

“But the LORD is in his holy temple; let all the earth keep silence before him.”

Dear Friends in Christ, and fellow redeemed:

Do you have a “perfect” Christmas Eve? What would be your ideal Christmas? My most memorable Christmases are the first ones with my wife and children. When Brenda and I celebrated our first Christmas as husband and wife we didn’t have money for a tree and lights. But we had a silver tree that had been donated to the seminary, and the revolving 3 colour spotlight that came with it. The tree was kitschy, but it was a wonderful Christmas, anyway. Then there are the first Christmases with each of my children. They were each unique and special, although like most parents we only seem to have pictures of Joshua’s first Christmas, and a few of Jessica. I’m not sure if we have any of Joanna’s first Christmases.

And yet, the Christmas Eve that most often comes to my mind as the most beautiful, the one that would be on the cover of a Christmas Card, was one while I was still in high school. After the wonderful celebration of the birth of Christ in the annual Carol Service at my home church, I went to visit with friends (alright, it was my girlfriend and her family). It was rather late (or very early, depending on your point of view) when I left their house to walk home. But it was a lovely night for walking. It was a calm night, with gently falling snow, the kind of snow I call Christmas Eve snow: beautiful, fluffy flakes that are light and falling just enough so that everything was covered with the blanket of white. It wasn’t really cold, and there was a beautiful moonlight that gleamed off the fresh snow. There was no traffic; no ruts in the snow; not even many footprints, other than my own. The world looked so calm, so peaceful. Parties were over and people were in bed. I really was alone. What really stood out for me was the silence of that night. There was none of the hustle and bustle that had led up to Christmas. I know I even thought of the words of the liturgical verse which says, *“When all was still and it was midnight, your almighty Word, O Lord, descended from the royal throne”* It was a truly beautiful Christmas Eve.

We have an image of that first Christmas night in Bethlehem being filled with this wonderful calm, too. We paint a picture of this sleepy, little town where people have curled up for the night, as snow falls gently down. The holy family gathers in the manger, where even the animals observe a revered quietness. But it wasn’t like that. It is true that Bethlehem didn’t have all our electric lights and 24 hour coffee shops, but it wasn’t nearly as quiet that night as we like to think. Remember what was happening in Bethlehem at this time. This small town had suddenly become overcrowded, as people came to be counted in that census that Caesar Augustus decided to take. That’s why, we are told that Mary *“gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.”* (Luke 2:7, ESV)

Remember, too, that the first Christmas was not being celebrated by the people of that town. For them, it was business as usual, as they carried on the routine of their lives. People were unaware of the events that were taking place in that stable. They didn’t know that the Saviour of the world was born. But they did know that there was work to be done and animals to be fed and paying customers waiting for their services. The first Christmas wasn’t really like the images we have in our mind: it was probably more like the ruckus that Boxing Day has become.

There is an old expression which says, “The more things change, the more they stay the same”. I think that our Christmases today have become more like that first Christmas than we would care to admit. There is the busyness of our lives, and the noise and commotion that is all around us. Like the people in Bethlehem that night, we are so caught up in the bustle of life, and the things we want to do that we can even miss the great miracle that is Christmas.

We need some silence in our lives. I don’t mean just the silence that can come from noise-cancelling headphones. We need the sound of silence in our lives and in our celebration of Christmas. We need to marvel in silent reverence at the awesome wonder of the Almighty God leaving the glory of His heavenly throne to come into this world of sin and sorrow. We need to listen in silence to the voice of God speaking through His Word. We need the silence that He brings, so that we may know the calm and peace that so often escape us in this noisy, crazy world. It is God Himself who speaks through the prophet Habakkuk to tell us: *the LORD is in his holy temple; let all the earth keep silence before him.*

We have heard it said that silence is golden. But silence is a rare commodity in our world today. Cell phones and MP3 players

allow us to have music with us everywhere we go. We don't just watch tv anymore—we do it with surround-sound speakers that fill the room. Sirens blare as emergency vehicles rush down the street, but people don't hear them because they have a 1,000 watt stereo in their car that is turned up so loud it shakes the cars for a half mile in all directions. Children don't even learn to sit quietly in school or church anymore. We have to be busy; we have to be entertained. We have to have music and noise all around us.

