

*The Scriptures Behind the Carols, Pt. 2*  
***What Would It Take to Get You Quiet?***  
*Habakkuk 2: 18-20*

**First Presbyterian Church  
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Talk radio. Blogs. Posts. Tweets. Hey, you've got a Facebook notification: I just checked in at the Subway in the Exxon station in Breaux Bridge. I thought you'd find it crucial to know that. Gazing out at the vast sea of chattering humanity, have you ever had this thought: what would it take to get you to shut up? I mean, short of violence, what do I have to do to get you to close your cyber mouth and still your flapping lips? You've probably felt that way during a sermon or two!

Several years ago, I had the deeply fulfilling joy of walking through Muir Woods near San Francisco. The ancient redwoods tower hundreds of feet above you. Their needles make the forest floor a blanket. The air is so oxygenated from the trees that you breathe deep and feel the peace. The busy world seems absorbed into the peace of the trees who have lived through it all. Visitors naturally fall silent, hushed by the majesty. I feel like I am in a cathedral made by God to nurture his children. And suddenly a squawking voice pierces the air, "Joanie, where are we meeting for lunch? You know I don't like all that bread at Panera." A woman on a cell phone talked about nothing but herself in the midst of the deep mystery of the primeval forest. Is there anything that would make you stop talking?

The truth is I'm afraid of silence. It gives me two kinds of fears. One, that there may be nothing in the silence but emptiness. It might turn out that I am all alone in the darkness with no one there. Or, two, there may be someone there. It may be the one true God, and that God might speak. And what he has to say might not be what I want to hear. So for both reasons, the void and the God I want to a-void, I keep talking. More accurately, I keep the talk going. I keep the words and videos flowing from my screen. I keep the stats and the reports running. I can't be still five minutes without looking at my phone. What would happen if the information went silent and the talk stopped? There might be nothing. Or, God might speak. I might come undone. Or I might get remade.

The prophet Habakkuk understood our human chatter. He knew we keep talking in order to shape life in our own image. We keep the noise going in order to keep from hearing the call of the God who claims us. "Woe to him who says to

a wooden thing, Awake; to a silent stone, Arise!” We invest ourselves in so many distractions, hoping they will give us life. Awake, sports team and save me! Arise, financial portfolio and make me secure. Awake, perfect Christmas and fulfill me! But then the prophet calls us to a new awareness. He makes our phones die and screens go blank with this news: “The LORD is in his holy temple; let all the earth keep silence before him.” God has taken up residence in the world. The holy presence is here. Close your mouth in reverence. Silence your voice in awe. Be still, and know that he is God.

At Christmas, we celebrate astounding news. The Word, the eternal Son of God, became flesh and dwelt among us. He took up residence in the temple that was not made of stone. He filled the temple of his human body. He came to us as one of us. The Lord of life living and breathing in flesh and blood among us.

The Christmas carol that begins our musical this morning declares, “Let all mortal flesh keep silence. Ponder nothing earthly minded, for with blessing in his hand, Christ our God to earth descends, our full homage to demand.”<sup>1</sup> We are summoned to silence in order that we might receive the King of kings.

This ancient hymn concludes with a beautiful and surprising image. It takes us to the image of a king’s victory parade. In those days, people would line the streets to see the king in all his glory pass by. Chariots and armed warriors and bowmen would go before him, showing by *their* might how mighty was the king that commanded them. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, both Hitler and Stalin used to parade their missiles and tanks and soldiers through the streets, so onlookers could feel the fear of such a powerful commander. Closer to home, we line the streets of Stadium Drive to await our champions. We send the beautiful, athletic cheerleaders first. Then the high stepping band stirring us with the music. Then the coaches whose brilliant minds shape the game plan. Lastly our gladiators come themselves. Young men in the prime of life, who have worked out all year to be fit for the fight ahead. Seeing them dressed in their suits, you feel that, like Superman, they could flex their muscles and bust out of those clothes, so powerful is our team. Sure, they diminish the effect a bit by wearing headphones and chewing gum, but it’s still a powerful sight.

So the hymn imagines the hosts of heaven lining the streets as the King of kings comes forth to do battle for his world. Rank on rank of angelic powers go before him. What glory must the King have if such mighty beings precede him? But when the king comes forth at the end of the parade, we see a strange sight. He is not suiting up in armor. He is stripping himself. He is not riding high on a

chariot. He is growing smaller. The Son of God comes forth to reclaim his lost world. And as he goes, he disrobes. He strips himself of his omnipotence to become a helpless baby. He takes off his omniscience in order to make his way learning and growing as we do. He declines every divine prerogative and chooses to be worshipped by lowly shepherds. The eternal God goes forth to war by giving away every weapon but love. The angelic heralds trumpet forth: behold your God! And all we see is the infant in Mary's arms. "The LORD is in his holy temple, let all the earth keep silence." It turns out the temple is the flesh and blood of a little, fragile child.

He stops my mouth with this sight. In the silence, there is not emptiness. There is a Word. And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. And the Word that speaks demands my whole life. But not to destroy me. "God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him" (Jn. 3: 17). He comes to remake me. He becomes poor to make me rich. He becomes sin to give me the righteousness of God. He demands I give up my idols. But only so that I can know how he loved me and gave himself for me. Let all mortal flesh keep silence. For we do not need to fear the silence. God is there. And he speaks. And what he says is Love.

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<sup>1</sup> "Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence from the Liturgy of St. James (4<sup>th</sup> c. Trans. Gerard Moultrie, 1864)