

St. Andrew's Episcopal Church
Last Sunday After The Epiphany Year C
The Rev. Barbara Hutchinson

I sense his electric energy, although I can only gaze upon him through the gaps in the crowd which swarms toward him, jammed against his body, wanting to touch him, to feel his presence, and to listen to his every word.

I watch him from afar; I don't know quite what to make of him. He can be as gentle as a patient mother stretching her arms wide for her toddler to run into her warm embrace; or as abrupt as a harried housewife, exhausted with interruptions, who snaps at her child, with words she instantly regrets, words as sharp as swords, which pierce something deep within him.

The early morning fog has settled over the village. A dampness alights upon my bare forearms and I feel soothed and prepared for a day that will become too hot by the afternoon. As I strain my eyes to see through the fog, I see this person, still far away, begin to murmur to a just a few, one, two, or three of them, coaxing them to follow, silently slipping away from the crowd, I the only one to notice.

Something inside compels me to follow. I've never felt such urgency before, but here it is, so I go, half-hidden in the fog, as I follow this small group up the mountain. Their feet drag along the dirt, compacted and worn smooth by the many travellers upon this path. Their shoulders slump, their heads flop downward. They are all weary. Two of the three hang on his side, one on the right, and one on the left. They never seem to give him even a moment to breathe by himself. I would find this suffocating. Maybe he does too, for, every once in awhile, he stops, kneels, and seemingly does nothing, yet when he stands up, his step is firmer.

We hike for what seems like an eternity, following behind him like sheep. My muscles ache, my throat is parched, I long for the sweetness of the fog to saturate my skin again, but we left it behind miles ago. I strain to hear their conversation, but they are too far away. My urge to be with them is overcome by my need to rest and I find an outcropping of rocks to settle behind. When I awake restored, there's a crispness to the air, which enlivens my spirit. The light has shifted, casting distinct shadows of the lonely trees onto the path. I rest in each moment of shade, few and far between, on the final ascent to the mountain top.

When I arrive, it is as though I am watching a play unfold before me. The curtain has lifted and there's a brightness and boldness to the colors, beyond my comprehension: vivid violets, brilliant blues; radiant reds; outrageous oranges; gleaming greens, and well-lit whites.

I first notice the three companions, reclining and resting after a wearying climb to the top. I wonder what they're dreaming of, for they have a pleasant look upon their faces, as if they

are about to wake from a dream they don't really want to wake up from, for it is so marvelous.

Suddenly, before my stunned and weary eyes, another curtain is lifted, and there is a brilliance that pierces the moment. Although I can hardly imagine the meaning of the words I unknowingly utter, I know it's holiness, not sunshine, which floods the scene. Instinctively, I cover my eyes with my forearm, the intensity is so blinding. My heart settles into the bath of light and warmth offered to me, and the luster moves within.

The one who everyone follows is talking to some people, who suddenly appear from stage left. They pick up a thread of a conversation they must have previously had, for there were no introductions, no greetings, just familiarity and conversation, moving the action forward in the plot of the story.

The three awaken slowly, simultaneously, as though they each heard the same stage director's cue. They rub their eyes to push away the sleep and to make sense of what they see. Are they still dreaming, or is this real? The taller one, more robust and energetic, must have said something ridiculous, for the expressions of the others he's talking with are dismissive.

Suddenly, the scene has shifted again. We are in deep darkness. It happened as quickly as a fog rolling in from the sea, beginning with a few wisps of cloud, only to, within moments, become a denseness that envelopes us all.

The urgency I had to follow this group up the mountain has returned. I need to be fully awake, for I can tell this is a pregnant moment, filled with truth and new beginning.

A bellowing voice, commanding and clear, with an intensity born before time, speaks emphatically and piercingly to all of us, even me, the one not originally included. "This is my beloved Son. Listen to him."

A profound silence seizes our hearts. We have become mute. There are no words needed, available, or appropriate. Silence is all we can offer to pay tribute to what we have experienced. I know I want more. I crave more. I strain my ears for more. It doesn't feel like enough, but this is all that we have been given, the command to "Listen to him".

Without direction, and instinctively, we trudge together down the mountain, no one particularly noticing me or caring that I had joined the group. It seems almost natural to be along, with the one I had previously only watched from afar. We journey in silence. Not just an absence of words. But silence. A state where all other words, thoughts, desires, or images, seem to pale in comparison to what our heart is experiencing.

When our feet touch the familiar, compacted dirt of the well-worn path leading into our village, I don't yet know what we'll do. I want to tell the whole world what just happened and yet I don't, or can't, or am not willing to yet.

When we see and hear and listen to Jesus, do we feel mute inside, or do we feel compelled to tell the whole world what happened?

The scriptures tell us, after hearing the voice of God, the disciples, "kept silent and in those days told no one any of the things they had seen."

Do you ever wonder why? There can be many very good reasons: it seemed too weird to tell, it felt too private, it can seem surreal, once they got down off the mountain.

I've been in all those places too, when I've experienced the presence of God or listened to the voice of Jesus. It feels like a natural response to hold the sound within. But is it a faithful response to stay there forever, not offering the part of Jesus shared with us with the rest of the world?

My question today is: "Is silence a faithful response to hearing the voice of God, whether that happens to you in a mountaintop experience, in the nitty-gritty stuff of real life, in the valleys, the low points of our existence, in the fields or woods or busy cities we find ourselves?" Is silence a faithful response to the movement of God in our lives?

Silence can be a faithful response to listening to Jesus, if it causes us to listen more closely to others. Silence can be a faithful response to listening to Jesus if the silence shapes and strengthens our own voice to speak out more strongly against injustice. Silence can be a faithful response to listening to Jesus if it helps us attend to the words placed upon our hearts by God, which refuse to go away, and which pull us into our true selves and toward our vocation. Silence can be a faithful response to listening to Jesus' voice if our holy hush is due to reverence and remembrance of the glory of God overpowering our hearts and souls.

I understand the temptation to be silent for if we say aloud what Jesus is speaking to us, we then have to boldly live into it. We have to give up our comfortable life for the change Jesus is inviting us into. Our lives are less complex and far more orderly and logical if we don't listen to Jesus' voice. For when the curtain is lifted, when the words of Jesus reverberate within our hearts and souls, and we say them aloud, something shifts, and the words must become actions, revealed within our lives.

For if we hear the compassion of Jesus, we must direct our hearts that same way. For if we hear of new life spoken to us by Jesus, we must pivot our lives away from the old and embrace the unfamiliar new. For if we hear the love of Jesus, we must dig deeply in our souls and eradicate the disease of hatred, fear, and aggression. For if we hear the mercy of Jesus, we must extend it to others.

It is risky business listening to Jesus' voice, because we are always changed by an encounter with the holy. Let us be changed today, when we listen to Jesus saying, "Take eat, this is my body which is given you. Do this in remembrance of me". Let us take Jesus within us, allow Jesus to change us, allow ourselves to be Jesus in the world.

Today, let us listen to Jesus' saying: "Take, drink, this is the blood of the new covenant which is shed for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins. Do this in remembrance of me."

Let us leave our worship forgiven, restored, and made whole by the glory of God, so that we may shine the light of a healed people into the world so others may know this grace.

Lydia, the woman who follows the disciples and Jesus up to the mountaintop, walks down the mountain, also changed, by the vision, by the glimpse of the holy, by the silence, by the profound yearning now in her heart forever to meet Jesus again and again. May we also yearn to meet Jesus again and again and allow his voice to speak boldly and clearly through our lives into our world. Amen.