

2 Lent – 28 February 2010 – The Rev. Madelyn L. Betz

Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18 • Psalm 27 • Philippians 3:17-4:1 • Luke 13:31-35 • Second Sunday in Lent • February 28, 2010 • St. Thomas, Hanover, New Hampshire

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

This morning I would like to talk about silence, acknowledging the oxymoron in that thought. What I want to talk about is how we incorporate silence into our Sunday morning worship, what it means to do so and what each of us might do with the silent spaces. You may have noticed that those spaces, in the midst of our corporate worship week by week, moments of intentional silence. Before the service begins, before the Collect of the Day, following the sermon, before the Lord's Prayer, and at the Fraction (when the bread is broken).

On a regular basis, our liturgies offer us glimpses of a balance of doing and being. The call for silence before each service, for example, is an acknowledgement that we need time to set aside 'our world' and focus on God. We can use those moments to pray – either our own prayer or one of those from the Prayer Book [see Prayer Before Worship on BCP p. 833, for example], to settle ourselves from the week past and be at peace, or to just be quiet and listen for God to speak to us. Other silences give us further opportunity to offer ourselves or listen to God. We are in corporate worship, therefore the time for quiet may seem quite inadequate. The Church's hope and belief is that we each also take time on our own during the week to be quiet with God.

So why do we do it—why do we make that space in our corporate worship? Why don't we just get on with the service? Following the sermon, for example. The idea is that, as we sit quietly for a few moments, perhaps a word or phrase from the sermon will linger, perhaps a question or a picture. The idea is that, by being quiet, we open a space for God to speak to us. In any short period of silence, we might focus on a word or phrase just spoken; we might remember those for whom we would like to pray; we might just allow God to love us in the silence; and remember that Christ is dwelling within us. Within silence, we can allow God to lead us, perhaps in new ways.

We heard today in our Old Testament reading that Abram was dissatisfied with his relationship to God. He had gained wealth, but he wanted something more than that. He had received from God and now was going to take matters into his own hands. When he brought this before God, Abram explained that he knew more than God knew about the future. It is very easy for me to be like Abram—so busy planning out the details of the future that I am apt to miss the opportunity to be surprised beyond my imagining. To Abram's credit, he did listen as God corrected his thinking and Abram was opened up to embrace another way.

When he listened, Abram learned something new about God and about himself, and he thus serves as an example to us of righteousness. Abram was in right relationship with God because he believed God.

We probably can also relate to our Old Testament story from God's perspective. We have probably all, at one time or another, wanted to do something for someone, but because the person didn't listen or was in some other way unwilling, we were unable to proceed. In our Gospel story today, Jesus is a giver of the gift of compassion. We can almost see him shaking his head and hear the sorrow in his voice as he says, "Jerusalem, Jerusalem," sorrow mixed with resignation. Jerusalem, the city that seemed to keep doing the wrong thing with God's gifts. Jerusalem was a city that had been at the center of prophetic words for centuries. The prophets' messages were not easy to accept and as the symbol of the beloved of God, Jerusalem had rejected God's messengers time and time again.

Yet Jesus' compassion is clear in the example that he gives. He loved Jerusalem for all that it had been and all that it could be. His compassion was maternal.

The picture of a hen gathering her brood is a picture of protection, of caring, of standing up to an enemy. And how often he had desired it. “But,” Jesus reminds them, “you were not willing!” What a terrible truth—that all it takes to thwart God’s compassionate love is unwillingness.

What irony there is in Jesus’ words! “See, your house *is* left to you.” In other words, “Be careful what you wish for.” I shall give you what you wanted. The city will be left to you, on your own terms. The people may have thought that Jesus was acknowledging that Jerusalem would get it right in the end and welcome him in. We know though, in 20/20 hindsight, what later happened in Jerusalem after the people said, “Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.”

God’s words to Abram and those spoken by Jesus invite their hearers into the fellowship of God’s family. Abram and the people of Jerusalem had surprises in store. The invitation remains. If we desire a connection with God, a response is necessary. We must be willing.

So when we who are leading our services leave space for silence, what we intend is to make a space for God. Quiet *is* conducive to listening. And right now we have the added Lenten image of the wilderness, which is an overlay to our observance of a quiet space. We balance moments of silence in our worship with words and with gestures. I think that entering into silence is a gesture of the heart and I think we can all benefit by that gesture. To stretch out one’s arms is to welcome, to be vulnerable, to embrace, to

open oneself. Entering into silence is to *do* all those things with the heart. It also is a gesture—to welcome God, be vulnerable, embrace, open oneself to God.

The gesture on our part invites connection. It is a willing response. The Psalmist said, “You speak in my heart and say, ‘Seek my face.’ Your face, Lord, will I seek.” [Ps. 27:11] It has been said that in the asking is the receiving, in the seeking is the finding, in the knocking the door is opened. With more hatred unleashed on the world this week in the form of suicide bombs and yet more earthquakes, there is much that we don’t understand about why things happen as they do. And I think it is ok to ask God ‘why?’ It’s productive to connect ourselves to God in order to do that asking. And silence is a space where we can meet God. I believe God waits for us there. I believe he waits with surprises beyond our imaginings. “You speak in my heart and say, ‘Seek my face.’ Your face, Lord, will I seek.”                      Amen.