

Speaking into the Silence

(Luke 2:1-20)

Sermon delivered by The Rev. Matt Rhodes at Christ Church, Millwood, Virginia
Christmas Eve, December 24, 2017

In the name of one God – creator, redeemer and sustainer. Amen.

I've been thinking about this evening's passage from Luke throughout Advent. I've been pondering the sense of immediacy in the narrative: the census is ordered; Mary and Joseph travel to Bethlehem; Jesus is born; angels appeared to the shepherds; the shepherds appeared in Jerusalem to worship the child.

There's not really a place as we read this where there's a breath, a place where there is a pause between actions. They're called; they go; there's a birth; there's an announcement; the shepherds visit.

But for me, this night has always been one of silences. There were the Christmas Eve visits to my paternal grandparents for dinner and the gathering of gifts to take home with us. I have very vivid memories of cold, crisp nights and beautiful starlit skies with no sound at all. I remember the annual 5:00 pageants at the first church I attended in Lynchburg, when there was a feel of expectation of what was about to happen – and there was a palpable silence in the sanctuary before the first young lady from the children's choir began to sing "I Wonder as I Wander."

Moments of silence were part of my Christmas Eve experiences. And as I looked at this passage, I've been wondering where the moment of silence was in Luke. Where was the pause in this story – that moment when the world held its breath in anticipation of what was about to happen? It was a question I posed to the group gathered recently in the Parish House for the final dinner of our Advent series.

A member of the group gave me an answer that brought me up short, and it was one that changed my perspective. The answer, they said, was that the moment of silence – the moment of holding our breath – comes ***after*** the birth of Jesus.

That answer marked a significant shift for me. I realized that rather than the silence coming before, in the midst of a moment of ***wondering***, it comes after – in the midst of a moment of ***wonder***.

Mary is exhausted, giving birth to her first child after a long journey to Bethlehem. Joseph is on edge, feeling the stress of not only responding to the emperor's decree and caring for a wife, but now seeing in this baby seeing someone to care for and raise. And on this night, in a stable in the middle of a crowded city, silence breaks through the noise of the animals

and the people and of the life going on throughout Bethlehem. It is the silence of awe, the silence of wonder. It is a silence that comes when Mary and Joseph realize that all that God has proclaimed has come true – and that there, before them, lies the tiny child who will sit on the throne of David and rule over the house of Jacob.

There is the silence. And in fields far away, there is another silence – the silence enveloping a flock of sleeping sheep, and the men and boys tending to it. And it is into this moment of quiet that wonder again breaks in. The news of the birth of the Son of God, the arrival of the Messiah, is proclaimed in the silence by a chorus of heavenly voices.

What is remarkable about this event is that it runs counter to the established Roman traditions of the day – but it is very much in line with the message and methods of God. At that time, the birth of one who would become emperor was announced by poets and orators in the palace. Here, it is not the rich and influential in the center of power who first receive the news. It is a group of the poor and marginalized in a darkened meadow who receive the news of Jesus' birth from a messenger of God.¹

God sends his Son to live among those on the edges of society, to heal them and preach to them and share a vision of the kingdom. It seems only fitting that those who first receive the news of the birth are those for whom the one born will be so meaningful.

It is into these moments of silence, these moments of awe, that God speaks. He speaks into the silence in that stable through the voice of a tiny child, a humble entrance for one who will make earthly kingdoms shake and change the hearts and minds of many. He speaks through the voices of the angelic chorus who break the silence in that field.

On this Christmas Eve, as we go our separate ways to our homes, families and friends, stop and find the moments of silence. Look for those times when all is calm and quiet. And when you find them, stop and listen.

The next sound you hear may very well be the voice of God, calling you to proclaim the Good News!

Amen.

¹ Fred Craddock, *Luke* (Interpretation Series), p. 35.