

*The Sound of Silence*  
*Advent II, December 9, 2018*

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Last Sunday, I said that Advent is a tricky season. And today, I want to expand on that suggestion. First of all, Advent is tricky because it's tempting to want to get to the end of it so that we can get to the really good stuff, Christmas itself and everything we associate with it: familiar and beloved Christmas carols instead of those unfamiliar Advent hymns, for example. A few years ago at the beginning of Advent, I was attending an area clergy gathering where we were discussing our own preparations for Advent, and one of the participants said, with a sense of resignation, "I'm not going to the preach on those difficult Advent texts (she meant the ones like last Sunday's from Luke which had to do with warning, repentance and the Second Coming);" she said, "I'm going to talk about Christmas and about all the good feelings that we have about Christmas. And throughout Advent, we're going to sing Christmas carols." I'm guessing that maybe some of you wish you belonged to that church. Last Sunday I compared Advent and Christmas to cake and the icing on the cake. The cake of Advent is good, we think, but we really can't wait to get to the icing.

But Advent is also a tricky season because we think that we get the main points through all of its symbolism: like the recurring image of light versus darkness, when we light our Advent candles and then when we all light all our little candles and the Christ candle during our Christmas Eve service, thus representing the coming of the one we call "the Light of the World" into our dark and often bleak world. And there are those wonderful

themes of the season: hope, peace, joy and love—themes that seem to be best understood by contrasting them with their opposites: despair, war, sadness and hate.

But I think that the most subtle and the trickiest part of our Advent symbolism is that while each Advent theme has its opposite, each also has what I will call its shadow impostor, which is all the more deceptive and dangerous because it distracts us from the real thing. So last week, when we thought about hope, we drew a contrast with despair, but we also talked about how hope can be confused with optimism, to the detriment of hope.

And this week's shadow impostor of peace is the frequent companion of peace in popular terminology: quiet, as in "peace and quiet." Now there is a lot of good that can be said about quiet in our noisy world. Just before the first Gulf War, in 1991, I was the staff person for a delegation of church leaders who traveled to Iraq to meet with Iraqi leaders to try convince them that although there were a lot of people in the U.S., including many Christians, who were against going to war with Iraq, we were pretty sure that if the Iraqis didn't withdraw from Kuwait, there would be a war despite our disagreement, and that Iraq would not fare well in it. So we wanted to encourage the Iraqi government to withdraw their troops from Kuwait. We hoped to go to the top man, Saddam Hussein, to convey our concerns.

It didn't go well. When we arrived we were told that we were scheduled to visit Saddam's war memorial commemorating his alleged victory in the Iran-Iraq War. (Actually no one except the Angel of Death won that war.) We refused, saying that we church leaders don't visit monuments glorifying war. We also knew that the centerpiece of this monument was a sculpture of Saddam's hands gripping crossed swords—the hands of the sculpture had been cast from molds of Saddam's actual hands—and we figured that the Prince of Peace wouldn't want to have anything to do with that. I think that our refusal to be used for propaganda was what eventually led to our being denied an

audience with Saddam Hussein, although we did meet with other Iraqi officials. Instead, while the Iraqi government was trying to figure out what to do with us, we were put in Baghdad's finest hotel, the Rashid, where we waited and waited for that meeting that never took place.

It was about this time of year, a week or so before Christmas, and you may be surprised, as I was, to learn that even though only about five percent of Iraq's population are Christians, Christmas at least used to be a big deal in Iraq. During our stay at the Hotel Rashid, there was a Christmas tree in the lobby, and a constant loop of Christmas songs, including carols, being played in the public areas of the hotel where we met, ate together and planned for that hoped-for meeting with Saddam. It got to the point where we got to know the order of the Christmas songs on the recording. And we got royally sick of those renditions. To this day I have a visceral dislike of Christmas muzak even though I love Christmas carols. That was a time in my life when I craved both peace and quiet.

