

FAITH IN THE FUTURE
MY SOUL IN SILENCE

Text on Wednesday

February 22, 2012

Job 2: 11-13; Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

They sat with Job on the ground seven days and seven nights, and no one spoke a word to him.

Silence for seven days and seven nights! Perhaps no one in this room has ever held silence for seven days. Why, for people of western cultures, to hold silence for an hour is rare. We talk a lot. At work. At home. In court. At school. Over dinner. In the doctor's office. On TV. Everyone is talking. Church is hardly different. Now, our Quaker friends know something of silence, but Protestant worship uses lots of words. We talk a lot.

When Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar hear about Job's ordeal, they get together. No doubt they talk. Perhaps they wonder what they are going to say to him, as people worry when they must visit a friend in hospital who has been grievously injured. *What am I going to say?* Talking is how we make ourselves known in the world. It's how we show up as me! To be sure, clothing and posture and hair style are part of it—but when we talk, we really set our self down in the world. We stand in the space. We push back at the silence of things everywhere; things doing nothing, mute witnesses to the passage of time, to our passage through time, to our passing through, passing away. We talk and talk to insist we are really here; to make our self real.

Our spiritual tradition does not encourage so much talk. To the contrary: a lot of silence. Moses was reluctant in speech. Forty days alone on a mountaintop? It sounds like a Trappist retreat. The prophets do prophesy, but they always withdraw, too—sometimes for years on end. Elijah finally hears God not in smashing loud wonders but in a still, small voice. Jesus speaks. But he and his disciples draw back to desert places apart and pray all day and night. Teaching how to pray, he says, "Shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret." What is going on? Why do we talk so much, when for our greatest good, the tradition says "Shut the door"?

Shut the door. The door stands for the choice we have between the outer and the inner; the decision we make between sound and silence. Go to the inner room, Jesus says. Shut the mouth from speaking. Shut the eye from shiny things. Shut the mind from a thousand thoughts. Shhh. Why does our spiritual tradition stand on the opposite shore of our much talking and our striving to insist we are real . . . and invite us to silence?

Job's friends, at least for these seven days, know about the invitation to silence. In silence, when the striving stops; in silence, when the push and pull to be right and in control and secure is let go; in silence (if you let the silence stand) what is real is touching you. No shell of self is protecting you. Yes, there is often clamor of thoughts—for that hamster on the wheel in the cage of our skull is running in every head—but silence can teach that the wheel is just a wheel. It is not real. Your thoughts are not you. You are real, the one watching. But you can only watch and wait when there is silence.

Consider Job. When a person is forty or fifty, full of strength, blessed with a family and with the consequences of many years of good work, he is somebody, she is somebody. That person has substance, like a house well-built, with many rooms and windows. For thousands of years, societies have praised lives like these, for their purposefulness and reliability help hold communities together. Such people seem very real. Job has been all of that.

But now he is none of that. His children are dead. His investments are destroyed, along with the house. His pains are too grievous to permit him to work. And so hideous is he that no one wants to open their eye on his face. Is he real? Who is he? How automatically we account for our self to the world according to what we have and what we have done! That *is* what we talk about! Yet if all that is gone, are we real? Ask America's long-term unemployed. Ask anyone who is very poor or severely disabled or subject to hateful prejudice: *Do people think you are real?* Without our past to talk about, are we real?

Only in silence can you begin to know a deep answer. Only silence proves what is. Only silence knows that what is so for the invisible and unloved people of the world is equally so for the successful and secure and powerful, who are able always to talk their way to more security and substance. The reality is, only silence tests and

reveals what is, beneath all the noise and fears and display that chatter away in us, as they do in all the animals.

What is real—our tradition calls it life eternal—has neither beginning nor end. It has nothing to do with what you did or earned, or with your crimes and sorrows, either. What is real cannot be harmed. When you feel hurt or threatened, what is hurt or threatened has nothing to do with who you really are, which is always touching you—a gift of God, forget it though you will, day in and day out. Only silence knows what the psalmist sings: “For God alone my soul waits in silence; from God alone comes my salvation. God alone: my rock and my fortress! I shall not be moved!” (Psalm 62)

Tonight we receive the sign of dust and ashes. This is the church not talking. This is the church offering a silent embrace, a nod of assent, with a thing of no value set up on the brow, saying that we know it is safe to live and it will be safe to die. For in silence, we know who we are, and whose. We are real.

To live in this world
you must be able
to do three things:
to love what is mortal;
to hold it
against your bones knowing
your own life depends on it;
and, when the time comes to let it go,
to let it go.*

Rev. Stephen H. Phelps
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*The Riverside Church
in the City of New York*

* “In Blackwater Woods” by Mary Oliver