



Text: Luke 1:67-79 (Ps 46:10)
Series: "Tidings of Comfort..."
Title: Part 1 – The Comfort of Stillness
Date: November 30, 2008
Place: First Baptist Church, Olds, AB

The "sons of Korah" gave us this simple and memorable spiritual advice. They were worship leaders in the temple in Jerusalem and their direction to us is...

"Be still, and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth." Psalm 46:10

Many other Scripture writers give us the same counsel regarding the importance of quietness and stillness before God.

The prophet Isaiah wrote...

- "In repentance and rest is your salvation, in quietness and trust is your strength," Isaiah 30:15

King David understood the profound value of times of stillness and reflection. He wrote...

- "Be still before the LORD and wait patiently for him;" Psalm 37:7
- "But I have stilled and quieted my soul; like a weaned child with its mother, like a weaned child is my soul within me." Psalm 131:2

Outrageous topic at this time of year – silence, stillness, quiet! We have things to do! So much to do, so little time to do it!

- We have school Christmas concerts to attend – a thing of the past for me, now, but for many of you they are still very much a part of your lives.
- We have Christmas parties to plan and attend
- We have family get-togethers – I'll be heading to Europe in two weeks to spend a few days with Hudson before he returns to Canada.
- We have baking to do & lights to put up and....
- Presents to buy! – Even with the threat of recession hanging over our heads, we're still buying, although perhaps more modestly than in the past.

Cf. Phil Galaway in Making Life Rich Without Money

- While trying to program his VCR he thought: Can you believe how much technology is out there that we never asked for?
- "Who said we needed split-screen televisions, freeze frame remotes and fancy delay features on our dishwashers? Who said we needed clocks that make coffee, satellites to find our car keys and cameras that talk? I love breadmakers and microwaves, but what I'd like more than anything right now is to lie down for a full hour without the phone ringing. I've been trying to



program my car radio since 1986. I've been reading instruction manuals since before that. This is the Aspirin Age and my head is pounding. If I had the time, I'd sit down and write a letter:

Dear guys who come up with more stuff:

Please stop. We're fine. We have enough RAM in our computers and enough room in our trunks. Our jets go fast enough now. Please work on an invention that slows us down. That brings families together. That cures diseases. I'm still trying to figure out my e-mail.

Some of you are probably thinking: *It's Christmas and you have the gall to talk about stillness at a time like this!!!*

-and isn't the church one of the offenders at making this season more hectic that it should be?

After all, we have Sunday school Christmas plays to practice! We have Christmas Eve services to plan! We have Carol Festivals to attend! We have decorations to hang! We have Christmas Banquet tickets to sell...

By the way, have you got your tickets for the Banquet &/or concert with Ben Crane on Dec 19? But I digress...

Yes, we have lots to do at Christmas time, but churches are also places where silence should be valued, as well as activity.

It reminds me of the story about a young brother and sister who were sitting in church. The little boy giggled and sang and talked out loud.

- Finally his big sister had had enough: "You're not supposed to talk out loud in church," she said firmly.
- "Why? Who's going to stop me?" her brother challenged.
- The big sister pointed to the back of the church and said, "See those two men standing by the door? They will 'cause they're hushers."

One of things I've learned about finding times of stillness is that we need to be intentional about seeking stillness & quiet – it won't "just happen."

"Be still and know that I am God" (Ps. 46:10)

- might seem like a gentle call to quiet – but the original Hebrew is a little more aggressive.
- It's closer to: "Stop!" "Enough!"
 - "Stop what you're doing & listen to me!"
 - "Enough stuff! Enough activity! Enough planning! Enough!"

Christmas is a wonderful season but the wonder can easily become "I wonder if I'll make it through."



I want to call us to balance this morning and for just a few minutes, I want us to stop and reflect on the important truths of the season.

My thought this morning is a simple one and it's this: **By stopping to reflect, even for just a few moments, we can capture the truly Biblical wonder that this season is intended to celebrate.**

- You might not have huge chunks of time to dedicate to reflection – your days are “go” from the “get up!”
- But does that mean that reflection and silence is out for you? No.
- I believe that we all have opportunities for stillness & reflection, even though they may be short ones, that can help us order our lives according to God's priorities.
- I was talking this week with a truck driver and suggested he use those long-haul drives as an opportunity to listen to Christian radio teachers or slip in an audio Bible CD.

According to the Bible, the birth of Christ should be a perfect time to talk about stillness. **Think of the role that stillness played in the life of Christ himself.**

Following a day of intense ministry, Mark tells us that: “Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed.” (Mark 1:35)

There is **a pattern of seeking quietness & reflection** in Jesus' life.

