

Sarah Kretzmann
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When I was a little girl, the highlight of my Christmas vacation was going back to Ohio to visit my grandparents. You've heard me describe them before—they were my anchor growing up. My grandmother, in particular, I adored with every fiber of my being. Christmas vacations were marked by her mincemeat pie, which I detested but ate because I loved her that much, playing with the Lite-Brite by the light of the Christmas tree, and terrible asthma attacks triggered by the vast multitude of dogs and cats that constantly ran through their parsonage. But at least when I had an asthma attack, Grandma would let me sit on her lap for hours, and we would look through this old Viewmaster together, peering at black and white photographs of the village in Germany where her family came from; also there was a photo of a lady in high heels with feathers in her hair, but she never volunteered an explanation, and I never asked for one.

But the highlight of Christmas vacation for years for me was the annual *Boar's Head and Yule Log Festival* at Trinity Cathedral in downtown Cleveland. We stood in line for hours in the driving snow just to get in.

This festival is based on a medieval English Yuletide celebration, with pagan roots, wherein the wild boar, traditionally a symbol of evil, is ceremoniously presented on a huge platter with an apple stuffed in its mouth as an offering to the Lord of the Universe and eventually in honor of the Christ Child. The part I hated the most was when the supposed intoxicated peasants entered the cathedral, grabbing proper Protestant ladies from their pews and swinging them around and around while singing, "Here We Come a-Wassailing." One time when I was about ten years old, to my utter horror, they grabbed me and swung me around in their inebriated dance. After that, I never, ever sat on the end.

But the part of the festival that has always captivated me is at the very end, when the entire court (a cast of 150)—the drunken peasants, the regal Yoemen guards known as the “Beefeaters,” the shepherds, the wise men and their slaves, medieval knights and their elegant ladies, and sweaty cooks bearing huge platters of food high above their heads, all kneel, heads to the floor, in front of the tiny rustic manger where the infant Jesus lay...and as they kneel, the congregation, over 500 voices strong, sings “Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence,” the first verse of which you just sang moments ago before the reading of tonight’s Gospel. After the singing, there is silence, over 650 people seem to simultaneously hold their breath, for how long I do not know. I am sure it’s not for long, but it always felt like an eternity...king and peasant and knight and lady and sage and slave and an entire audience of sleeping children and men in suits and ladies in lipstick...all silent.

That silence was—and remains—indescribable, as silence must. But something about that must have deeply impacted me, because even 30 years later, it still moves me even to tell about it. What was it about that silence that was so stirring?

Silence doesn't occur often in our lives. In fact, it is a rare treasure. I don't mean quiet, I mean silence...the absence of any and all sound...the kind of silence where you become aware of the beating of your own heart and you swear you can almost hear the earth spin on its axis. That kind of silence.

Silence is even rare in the Bible. The longest, most profound silence is in the book of Revelation, chapter 8. A vast multitude of baptized saints stands in front of God. They have finished life on earth; they have been hungry, thirsty, they have been beaten down, they have wept bitter tears. And this huge multitude of people stand in front of God, and they look at

God and God looks at them...and suddenly, silence descends over heaven. A vast and profound silence. Heaven screeches to a halt, the city that never sleeps suddenly stops in its tracks. Heaven stops for nothing—there's no reason to...what would it stop for? A heavy snowstorm? An outbreak of the flu? Heaven stops for nothing. But here, it stops.

The doxologies of 100 million angels are hushed. The rolling wheels of countless chariots screech to a sudden stop. The galloping hooves of an army of white steeds come to a restless, stamping halt. The flapping wings of the angelic host, the cherubim and seraphim, suddenly freeze. Chanting voices of a countless throng of saints simultaneously hush.

And for half an hour—for 30 minutes—there is silence in heaven.

This multitude of people look at God, and God looks at them.

And they don't know what to say; indeed, there is nothing left to say.

And so there is just silence.

Why?

Because sometimes words fail. Sometimes words are limiting and inadequate.

Sometimes, love is so profound, that appropriate adjectives simply do not exist, and only silence suffices...when the intensity of love simply takes the breath away, and there are no words.

Tonight is such a night. Christmas Eve worship is a quiet, tender thing...For most, the favorite part of the evening is when we sing “Silent Night” by candlelight. It is an odd hymn to sing, if you think about it, because we sing about Mary and Joseph and their first night with their brand new baby son Jesus, where all is calm and all is bright...but I have spent three first nights with three different sons and those nights were never calm and bright! There was crying and sighing and funny baby body sounds. The first night with a newborn is many things—miraculous, yes, but also

scary...it is anything but silent, calm or bright. I can't help but think it was similar for Mary and Joseph. So when we sing "Silent Night," maybe we are not describing a silence that was, but a silence that will be...a silence that comes when we stand toe to toe with God, and we look at God and God looks at us and words run out and we are embraced by holy silence.

Tonight we stop, for just a minute, not thirty...to contemplate the unimaginable, to ponder the inexpressible, to laud that which cannot be articulated...the fact that God comes to us...that God wraps himself in our flesh, fills his veins with our blood....that God allows that flesh to be nailed to a cross and allows that blood to drain from his hands and feet...that he gives us his own crucified flesh and his own drained blood to eat and to drink in the most stunning demonstration of love...that he does this for every single person ever created, that he turns no one away from his kingdom of heaven, that he stretches out his scarred hands and welcomes the

drunken peasant and the royal king, the noble knight and the elegant lady,
the wise sage and the obedient slave, the dignified palace guard and the
sweaty cook, the CEO and the unemployed, the lowly private and the 5-star
general, the best that the world has to offer, and the worst that the world can
scrape up...all are welcome to this place called heaven, which is silent, for
30 extraordinary minutes.

Since the dawn of time, there has not been such a silence, what with
the explosion of the universe, the crashing of the seas, the ripping apart of
the continents, the eruptions of volcanoes, the earth-shattering cry of Jesus
from the cross and the tearing of the temple curtain and the splitting of the
rocks and the shaking of the earth...never before has God commanded
silence, never before has God stopped talking, let alone for half an hour.

In this silence, we do not find the usual ridiculing voices or the usual
self-contempt...in this silence, we encounter the quiet presence of God, we

encounter his peace. Be still, just for a minute...that peace is God's gift to you this night, a minute of silence, and that offers you a glimpse of what heavenly silence is all about, a peace that surpasses all human understanding, a peace that we long for from the marrow of our bones, a peace that announces the arrival of its Prince, that God's Word has finally accomplished that for which he came, that our lifelong search for words to describe what's wrong with us is finally over, that there is room in creation for beautiful silence.

A half an hour goes by quickly, even in heaven, and already the white steeds are stamping restlessly, the seraphim are reaching for their harps, the angelic choir is collectively inhaling, the din of heaven is about to resume...but for tonight, for just a brief minute, in this lovely church, with your beautiful faces illumined by candlelight, we savor a brief silence and ponder the miracle of a God who chooses to rub shoulders with us, and the

mysterious paradox of his all-powerful Word...that God while cannot
command our love, maybe for tonight he can command a brief silence, on
this silent night.

Sometimes words run out, and all you can do is look and wonder, like
a parent looks at the newborn baby, like new lovers look at each other, like
God looks at you, a silent place that exists beyond words, a time for the eyes
to trace the face, to behold, to admire...and if I see you half as beautiful
tonight in the candlelight as God sees you, I understand why he chose to die
for you.