

“A Voice Shattering the Silence”

Malachi 3:1-4; Luke 3:1-6

Third Sunday of Advent – December 13, 2009

A homily preached by Rev. Dr. Ivan H.M. Peden Copyright: 2009, I. Peden

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For about 400 years no prophetic voice had been heard in Israel. Perhaps the people were beginning to despair of ever “hearing from God” again. Four centuries is a very long time not to hear the voice of a great prophet in Israel. A South African Dominican priest, Fr. Albert Nolan, commented in his book, *Jesus Before Christianity*, that [I quote] “the spirit of prophecy had been quenched. God was silent. All one could hear was ‘the echo of his voice.’” The people hoped ...the people expected to hear God’s voice through “The Prophet” for whom they were waiting ...“The Prophet” who was to come. Maybe they had it all wrong. Maybe it wasn’t God being silent. Maybe they just couldn’t understand or interpret the sound of silence.

I know I am dating myself by asking this, but how many of you know the song first called *The Sounds of Silence* and later renamed *The Sound of Silence*? Perhaps you recall this song from the sixties. It was written shortly after the assassination of John F. Kennedy. Without elevating the song to the level of the sacred, I believe that Simon and Garfunkel were expressing their belief that life may be tragic when lived in silence – not just any silence, but rather the silence of loneliness, and the silence of broken relationships. The song is a commentary on society where we live compartmentalized lives – cut off from each other and ultimately from ourselves. Paul Simon described the song as “a societal view of the lack of communication.” At such a time we may become keenly aware of the silence of God ...or that God seems to be silent. The silence of God is perhaps best described as a feeling that overwhelms us when we hope for a word from God, and nothing comes.

As I just mentioned, it had been 400 years since Israel had heard God’s word. For centuries the people had been waiting, and searching and dreaming for God’s word. They wouldn’t settle for more political words. They wouldn’t settle for more economic words. They wouldn’t settle even for religious words. They yearned for great dreams that could only come from one inspired with the word of God. They looked for the return of God’s

spirit, but to no avail. Where was God when they needed God? What did God want from them? Israel had begun to believe that God was silent.

“This silence was broken by the voice of John the Baptist in the wilderness,” declares Albert Nolan. John the Baptist, a very unusual reclusive person, a rough and salty individual, declares that the kingdom of God is at hand and proclaims the need for repentance. For those who are willing to hear John the Baptist’s message it seems as though the silence is being shattered by the Baptist’s voice and the word of the Lord is being heard once again. “The Messiah is coming,” John declares, “Get your lives right!” However, this is not the word that God’s people are seeking; this is a different word.

For the Jews of John’s day John the Baptist’s sermon is not the anticipated word of comfort; it is a word of judgment ...it is not a word of acceptance; it is a word of warning. It fails the test as a word of liberation, vindication, or restoration. It is not surprising that to this day the Jews await the coming of a Messiah or “The Prophet” who will speak a word of vindication and liberation on God’s behalf. But not so for Christian people, for whom the misperception of the silence of God was shattered when John the Baptist preached his first sermon on the banks of the Jordan River.

Now a question for us to consider: “When we experience or feel that there is a tragic silence between God and us ...is there any good news at all?” The good news on this Third Sunday of Advent is that – in spite of what we think and feel – even in the silence there is a voice calling to us ...sometimes from a very dark place in our lives ...imploping us to get ready, to make room in our lives, for the presence of Christ. By listening to that voice, that word, we are acknowledging that we are not forsaken, we are not alone, and we are definitely never abandoned in a silent wilderness.

Our problem is that, more often than not, we neither look for the presence of God nor pause long enough to hear the voice of God. How then do we quiet our lives long enough to hear God? Pursuing jobs with incessant and often incredible demands, attending to families that require our focus, and participating in our church ...the question is: when and what do we stop in order to hear God? The answer is: when we stop all the noise we are making and make our way to the quiet wilderness we will come upon a strange person and listen to his

uncharacteristic, unconventional way of preaching ...and we will hear God's voice.

