

Christianity in the Age of Spirit
Series 1: Pilgrim's Progress
Part 4: How does Silence guide us on our journey?

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Scripture: 1 Kings 19:1-13a; Genesis 1:26-28

1. The Sound of Silence

We live in a noisy world. Inside, the television drones, dishwashers churn, the Boom Box booms. Outside, cars and motorcycles roar down the streets, fire and police sirens scream, air conditioners churn. Even the sounds of nature keep silence at bay – barking dogs and chirping birds, rushing wind and pounding rain. If silence is a vacuum, apparently the world abhors it.

Our interior world is full of noise, too. Songs shuffle through our heads, our ears ring, and our internal voice engages in moment-by-moment conversation or replays old ones.

In a 24-hour day, are there any moments when our world – internal or external – is truly and completely silent?

In our passage from 1 Kings 19, the story says that God spoke to Elijah not in the rushing wind, or the trembling earthquake, or the roaring fire. God spoke in the sound of “sheer silence.” Actually, the Hebrew is untranslatable in English. What we translate as “sheer silence” or “a still, small voice” literally reads, “finely powdered silence” in Hebrew. Apparently, the “coarsely granulated” silence our world serves up is even too loud for God’s voice to be heard. It must be “finely powdered” – a silence within the silence. I wonder what that kind of silence “sounds” like.

Many people know that I love snow. Every fall, around the first of November, I place a small plaque above my office door that reads, “Let it snow!” People seem to consider this an openly hostile act in Omaha! But to me, there’s nothing quite like waking up in the morning after snow has been falling all night. Before you even open your eyes, you know that snow has fallen. You can tell because snow absorbs sound, subtly changing the acoustics of everything around it. When you step outside early in the morning before the birds are up or the traffic starts, it seems quieter than quiet. If there were such a thing as sub-quiet, or sub-zero

volume, this is what a snowy, pre-dawn morning is like. It's about the closest "sound" I can think of that approximates an experience of "finely powdered silence."

Of course, such pre-dawn moments are rare, even in a Nebraska winter. If we are to experience deep silence on this level, we can't rely on the external world to create it. We must find ways of bringing down the volume of all that is *within* us until it is as silent as freshly fallen snow. But how?

Throughout the ages, mystics and other spiritual teachers have developed a wide variety of ways to quiet down our internal thoughts and voices to a point that approaches the "finely powdered silence" in which the holy may be found. But for now, I'd rather acknowledge the obvious: The first step toward that level of quiet is to simply turn off the television, or stop singing along to the radio, and simply shut up. Declare yourself absent from all conversation, external and internal, and simply be in whatever silence you can escape to. Don't listen to or for anything at all, not even God's voice. Just *be* the silence you seek.

Why not take a few moments to be silent before reading on ...?

II. Imago Dei

Many people know that, as much as I love snow, I love time spent in solitude even more. I've never had trouble being alone. On my Monday Sabbaths, it is not unusual for me to go the whole day without uttering a word to anyone but my dog until Melanie comes home from work. When I take time off for study-leave, I can remain silent for days at a time without ever feeling the slightest bit bored or lonely. I'm not lonely because the more silent I am, the more my soul lights up. I find myself illuminated by either the soft glow of the Spirit's Presence, or Her raging fire. These soul-stirring moments can be more thrilling than a roller coaster ride, or more comforting than the softest blanket.

Yet as much as I love my solitude, and my God, I have come to realize that only a small fraction of my experience of God comes through silence – even "finely powdered silence." My "God experiences" come more frequently through *other people*.

The Scriptures tell us that human beings are created in the "image and likeness" of God. I doubt this means physical likeness. As Rev. William Sloane-Coffin once put it, "the power of God is lodged in the very marrow of our substance and it is

pressing, constantly pressing, for release in order to permeate every fiber of our being." This inner, spiritual "image and likeness" permeates us and finds release when we let it flow through us to embrace others.

Often we are on the receiving end of this embrace. Ironically, we often become most acutely aware of God's power and Presence working through other people when they pass on from this world and return to God. Before the family of a loved one who has passed away enters the sanctuary for their funeral or memorial service, I spend a few moments with the family in The Commons to pray with them. Before offering a prayer, I ask the family if there are ways they experienced their beloved that can be summed up in one or two words. Words I frequently hear include these:

Loving
Caring
Compassionate
Generous
Kind
Comforting
A True Friend or Companion
Patient
Faithful
Fun
Funny
Intelligent
Wise
Joyful
Gracious
Always There

Which of these characteristics have nothing to do with God? Indeed, they have *everything* to do with God. Yet which of these divine characteristics would you come to know solely by being alone, if there were no people in your life?

It's not that these aspects can't be discovered in solitude. It's just that about 95% of the time we experience them through others. In fact, it is through our interactions with others that we learn to separate what is "of God" and what is not. We come to know that God is loving, not hateful; caring, not disinterested; compassionate, not cold-hearted.

Curiously, we experience God not only when others “bear God” to us through acting like God does, but also when we discover commonalities with other people that may have little or nothing to do with what we find in God. For instance, it is doubtful that God is lonely. Yet two lonely people together find comfort and companionship – both characteristics of God. Similarly, it is doubtful that God has ever been bullied by others. Yet two people who have been bullied can find mutual understanding and compassion – again, characteristics of the Divine.

