



June 24, 2007

Birth of St. John The Baptist

## “The Sound of Sheer Silence”

Elijah is on the run. Queen Jezebel is hot on his heels. He’s in a state of fear. In fact, he’s ready to pack it in – cash in his chips and ride the Big Chariot to his resting place. Ever felt like that? Cockburn has a verse in *Pacing the Cage* that captures this world-weariness.

Sunset is an angel weeping  
Holding out a blood sword  
No matter how I squint I cannot  
Make out what it’s pointing toward.

Sometimes you feel like you’ve lived  
too long  
The days drip slowly on the page  
You catch yourself  
Pacing the cage.

With the blood of the Baal prophets still dripping from his own sword, Elijah has had it with life, perhaps with his own violence, and certainly with being a prophet of the Lord. He takes refuge in a cave. He’s wondering where God is in all of this. A storm passes. Perhaps the Lord is in the thunder and lightning? But no. Then an earthquake shakes the ground beneath his feet. Perhaps this a word from the Lord? But again, no discernible presence.

And then the storm and the earthquake pass, leaving the whole earth in a state of silence. Elijah listens to the “sound of sheer silence”, and

there finds the Holy One. The *sound* of silence? Isn’t silence, well...silent? Isn’t it simply the absence of sound?

When is the last time you *heard* the silence? Eleven years ago, traveling across the prairies to get to our new home in Vancouver, we stopped at the childhood farm of my mother. We visited the local cemetery that was on their land. That’s when I heard it. The sound of silence. O, there were redwing blackbirds singing, and crickets rubbing their legs, and frogs croaking from a near-by slough. But under all those noises, around, within, and through all these sounds was the palpable presence of silence. Silence, I learned, is not the absence of sound. It’s the presence of stillness. It almost has a weight. Silence is a cave that surrounds us, draws us inward, and stills us.

Fortunately, it caught me off guard, because had I known it was coming, I would have found some way to avoid it, I’m sure. This is a curious thing about humans. We avoid that which the soul craves. And seek out that which is ultimately destructive of peace. Make no mistake; I was aware of my soul craving this silence. It was drawn like a magnet, like a horse to water. Before I could defend myself against the palpable silence, I was

apprehended. I had no time to steel myself against it.

Why, I wonder do we run from what might heal us? For the same reason, I suspect, that Elijah was on the run. Fear. Not of Kings and Queens that are out there chasing us. But from voices of authority we've internalized – stories our culture tells us about who we are – consumers who need more of just about everything, a crowd to be entertained by celebrities, cogs in an economic machine. In the silence, the stories that culture tells us about who we fall away. And then there are our personal shadows chasing us – a traumatic childhood, fear of being exposed, of not being loved, of being inadequate. Silence threatens to reacquaint us with an alien self – a natural divine self that is a center of creativity, that loves to play, that wants to move, that loves life and wants to throw its arms around every thing and every body, because this self knows it's all a sacred gift. Spirit waits within the silence to return us to life and love and wings and the gay, great happening, illimitably earth – to use e.e.cummings line. Silence threatens us with new life.

Silence is where God catches up to us. The greatest source of noise in our lives is not the construction site that is Vancouver, British Columbia. It's not traffic or the TV. It's the not I Pod dangling from our collective ears or the Harley Davidson rumbling down our street. It's the noise that goes on inside our head. It's the cave of neurons and grey matter we carry

around with us in our cranium. Incessant thoughts and images, obsessing about what happened yesterday or how we want it to go tomorrow, and endless worrying. I came across a great line the other day: "Worry is prayer for the kind of the world we don't want." We're creating this world all the time. This is the noise that drowns out the silence.

I know this because it's what I have to contend with every time I settle myself down to prayer – to empty my mind so that God can catch up with me in the silence. We so easily confuse the activity of our brain with who we are – if this is true then who am I when I'm not planning, worrying, thinking? Who am I when the sound of sheer silence calms the voice of fear that I confuse with Bruce Sanguin? Well, that's the spiritual journey, isn't my friends? Discovering who we are when we aren't living in fear. When we stop running. Perhaps I'm the one – and you are the one, who, in the silence, is able to witness the thoughts and feelings and images as they come and as they go. Maybe all the mental noise is just the tip of the iceberg we think of as ourselves, but our deepest nature lies hidden under the surface. Maybe, we're sons and daughter, of the Holy One. Perhaps, if we take just a few moments every day to listen for the silence, even in the midst of the hubbub, we'll discover the all-pervasive Presence that wants only to love us – and for us to realize our truest identity as beloved.