- He began his ministry with 40 days in the desert (Mt 4:1-11)
- When he learned of the death of John the Baptist, he withdrew to “a lonely place apart.” (Mt 14:13)
- After the feeding of the 5,000, he “went up into the hills by himself” (Mt 14:23)
- After healing a leper Jesus “withdrew to the wilderness and prayed.” (Lk 5:16)
- When the 12 returned from a preaching mission he instructed them: “Come away by yourselves to a lonely place” (Mk 6:31)
- And before his most important work, the work of carrying the world's sin and sorrow in the cross, he sought out the solitude of the Garden of Gethsemane and prayed (Mt 26:36-46)

Jesus' pattern was to seek silence & solitude to commune with His Father – to keep himself on track with the will of the Father & to fellowship with Him.

Think of the carols of the season that speak about stillness – they are calls to reflection on the true, deep wonder of the birth of Christ:

- *Little Town of Bethlehem*



- “How still we see thee lie, above thy deep and dreamless sleep the silent stars go by...”

- “How silently, how silently, the wondrous gift is giv’n...”

- “*Still, Still, Still,*” (Austrian carol) “he sleeps this night so chill”
- “*It Came Upon a Midnight Clear,*”
“the world in solemn stillness lay to hear the angels sing”

And of course, the carol of all carols:

- “Silent Night, Holy Night, all is calm, all is bright,...

Of course there are carols of great joy!

Joy to the World,
O Come All Ye Faithful, Joyful & Triumphant,
Good Christian Men, Rejoice

But the songs of stillness remind us that there are two sides to the season – stillness and joy.

What I’m calling us to is balance – I don’t want us to throw away the great, rich celebrations that express joy, but it seems to me that we also need to incorporate times of stillness and reflection into the season.

Not only do the carols of the season speak about stillness, but have you ever **noticed how stillness is built into the story of the birth of Christ?** Elizabeth, Mary & Zechariah -- each of these people spent quiet time in preparing for the birth of Christ.

- 1) **Elizabeth** – she spent 5 months in seclusion (Luke 1:24) after she became pregnant with her son John
Why? She was preparing for the birth of her son, John – meditating on the kindness of God in giving her a child in her old age.
- 2) **Mary** – she spent 3 months visiting her cousin Elizabeth after the angel’s announcement to her that she would give birth to the son of God.
Why? She was preparing for the birth of her Son, Jesus – reflecting on the angel’s words to her, telling her that she would be the mother of the Messiah, God’s promised Saviour.
- 3) **Zechariah** – he spent 9 months in silence following the angel’s announcement to him of the birth of his son, John.
Why? Well, let’s find out. Let’s read Zechariah’s story from Luke chapter 1...

Read: Luke 1:5-20 (NIV)



Notice Zechariah's question: "How can I be sure of this?" (1:18)

Why was Zechariah silent for 9 months? Because Zechariah didn't believe the angel's announcement about the birth of his son, John – let's not be too hard on him, would we believe it?

- They were "advanced in years." (v.7) – a polite way of saying that he was an old man and that Elizabeth was an old woman
- They had prayed for a child (v.13), but it was probably an old prayer
- Perhaps he had given up the hope that God would answer his prayer
- He probably hadn't prayed it in years, why else would he respond the way he did to the angel's message?

Do you have an old prayer that hasn't been answered? Maybe you've stopped praying for it because it's been so long:

- A child that isn't walking with God ?
- An old heartache that isn't resolved?
- A reunion with family that's been delayed for years?
- Some deep longing that remains unfulfilled?

God hasn't forgotten it!

Because of his unbelief, God placed a silence upon Zechariah as both a sign AND a discipline.

- Zechariah's silence was a sign that would demonstrate the powerful reality of the angel's words – they will come to pass.
- As a discipline, Zechariah's silence would give God and Zechariah time to talk.

Not only was Zechariah unable to speak but he was probably unable to hear as well.

- 1) 1:22 "unable to speak" – word can mean both deaf & dumb
- 2) At the birth of John, the neighbors came to celebrate and to share in the naming of the child: What name to give the child?
 - Eliz. – "John" – but no one of that name in their family.
 - "Then they made signs to his father, to find out what he would like to name the child." (1:62)

Zechariah was like the man described in Psalm 38:

**"I am like a deaf man, who cannot hear, like a mute, who cannot open his mouth; I have become like a man who does not hear, whose mouth can offer no reply. I wait for you, O LORD; you will answer, O Lord my God."
Psalm 38:13-15**

For 9 months Zechariah waited on the Lord.