That is why it is so hard for us to be silent before the Lord who comes to us this night. We gather here to sing the carols that people love. We come to rejoice in the great and wonderful news of the angels, that a Saviour is born. We come to give thanks and praise to the Lord Jesus Christ, who comes to help us and save us. But do we remember that we are here to come into the very presence of that God who left His throne to be among us? The prophet Malachi said: ***“the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple; and the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts. But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears?”*** (Malachi 3:1-2, ESV) How do we—sinful, imperfect human beings—dare to stand before the almighty, holy Lord of heaven and earth? We need to be silent before God, because of the great shame that should fill us when we think of the sin that so rules our hearts and lives. We have nothing we can say before Him, because we are all guilty. We cannot stand in His presence, because we are not the people we should be. Oh, we like to excuse ourselves by saying that we've never killed, we've never cheated on our spouse, or we've never stolen anything. But sin is all that we do in thought, word and deed. The very same Jesus who comes to us at Christmas reminds us how often we have failed before God. Jesus tells us that if we hate someone or call them a fool this is as bad as murder. He tells us that if we have looked at another woman or another man with impure thoughts, then we are guilty of adultery. If we don't help or care for others in their needs, then we have stolen from them. And we can go on and on to show our imperfections against all of God's commandments. We should hang our heads in shameful silence before God.

Even as we stand in shamed silence, there is another silence that fills the believing heart, as we remember why Christ is born among us. St. Paul says: ***“The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost.”*** (1 Timothy 1:15, ESV) We stand in silent awe of a love beyond anything we can even begin to imagine. We cannot stand before the presence of the Lord, but that same God comes to be with us, to make His presence known to us. He comes to us so that we can come to Him. We will see His love and glory unfold before us as the Babe of Bethlehem grows to manhood. We will watch in silent wonder as the only sinless person who ever lived on this earth gives His life as a ransom for all sinners, including you and me. We will stand silent and tearful before the cross, as we remember all He suffered for us. And then, as we do yet this night, we will burst forth in shouts of joy as we live in the victory that Christ has won for us, as He destroys sin, death and the devil, and rises triumphant from the grave.

There is a hymn which says: *Let all mortal flesh keep silence and with fear and trembling stand; ponder nothing earthly minded, for with blessings in His hand Christ our God to earth descending comes our homage to demand.* (LSB 621, v. 1) There is silence as we come before this Babe of Bethlehem, our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. But with angels and archangels and all the company of heaven, we go forth to fill the world with the glorious praises of love and grace, given to us by our God. It is beyond all comprehension that God should come to us, that He should come into this world of noise and confusion; this world of anger and war; this world of hatred and selfishness. But He comes to us. He comes to call us to the quiet of His peace. He calls us to draw near to Him, to partake of His goodness and love. He calls us to His forgiveness and to the life only He can give. We come in silence before Him, but we do not remain silent. We praise Him with music and shouts of halleluiah. We ring the bells and we laugh with glee, for the Lord has come, and we have hope and life in Him.

Habakkuk is right, my dear friends. We need to be silent before the Lord, and not just on this night. In the loud clatter of this world, we need to take time for silence as we come into His presence. There is an old Bulgarian proverb which says, *With silence, one irritates the devil.* The problem is that we don't take advantage of this silence. We keep up the craziness of our lives, with little time for silence before the Lord. We are so caught up in the noise we don't find time for quiet with Him. The truly blessed life knows the silence that comes as we worship Him, hear Him, and to listen to Him. We need to come in silence before Him as we confess our failings. We need to stand in silence in awe of His love for us. Then, equipped and strengthened for the day, we go out rejoicing that Christ, the Saviour is born.

In the book of Ecclesiastes we are reminded that there is ***“a time to keep silence, and a time to speak.”*** (Ecclesiastes 3:7, ESV) We need to be like the man who prayed: *God, grant me to be silent before You—that I may hear You; at rest in You—that you may work in me; open to You—that You may enter; empty before You—that you may fill me. Let me be still and know You are my God.* Listen to the sound of silence, as we stop before His manger. Be silent as we stand before the cross, on which He died for you and for me. And then rejoice, be glad and sing as we gather before the empty tomb, knowing all that He has done to forgive us, to bless us and to bring us greater joy than the best Christmas we have ever had. Amen.