

SECOND SUNDAY OF CHRISTMAS
Jeremiah 31:7-14
Ephesians 1:3-14
John 1:1-18

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It is so good to be with you this morning – I can't tell you. It's been three weeks since I've worshipped with you, and I have missed you, especially at this important time of year.

We won't soon forget this very strange Christmas of 2008. I've marveled at your snow stories – of neighbors helping out; surprise visits from kind friends; of hunkering down at home for a quieter, simpler Christmas; or forging through the snow to make that special dinner happen after all. Stories of getting around... slippery sidewalks, city buses skidding, tire chains breaking, flat tires, and SUV-driving angels providing transportation when nobody else could get through. Flights were cancelled, some hoped-for guests couldn't come, but for all the things that didn't happen, there were those great ones that did. Snow angels and snow forts, cross-country skiing and snowboarding in the streets. The sweetness of reading books or playing games with the kids, just messing around instead of always rushing around.

And household chores. Let me tell you, a person can get a lot done around the house when you're stuck there for seven days! Shirley Rasmussen was so bored she baked up extra batches of spritz cookies. I actually got my Christmas cards ready before Christmas, which doesn't usually happen. But I'll admit to a certain amount of frustration, being housebound. I realized again how extremely task-oriented I am.

You too, I'm sure. We are so accustomed to doing and accomplishing, measuring our worth by the things we make happen. Our culture is a busy and noisy one that feeds this cycle. Commercials are designed to raise our anxiety so we'll keep on getting and spending. The news is full of conflict, the more conflict the better, because excitement is what keeps people hooked in. Living in the city we love the daily rush and bustle, but the energizing rush can also keep us distracted from what is most essential.

In truth, many of us have learned to avoid stillness and silence. Televisions chatter in the background of our homes. iPods fill our ears with private concerts. Radio broadcasts accompany our commutes. Noise has become our habit. And the noise from outside us can be matched by a commotion from within – the clamor of a worried mind, or a troubled heart. The restlessness of a preoccupied spirit.

In contrast, this season of Christ's birth calls us to reclaim silence and stillness. It calls us to pause in the rush to sense the quiet, holy entrance of our Lord into this overfull life of ours. To let God's goodness fill us with awe at the gift of our Savior.

One of the most silent times I know comes in the early morning when new snow has fallen. Remember? Everything is blanketed and muffled. Traffic is stilled, even the highways quieted to a hush. What a treat it is to put on some boots and walk out into that quiet, still world. Watch the flakes falling without a sound, floating down without a whisper, settling into soft mounds that absorb all noise. And in the stillness we notice things in a new way. Our senses are sharpened to the beauty of ordinary things.

It is said that Brother Lawrence, a simple monk from the 1600's, was first drawn to God by the sight of a leafless tree in winter. In the stark, quiet winter light, every branch of that tree stood out as an intricate sculpture. Somehow it spoke God to him. It spoke of life stripped down and bare, waiting for God's providing hand to waken it. That leafless tree opened his spirit to the Creator.

We have been there, in the place of holy, open quietness. In the silence of a household in the early morning when only you are awake, and the sun is just coming up. In the companionable silence of a quiet evening when you are alone and glad to be. In the silence of prayer when there is no need for words, only resting in God's loving presence.

How we long for those rich moments of silence and peace. Attentiveness. Openness. Clarity. Quiet and calm. But the longing within us is even deeper than this. Silence alone is not enough to nourish the soul.

In fact, silence itself is not always a gift. Silence can be a thing that separates people from each other and from God. I'm thinking of the silence of loneliness, the phone that never rings, the doorbell that's never used, the apartment that is *too* quiet. I'm thinking of the sad and empty silence left behind when someone you love has died. Or the weary, destructive silence that comes when people give up trying to speak to one another and give up trying to listen. There is the silence of anger, when stubborn egos refuse to communicate. There is the silence of hostility, when people or nations retreat from one another in suspicion. We know how tempting it can be to close ourselves off in silence. But this is not a silence that soothes our souls; it is a stillness that paralyzes them.

Into both the silence and the commotion of our lives, God speaks. In the birth of Christ, God breaks the silence. God bridges the distance. Into the silent, aching need of our experience, God brings the message of love in the person of a Savior.

The promise is right here in our scripture from John – this mystical, poetic hymn to Christ:

*And the Word became flesh and lived among us,
and we have seen his glory,
the glory of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.*

Scripture says that *Jesus* is the Word that God speaks into our lives. Jesus is God's message of hope and love and salvation, come to us in person.

I get a mental image of the voice of Almighty God, speaking a resounding, cosmic Word of love out over the universe, God's words echoing out through space: "Hear this: I love you. I created you. I am with you." And then I get the image of God's same loving message pressed down into the life of one human being. Jesus, who through his life did say to the world in the most personal and human way: "God loves you. God created you. God is with you."

Jesus lived a life that radiated caring and sacrifice, a life full of healing and teaching and courageously reaching out, a life that kept shining with God's love even to the cross and then rose out from the grave, still shining. In the life of Jesus, the world has witnessed God's message of hope and love "made flesh." And people on earth have finally said: "Now we hear what God's been saying to us. Now we see God-- in the life of Jesus."

As the scripture says: *No one has ever seen God in person, but in God's only Son, Jesus, we have seen God. We have heard the voice of God speaking eternal love to every one of us, and to the whole human family. We have heard God speaking peace. We have heard God speaking hope. So we no longer live in the place of sad and weary silence. Or in the place of confusing, worldly noise. Instead throughout our days we carry on a loving conversation with the God who talks with us, who listens to us, and who lives with us, and us with God, now and forever.*

The birth of Jesus Christ is a still point in our moving world. A moment of mystery when God becomes human, entering into our clamoring life with a peace only God can give. In this eternal Savior, God gives us a way to experience the peace that passes all understanding, the peace that is more than rest or stillness or calm or quiet – the peace that comes from being loved and accepted and cherished forever by the One who created us. Our hearts will always be restless until they find their rest in the still point of God's eternal love.

In the midst of a busy world that often seems like just so much noise, our Savior invites us to "Be still and know that I am God."

And living in the promise of the Word made flesh, we hear a saving message from beyond ourselves. God's Living Word inviting us into relationship with the One who loves us best, and loves us always.

Amen.