SCRIPTURE:

“My soul, wait thou in silence for God only; for my expectation is from him.” — Psalm 62:5, ASV

“The Lord is good to those whose hope is in him, to the one who seeks him; it is good to wait quietly.” — Lamentations 3:25-26, NIV

MEDITATION:

While I’ve never audibly heard God’s voice, there are times when it seems like he is speaking and times when it seems like he is silent. We associate God’s silence with feeling alone and empty. Several years ago, I visited the Hoh River Trail at Olympic National Park wanting to hike to the location of the One Square Inch project. The founder, acoustic ecologist Gordon Hempton, claims that a sliver of space in the Hoh Rainforest is “very possibly the quietest place in the United States,” unmarred by any human noises.

As I began my hike, I thought about the irony that, historically, physical silence has been a spiritual discipline for people hoping to hear something from God. What about silence contributes to spiritual growth? Is it that it is restorative to eliminate the noise that fills so many of our urban lives? Or is it the discomfort we feel when silences get a little bit too long, challenging our notions of what it means to “hear from God”?

Before my hike, I sought silence of another sort in my own neighborhood. Just down the road, the computer device company Logitech creates and tests audio equipment such as speakers and headsets. At the heart of the facility is its anechoic chamber, a room designed to eliminate all acoustic reflections. Logitech’s chamber reads at zero decibels—by definition, the limit of human hearing.

Many people who visit anechoic chambers describe the experience as somewhat magical. Chris Watson, a wildlife sound recordist, described his experience: “There was a hissing in my ears and a low pulsing that I can only guess was the sound of my blood circulating.”

I entered the chamber through thick four-foot-deep doors. They were lined, like the walls, with foam triangular wedges. When I passed through, I saw a gap between the walls intended to prevent any vibrations from the main building. I stepped onto a wire mesh surface that absorbed each step like a taut trampoline, surprised that I could see through the floor down into more cushy wedges.
Left alone, I listened to every slow breath I took. The loudest thing in the room was my own ears faintly ringing, as if attempting to pick up some frequency when there was none discernable. A strange reverence washed over me. I didn’t just think it was cool. I felt it. If I swayed slightly, I could feel my head spin just ever so slightly. When in conversation, the sound stopped short of the mouth.

The absence of something certainly didn’t feel like nothing. In fact, it made me more aware of what was there. Most notably, myself.

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In the arts, silences are used to force contemplation or add dramatic tension. Daniel Levitin, a cognitive psychologist, writes in *This Is Your Brain on Music*: “One way of flouting expectation is to add unexpected silences, even very brief ones. The brain seems to find pleasure in adjusting itself to remain synchronized with the musical beat.”

Sometimes the tension of silence is resolved dramatically. I contemplated the 400 years of silence in the Bible—the period when God seemingly stopped speaking through prophets, ending when the Word became flesh.

Expectation punctuated by silence.

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As I sat in relative silence, I adjusted my expectation of God’s voice. I reminded myself that even his silence is part of his speaking. As loud as my breath, his handiwork was not only near, as perceptible as my footfalls trudging forward on the trail, but it was me (Ephesians 2:10).

As I looked out at the Hoh River, I listened as his voice rang out in buzzing yellow jackets, warbling birds, spruce seedlings sprouting from decaying logs, fog rolling into the forest bringing water and life—all of this is evidence that he is most certainly with us and also loudly speaking in the quietest places.*

**REFLECTION:**

1. Where were you last in a moment of true silence? What does silence mean to you: an actual absence of noise or a stillness in your soul—awareness of your rootedness in place and time?
2. In this strange season—filled with lots of noise yet also lots of pausing—how can you find the space to become more aware of what God already has for you?

**PRAYER:** Good Lord, thank you for your involvement in creation and our world. When the pauses feel unbearable and it feels like you’re being silent, remind us of the melody you’ve written so that our hearts may join in the song you are playing. May our lives sing your praises! Amen.

*A longer version of this essay appeared in Christianity Today’s *Behemoth* magazine.
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