And there's a lot noise in our lives, not just Christmas Muzak during the Christmas season. There are those cable news programs that are the constant background noise in restaurants or stores, or in the dentist's waiting room, anywhere we have to wait for something, or there is the background noise in our own living rooms. Broadcasters have an aversion to what they call dead air, and that's because many of us do too. I know that while some of you appreciate the silences during our prayers of confession and intercession, even wish that they were longer, I'm guessing that some of you are made uncomfortable by them. So, in many homes, the TV is always on, even if there really is nothing on it that anyone is really listening to. For the past couple of years, Pat and I have tried to discipline ourselves to only watch the local news and weather. We can get the rest of the news through the newspaper. We're learning to savor long periods of silence when we can read, or, heaven forbid, when we can fill the silence with our own conversations, and not someone else's commentary. Silence can, indeed, be golden.

But there is also a menacing silence, the silence of oppression, the enforced silence where power doesn't want to allow criticism. And there is the silence of poverty, when poverty equals powerlessness, so that we don't even hear the poor because they have no opportunity to be heard, like in an election campaign. After all, the discomfort caused by seeing poverty or hearing about poverty, leads us and our public officials to want to talk about other things. Yes, indeed, the middle class is distressed, and that distress must be addressed, but what about the invisible and the inaudible and desperate poor for whom hope has vanished.

And there is the silence of fear. There's a reason why John the Baptist eventually was executed by Herod Antipas, the son of the Herod in our Christmas narratives. And I don't think that it all had to do with John's critique of Herod Jr.'s flamboyant and terrible morals—you know the thing about marrying his brother's wife, and then the banquet and the stripper who was also his stepdaughter and, um, cousin. Often, shady personal morality goes hand in hand with a callous disregard for other people, a disregard particularly for people who are already powerless, who, in the imagination of the powerful, can't do them any harm. I think that John's fate was actually sealed when he broke the silence; when out there in the desert he shouted out the uncomfortable truths, uncomfortable truths about religious people whose religion didn't seem to make it past the temple walls into public morality; or about the minions of the state who gouged the poor; or the soldiers of the occupying Roman army who extorted money from those they were supposed to protect.

Those silences—the silences of oppression, poverty, powerlessness and fear—are not the things that make for peace. Real peace is only possible when someone has the courage to break the silence, is willing to shout the uncomfortable truths in such a persuasive way that people are not only willing to listen, but are willing to hope again. At the conclusion of his reporting of John's sermon in the desert, and his warnings about the consequences of not repenting, of not wanting to change our lives, Luke the Evangelist says this most

remarkable thing about John the Baptist: “So with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.” All those warnings, those scary warnings, are really good news.

The good news is in our assurance of pardon every Sunday when we worship together. It is always something like this, “In Jesus Christ, we become new people altogether. We can begin again.” Breaking the silence about ourselves is a necessary step on the path to redemption and salvation. The uncomfortable truth becomes our hope, our hope for a peace that passes all understanding.

At the conclusion of our visit to Iraq before the first Gulf War, our delegation of church leaders waited for our flight out of Baghdad in a VIP lounge. Like every available public wall in Iraq during Saddam Hussein’s rule, the walls of this room were covered with photos or portraits of the Dear Leader. While we waited to be called for our flight to Amman, the head of our delegation, Bishop Edmond Browning, the Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church, rose and stood before one of those portraits of Saddam and began to read the document that we had painstakingly worked on in the hotel while that Christmas Muzak was driving us all crazy. It’s the document that we never got to deliver. I’ll confess that my initial reaction when Ed started to read that statement aloud was to say, “Be quiet. This room is, for sure, bugged, and we may never get out of here.” My disquiet was mirrored by the clear discomfort of the Iraqi soldiers who were watching us. They probably didn’t understand what the Bishop was saying, but they knew it couldn’t be good if it was being read to a portrait of the man who knew everything.

But sometimes you have to shout, even in the wilderness where you think that it’s unlikely that you’ll be heard.

After all, sometimes peace and quiet isn’t really peace. Amen.