

As we approach thanksgiving, I am intrigued by the Pilgrims methods of worship. For example, I like their practice of having an hour glass filled with sand on the pulpit. The minister turns it over at least once during the sermon, if not twice. Then again, I am not sure that I would like to prepare such an extensive sermon and I doubt that you would find such a long sermon totally meaningful: too much noise, too little impact, no time for coffee.

I grew up in Kenosha's First Congregational Church. Each week the bulletin included this statement: Before the service we speak to God. During the service God speaks to us. After the service we speak to each other. The sense is that the quiet time before the service was, and still is, a very important part of our worship. Quiet time with the Lord, apart from Sunday worship, is also critically important in our relationship with God and through that relationship our understanding of who we are.

Another aspect of the Pilgrim's routine is that they entered and left worship in groups for their protection. Zechariah, the priest in this passage, entered the inner alter of the Temple alone. It was literally a once in a lifetime opportunity to enter the holy place and offer incense to God. Upon leaving, Zechariah would be expected to pronounce a blessing upon the waiting crowd.

To put it mildly, for Zechariah this was a quiet time before the Lord. There had been many prophets of old, all too many of them ignored or even put to death. There were many prophecies that had yet to be fulfilled. They still awaited the fulfillment of the prophecy of Jeremiah that a wise and righteous king, the Messiah, would save Israel. Now Israel was in dire consequences. After the exile and return they had had little freedom. Now they contended with the oppressive Roman occupation. Still, God had not spoken, or so it seemed, for centuries. Far too many priests had made the daily offering and left only having heard the silence of the inner chamber.

So Zechariah probably did not expect much to happen.

He and his wife Elizabeth had been praying for a child. The silence of a childless household matched the perceived silence of God. Even more so, in that society, in which being childless was seen as a sign of disfavor from God. I need to add that this has never been the understanding in Christian circles. Still, I wonder if Zechariah had any concerns as he entered the holy place; perhaps wishing for company just in case something untoward happened.

I wonder if a modern Zechariah would have taken a selfie on his way in? This was a big deal! Post it for all of his friends and followers to see. Perhaps linger a bit for their feedback. Garner a few 'likes' and positive replies. After all, if God was not pleased with him at least his fellow priests could offer support. Was he silent before the Lord? Perhaps there was external silence but none within his

heart.

And then something unheard of happened. An angel of the Lord, Gabriel, informs Zechariah about the future birth of his son; a child for whom Zechariah and his wife had been praying. Let's make sure we're tracking with this story. God hasn't spoken in centuries. Zechariah might not be in a most favored status. He is alone. And an angel of God appears. The angel speaks for God. Prayers are to be answered.

When Zechariah gets the news, from an angel, in the temple, that his prayers have been answered, and that the thing he had hoped for his whole life was about to become a reality, he responds not with faith, but with anxiety and doubt worthy of his forebears Abraham and Sarah: "How will I know that this is so? For I am an old man and my wife is getting on in years" (v. 18). He questioned how he would really know that this was going to happen.

And the result? Zechariah did not get a go sit in the corner 'time out'. No, he got quiet time. Nine months of quiet time to think about the Lord's message; to think about having doubted the Lord; to think about his future son. Quiet time to think about what he would say once his voice returned.

The famous mathematician and theologian Blaise Pascal wrote in the 17th century "All of humanity's problems stem from man's inability to sit quietly in a room alone." Zechariah and Pascal lived long before the television and computer and the smartphone, inventions that ensure that people today are rarely quiet and rarely alone. Even when we are alone, we are not quiet. Wednesday night I received two Amber alert messages, one around midnight and the other a few hours later breaking the silence of the night. But even more, how often do we have a free moment and immediately start checking emails and texts and news updates and on and on and on.

If Pascal is right — that our problems are due to an inability to be alone — then we're in trouble.

What is the longest period of quiet time that you have experienced? What about the longest period of quiet time you have experienced in the digital age? Have you ever taken a 'digital fast'? Have you disconnected, unplugged, silenced everything and been truly alone? Have you used that time to be quiet before the Lord?

What would you say if God gave you all of that time unable to speak? What would your first words be?

Like many of us in a distracted world, the old priest wants some assurance, a sign that things are

going to be okay. We often seek those signs by tallying up the number of “likes” and positive comments we get from others, seeking their approval. Somehow, even with an angel standing in front of him, Zechariah doesn’t believe that he’s been approved by the only one whose opinion actually matters: God.

Part of the temple ritual was that after the priest lit the incense and came out of the holy place, he was supposed to give a blessing to the people. Here comes Zechariah out to the waiting crowd and ... *nothing*.

Then, after nine months and the birth of John, Zechariah is able to speak.

Benedictus is Zechariah’s song. *Benedictus* is the title of a canticle or hymn beginning in Latin with *Benedictus Dominus Deus Israel*, and in English “Blessed be the Lord God of Israel.” The first words that Zechariah spoke were words of praise to the Lord God of Israel. He was able to sing it because he learned how to sit quietly, be in a room alone and stop talking. God made sure of that. We learn that the carol is the result of some imposed silence and solitude. And therein lies a lesson.

To establish the premise that there’s some value to silence and solitude, we can turn to computer scientist and self-help author Cal Newport. In his provocative and sobering book *Digital Minimalism: Choosing a Focused Life in a Noisy World*, he writes that our culture is paying the price for our “compulsive connectivity.” Our constant snapping, chatting, tweeting, posting, liking and swiping have become “a nervous twitch that shatters uninterrupted time into shards too small to support the presence necessary for an intentional life.”

In other words, we can’t seem to stand solitude and silence anymore — and it’s killing us. Newport points out that our “solitude deprivation” is one of the significant causes of much of our cultural anxiety, angst and rising rates of depression and suicide. It’s a state in which you “spend close to zero time alone with your own thoughts and free from input from other minds.”

Luke begins his Advent story with an example of how imposed silence not only allows for deeper reflection, but also for deeper faith, an opportunity to listen to God and discern what God is really up to in the world and in our lives.

Perhaps we should prepare to spend some time in silence before Advent begins next Sunday. We can contemplate what it means to wait, wait expectantly, as did Zechariah wait for his son to arrive and his voice to return. We can anticipate the arrival of Christ. We spend weeks in anticipation;

consider the centuries that Israel spent in expectant anticipation.

The Benedictus is a song full of praise and thanksgiving and blessing.

I wonder if the Pilgrims heard such a song of praise and thanksgiving and blessing on that first Thanksgiving feast that saved them from disaster? Had there been enough silent time as they struggled to survive to ponder such things?

Each year, the National Organization makes a Thanksgiving Proclamation. Hear this one:

PROCLAIM THANKS 2019

We thank God....

For Grace and Love

For a place to live our Faith

For Freedom to do good and do well

For Faithful companions on our Pilgrimage

We give thanks...

For the hospitality of the Dutch

For their open arms and open hearts

For their courage to take the strangers in

For their Reforming ways

We are so aware that...

It takes courage and generosity to be hospitable

We may fear the stranger and not want to let them in

The cost for hospitality is well worth the gamble

We need examples of courage and be courageous for others to see

In the year of our Redeemer 2019...

We are a pilgrim people yet today

Thanks be to God!

Let each of us spend quiet time before the Lord. Let each of us compose our own Benedictus of

Sermon
FCC

The Benedictus
Jeremiah 23:4-6; Luke 1:67-79

24 Nov 19
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praise. Let each of us proclaim our own thanksgiving. Let each of us faithfully and patiently await the fulfillment of all of God's prophecies.