For 9 months Zechariah was shut in with no one to talk to except God – now that’s stillness!
Just Zechariah & God – a simple two-way communication without interruptions.

Back in the days when churches were always open for prayer, a pastor once noticed a man sitting in the sanctuary of the church.

- Curious because the man didn’t seem to be doing anything – not even praying, just sitting
- Finally the pastor asked the man, “What are you doing there for such a long time?”

The wise, simple man replied: “I look at Him, He looks at me and we are happy together.”

That’s the beauty of stillness!

And that’s the kind of stillness and communion that God and Zechariah had for 9 months.

AND WHAT A CHANGE IT MADE IN ZECHARIAH!

That time alone with God brought Zechariah in line with what God was about to do through his son, John and through Jesus Christ.

In fact, you notice as you read Zechariah’s song of praise that it doesn’t focus on his son, John, but on Jesus.

A time of stillness can help us direct our focus to where it belongs – on Christ and not on ourselves.

At Christmas we get so easily caught up with ourselves

- our wants
 - our families
 - our friends
 - our plans

But Zechariah illustrates for us a practice that will help us to keep the “Christ” in Christmas in our own lives.

Zechariah’s words are full of what Christmas really means – I would recommend that you take a few moments this week to read this little song of praise over to reorient your celebration of the season to God’s priorities. Let’s walk through Zechariah’s psalm of praise together...

"Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come and has redeemed his people." Luke 1:68



In the birth of Christ God has come to earth to save His people. Matthew, in his account of Jesus' birth, tells us that Jesus is "Immanuel," which means, "God with us." (Matthew 1:23)

There is a truth that is worth reflecting on for a few moments this Christmas season. As one writer put it years ago: "He whom the universe could not contain lay gurgling in Mary's lap."

"Joy to the world, the Lord has come, let earth receive her King."

"He has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David (as he said through his holy prophets of long ago)" Luke 1:69-70

God kept his promise to send a Saviour

- "The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight."
- For hundreds of years people longed for the Messiah – he had finally come!

"salvation from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us -- to show mercy to our fathers and to remember his holy covenant," Luke 1:71-72

Christmas happened because of God's great love & kindness

"his holy covenant, the oath he swore to our father Abraham: to rescue us from the hand of our enemies, and to enable us to serve him without fear in holiness and righteousness before him all our days. And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High; for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him, to give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins," Luke 1:73-77

In reflection, Zechariah saw clearly how his life fit into God's plans

- His son would be prepared the way for the ministry of Jesus
- How does my life fit into God's plans?
- What is God doing through me?

"because of the tender mercy of our God, by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the path of peace." Luke 1:78-79

Peace, the watchword of season – what the angels declared to the earth on the night of Christ's birth.

Where do you & I find times for stillness and reflection in the midst of such a busy season?

Cf. The "little solitudes"



Let me suggest that you write out or photocopy or highlight this passage in your Bible and read it three times this week:

- a few moments in the morning before the family rises – set your feet on the floor, read these verses over and commit your day to the Lord.
- The morning cup of coffee before you begin your work day – silently read them at home or at work
- The drive to work – turn off the radio & cellphone – spend some silent time meditation – record it on a cassette & play it in your car stereo
- In the evening, slip outside and walk around the block, marvelling at the stars and the lights and read these words under a street light
- Drop in to the church this week – we’re open from 8:30 to 3:30pm – spend a few moments in the sanctuary reading this passage.

Another tool for reflection that I want to give you this morning is a devotional booklet called, *“Emmanuel, The Glory of Christmas.”* Max Lucado & Charles Swindoll have prepared a devotional guide that is perfect for the busy person at Christmas. It contains 30 days of short Scripture readings and brief reflections that you can begin any time – they’re not dated. But why not begin today, this afternoon or this evening, or if not today, then begin tomorrow morning. You can pick up a copy of the booklet on your way out this morning.

Remember – unless we’re intentional about cultivating stillness for reflection, it won’t “just happen.”

Here is a taste of what awaits you in those moments of stillness & reflection...

“In repentance and rest is your salvation, in quietness and trust is your strength,” Isaiah 30:15

“Be still before the LORD and wait patiently for him;” Psalm 37:7

“But I have stilled and quieted my soul; like a weaned child with its mother, like a weaned child is my soul within me.” Psalm 131:2

“Be still, and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth.” Psalm 46:10

- **Prayer & Invitation to Prayer ministry**
- **Song:** Hope of the Nations
- **Benediction**