now to wait in the  
darkness, to know in the silence what our ancestors before us have also known. That the mystery  
that is God is alive and moving and breaking forth in new patterns of love and justice. Freedom is  
coming. But it does not come from the halls of power in Washington or Baghdad. It comes from  
the heart of love inside you and me. Go deep into the silence and find the whisper of Love that  
has been with us from the very beginning of time. That carries us in the in between time. That  
will be with us for all time.

What would it be like if we lived confidently in the truth that God is Alpha and Omega, that God  
was and is and shall be? What difference would it make? How might it open us to God's spirit  
seeking to break forth in us? To bring new life to our hurting, wounded places?

The realm of God is coming. It is coming in us as we enter the deep silence of God's forever  
mystery. The silence is our friend. Let us make room for God to enter in again. Amen.