Even more curiously, God can be experienced in relationships that are essentially unhealthy between people. For instance, it is possible for an unkind person who intentionally hurts another person to be moved to repentance and compassion when confronted by the hurt they caused. I think of all the indifferent Americans – and even outright racists – who, in 1965, suddenly pivoted and even fought for civil rights after watching the brutal attacks on African-Americans who sought to cross a bridge in Selma, Alabama, on television. The stories they kept telling themselves and others that enabled a racist culture to thrive suddenly fell silent – were ground down into “finely powdered silence” – when confronted by a truer story. Often, the fullness of God’s heart can be experienced most powerfully when the heart breaks and our familiar narratives fall silent. In this ominous silence the fullness of God trickles in to fill the void.

III. Speaking Chanterelles

In the middle of the first major revision of my book, *Gifts of the Dark Wood*, my confidence completely fell apart. Over two hundred Countryside members had read the first draft in small group settings. While the book hit about 25% of readers between the eyes, who gave it favorable reviews, it went almost completely over the heads of about 75% of readers.

Shortly after arriving at this sobering conclusion I attended a writer’s conference in Bend, Oregon, that featured a number of famous authors including Anne Lamott. Being a big fan of the way Anne Lamott writes so candidly, humorously, and *wisely* about finding reasons for faith and hope in the midst of her own Dark Wood experiences, like alcoholism, single-motherhood, depression, I was excited to have an opportunity to hear her lecture.

I really perked up when Ms. Lamott started talking about how negatively her writings had originally been received by people whose opinions she valued. She spoke eloquently about how she had to learn to trust her own unique voice rather than allow it to be shaped into the narrow box of other peoples’

expectations. She advised all aspiring authors to stand firm when they've found their "true voice" and not be swayed by public opinion.

Inspired by her words, I stuck around after the lecture until she had autographed the last book. As she turned to leave, I quickly interjected, "Ms. Lamott! Do you have a moment for one quick question?" The look on her face strongly suggested that she was well past done speaking with other people. Nevertheless, she nodded and there was no way I was going to let my opportunity slip by.

"I've written this book manuscript. It's about finding God and your spiritual path in those times when life hits you particularly hard. I was really inspired by your talk and how you advised us to hold firm to our true voice once we've found it." Holding up my manuscript, I exclaimed, "I've certainly found mine in this book. The only problem is that only about a quarter of the people who've read it really understand what I'm trying to say. Should I 'hold firm' to my voice, like you've said?"

Her face, which was already full of fatigue, fell further. "Oh no," she said. "You really need to revise it!"

Making my way down the mountains from Bend to our family cabin in Bandon where I had scheduled some writing time, my confidence was thoroughly shaken. "How can I revise my 'true voice' without losing it?"

Day after day, I made various attempts to revise and re-write sections, but the more I worked, the more the book seemed to unravel – to the point where it just seemed like a pile of disjointed and incomprehensible nonsense.

I remember going for a walk alongside a creek on our property while all this was happening and completely breaking down in tears. I asked God to take the pain away somehow. I hoped that God would either bestow some insight upon me that would bring the manuscript together, or – perhaps better yet – tell me to forget all about the book and move on to other things. Instead, I was met with silence. Sheer silence. But not the kind Elijah experienced when he heard God's voice!

Feeling abandoned in my hour of need, I felt a new sensation well up within me: Anger. With venom I prayed, "How can you leave me flailing around like this after all the work I've put into writing this book – the one that *You* told me to write in the first place?"

More silence.

Finally, in defiance, I determined to walk to a place I knew of where my exterior surroundings would match precisely how I was feeling on the inside. "If You won't talk to me," I growled, "maybe the forest will."

I made my way over to a large ravine I had never walked in before. I'd never gone there because the forest was so dense there that you could hardly enter it, and the bottom of the ravine was so dark and swampy you could easily get stuck or completely lost there. It was a repulsive place I'd never felt tempted to go ... but a place that completely matched how I was feeling inside. I figured that, if nothing else, I would at least not feel so alone in my despair there.

Standing at the top of the hill overlooking the ravine, I literally had to get down on my belly and squirm under thick bushes for a dozen yards or so before I could crawl on my hands and knees and eventually get to my feet. I found the bottom of the ravine to be exactly as I thought it would be: swampy, filled with thorny brush and scraggly trees, and so dark and dense that I couldn't figure out which direction to go to reach the other end. "This is exactly how I feel, God," I prayed. "Are you happy now?" More silence.

Yet, just before I reached the crest of the hill where I would emerge into the sun and open space, I looked to my right and saw something that took my breath away. It was the largest patch of Chanterelle mushrooms I'd ever seen!

I'm a huge Chanterelle fan. When I'm at the cabin at the right time of year, I love to go searching – mostly in vain – for these wild beauties. When I get lucky, I may return with half a pound or so. But there were five or six pounds of Chanterelles in this patch!

I stood there in stunned silence. In that silence, it was as if the Chanterelles themselves spoke. "Don't give up on your book, Eric. Yes, there are some rough patches you'll have to work through, but if you're looking, you'll also find that it's full of 'Chanterelles'. Find the 'Chanterelles' – the stories and insights that are worth keeping. Pull them all out and arrange them in front of you. You'll find a coherent thread among them that will help you set them in proper order and make your book coherent to others."

I did what I was told.

While I can't say that everything was easy from that point on, I believe that the Holy Spirit spoke to me in that wordless moment as I communed with the Chanterelles. At the point where my broken heart encountered the fullness of God's Creation, what I "heard" there spoke louder than words alone could convey.

Surely, when we shut up and start listening *for* God rather than talking *to* God, we give God room to speak within the silence. We may hear the Spirit's voice in these quiet moments. We may hear the Spirit speaking through the words and actions of others created in the "image and likeness of God." We may hear the Spirit's call by observing and experiencing God's Creation. In all these ways, it is silence that guides us, and hearing God's voice within our silence that leads us home.