

Sermons at Saint Paul's

Creating Peace through Spiritual Nourishment and Service in the World

The Eve of the Nativity: Christmas Eve/December 24, 2016

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We sing “Silent Night” on Christmas, and though the night might be silent, we shouldn’t be. In our lesson from Isaiah, the prophet posts sentinels on the walls of the city who shall *never* be silent. I thought of this, this past week, in the lead-up to Oprah Winfrey’s interview of Michelle Obama. I missed the interview but caught one of the commercials where Mrs. Obama used the phrase “live out loud.” It was new one to me. It means, be yourself and let others take you for who you are. When criticized for being an angry, black woman Michelle Obama responded, “OK, well, let me live my life out loud so that people can then see and then judge for themselves.” She turned her attention to young people, women, and minorities. Too often they underestimate themselves, she said. Don’t hide your beliefs. Don’t apologize for them. Just put them “on the table and let people deal with it.” Live out loud. Find your post along the wall and never be silent.

The prophet’s sentinels live out loud. They are to remind the Lord. That is, they are to repeat what was previously brought to mind, the promise that God has for peace on earth. God created the earth in beauty, and in reply the earth rejoices, as is sung in the psalm. In each case God is re-minded. Our praise of peace and joy are reflected back to God.

We are image-bearers. We bear the image of the angels’ peace. We take God’s praise and mirror it into the world. We echo the wisdom of Creator embodied in Jesus and carried by the Spirit into our little piece of the planet. We live it out loud. Our purpose as human beings is to be active in contributing to the world’s and one another’s wellbeing. Our role as believers is never to be silent. We are to live out loud.

There is a kind of resonance that goes on between God and humankind when we join in God's purpose of wellbeing. The Bible begins with God speaking or singing the world into existence. In the beginning God said, "Let there be light;" and there was light. And then, the light reflects its glory back to God. Creation resonates with the word of God. It reminds God. It echoes back the peace and praise of the Creator.

I think that is what we mean by soul. The soul is not a particular part of the body. It is the whole body when it resonates with God. God brings to mind wellbeing and we re-mind God by living peace out loud. That is soul, when we resonate with God. The biologist Rupert Sheldrake pictures resonance this way. "The classic image is the sympathetic resonance of stretched strings. I like hearing the sympathetic resonance of pianos," he said. "If you lift the lid, press down the sustaining pedal, and chant 'ooo' into the piano, it will say 'ooo' back to you. If you chant 'aaa' into a piano on the same note as before, the piano will say 'aaa' back. These vowel sounds differ in their pattern of overtones, and the different strings responding to these overtones resonate to give the vowel sound back." Soul is what resonates with God. The overtones of peace are spoken into the world and we respond, if we have soul, with that same peace. Peace resonates with the Source of all that is. The German theologian Jürgen Moltmann wrote, "Cosmic vibration is the origin and ground of all forms of matter. The vibrating breath of God is, as it were, the note to which the creation of the world is tuned." We sing "Silent Night" on Christmas, and though the night might be silent, we shouldn't be. When we are resonant, when we have soul, we give the sound of God's peace back.

Prior to our reading from Isaiah, there is a lament. The people are not in tune. There is no resonance. "We all growl like bears;" the prophet says, "like doves we moan mournfully. We wait for justice, but there is none..." (Isa. 59: 11) The people are small-minded and miserable. But just then someone becomes resonant with God's promise. Maybe it is a soul-singer and the song is: "For darkness shall cover the earth... but the Lord will arise upon you, and his glory will appear over you..." (60: 2). Centuries later, Mary and Joseph are pushed to the edge. Caesar Augustus forces them on a long journey to Bethlehem where there is no space for them. They are disadvantaged without

the security of a home. One might expect them to be hardly resonant, out of tune. But it was there that Mary brought forth her firstborn son, the very image of God's peace.

And at that time there were shepherds, busy about other matters, keeping watch over their flock by night. One could hardly think of less important people. And yet the angel of the Lord came upon them. After they get over their fear, they resonate with trust. The most modest of us can live out loud. Every one of us has soul, if we keep ourselves in tune. The angels sing, "Glory to God... and on earth peace." The shepherds make this known abroad. They mirror God's peace to the world, and the world wonders, and peace resonates; it ripples out further and further. The Christmas story is about living out loud.

The trick is we have to be in tune. Whether we are a mother, or of modest means; whether as Mrs. Obama says, we are young, or women, or minorities, we can resonate with the wellbeing of God. We all have soul. I think the reason we come to church is to get tuned up! The psalm says, "joyful gladness (has sprung up) for those who are truehearted." To be truehearted means to be in tune. It is then we can be capable of reflecting back to God, and sounding into the world, the Creator's joy and peace. Come to church and get in tune, to live out loud the good news of joy and peace.

What does it look like to be in tune, to be resonant, to have soul? The letter to Titus describes it this way. God gives to us an unlimited mercy, and so we become merciful. We mirror that mercy. Jesus would later preach, "Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy." We are tuned to the vibrating sound of mercy. When the Savior who is God's Word appears, we are saved. We resonate with the freedom and forgiveness of God's goodness. God's grace tunes us up. We are justified or aligned with God. We respond to the overtones of God's love and echo them back. Finally, to have soul and live out loud is forward-looking. We "become heirs according to the hope of eternal life," the Letter to Titus says. Eternal life is the life of God – peace on earth, compassion, beauty. To live in hope is to bear the image of these things.

So Christmas is a silent night but not a silent people. To come to Jesus is to live out loud – like the sentinels on the wall, like the shepherds at the manger. The Lord brings to mind peace on earth, and we re-mind, that is, we echo back that same peace. Yes, sometimes we get out of tune and there is no resonance. We become small-minded and not re-minding. Then, come to Bethlehem, the Spirit calls, and get in tune with God’s peace. Hasten to the manger and feel the vibrating breath of God in Mary’s first born. Come to church and get tuned up to behold the glory of the Lord in everyday moments. In this way may your lives be resonant. May they have soul. Live out loud. Show mercy, be free and forgiving, have integrity and hope, so that as Michelle Obama said, “people can then see and then judge for themselves.”

Amen.