As John began to speak God's word to the people, we are told that great crowds developed. It reminded them of the prophecy of Isaiah that someday one would come who would be, "The voice crying out in the wilderness, 'Prepare the way of the Lord.'" They came ten, twenty, thirty, forty miles to hear him preach. They came out from their cities and into the wilderness. What did they come to see? A reed shaken by the wind? No. They came out to see a prophet and more than a prophet. They came out to see a man who had found the powerful presence of God in the wilderness. They came to listen to a voice that was shattering the silence of God.

If ever there was a relevant moment to hear John the Baptist, it is today. People are searching, and they will come to anyone who has an authentic word from God. On this Third Sunday of Advent the word of the Lord is clear. The Lord says to you and me, "Go into the wilderness and become clean. Go into the wilderness and be cleansed ...your mind, your imagination, your heart, your actions, your words, your habits ...all cleansed!" Jesus himself went into the desert. Jesus was baptized in the desert and immediately he went further into the desert for forty days and forty nights, preparing for a new mission, for a new life, for a new ministry in the noisy cities.

"Where is the desert?" you ask. "Where is this wilderness?" The wilderness is where God lives. The wilderness is any place where a person becomes absorbed in the powerful presence of God. The wilderness is where anyone is alone, totally alone, really alone, with the ultimate issues of life, death and eternity. The wilderness is in reading the Bible, in receiving the sacrament. The wilderness is in a prayer and a still small voice. Sometimes it is in a hovel or a hut. Sometimes it is in a closet or counseling session. Sometimes it is on a mountain ledge or on a sandy beach. Sometimes it is in an apartment or hotel room. The wilderness is always where the cross of God is invisibly present. The wilderness is where God is, and where God can cleanse our polluted minds and imaginations and hearts and values and habits and anything else inside of us.

The wilderness is silence and quiet. It is the elimination of the sounds of television, radio, iPod, MP3, CD or DVD player, stereo, cell phone, Blackberry. It is the elimination of

the voices of mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters, friends, and co-workers. It is the elimination of the racing tape of my own mind that absorbs my thoughts. The wilderness is quiet. It is utter stillness. It is being alone with God. It is for a moment, for a minute, for a month, being still, absolutely still...and listening. God speaks in the wilderness of silence. The city, the street, the workplace, the classroom, the gym, the sports venue is so noisy, so busy, so crowded in our minds. The wilderness is silence and God speaks to us through the silence.

The difficulty is listening for the word of God when there are so many other voices clamoring for our attention. In Henri Nouwen's book, *Life of the Beloved*, he writes: "It certainly is not easy to hear God's voice in a world filled with voices that shout: 'You are no good, you are ugly; you are worthless; you are despicable; you are a nobody – unless you can demonstrate the opposite.' These voices are so loud and so persistent that it is easy to believe them." (pg. 26, 27). Nouwen openly admitted that he kept refusing to hear God's voice that was speaking from the very depths of his being ...the voice of God that was saying, "You are my beloved, on you my favor rests." You will remember that these were the words Jesus heard when he came to the Jordan River to be baptized by John.

Nouwen explains that in his own life this voice had always been there, but it seemed that he was more eager to listen to other, louder voices saying: "Prove that you are worth something; do something relevant, spectacular or powerful, and then you will earn the love you so desire." But Nouwen continues: "Meanwhile, the soft, gentle voice that speaks in the silence and solitude of my heart remained unheard or, at least, unconvincing."

In the wilderness, if we stay long enough, we will actually hear the voice of God shattering the silence ...God's voice saying, "Be washed. Be cleansed of the pollution of resentment, rage, and revenge. Be washed of whatever is hurting your life and the lives of others. Hear my voice, 'Your sins are forgiven; go and sin no more.' Hear my voice, 'Love one another as I have loved you.' Hear my voice, 'You shall love God with all you have inside, all your heart, mind, soul and strength...and your neighbor as yourself.' Be quiet. Be still."

In the wilderness, you finally can see the stars and hear the sounds of the wind. In the quietness of the wilderness, be still and you will hear the voice of God that shatters the

silence with good news of the One who has lived and loved, healed and helped, died and risen ...the One who is to come ...again!

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.