

SILENCE
JOB 38:1-7, 34-41

Sometimes I am jealous of Abraham and Moses. It is not that I am clamoring to be the parent of a nation or lead a covenant people out of slavery, but every now and then, it would help if God said something audibly and specifically to me or were willing to part a sea, or at least traffic, for me from time to time. God's work is not for the faint-hearted. When I am jealous of Abraham and Moses, it is because God speaks directly to them. God says "go," and Abraham goes. God appears to Moses in a burning bush, and Moses does not find himself wrestling with the question, "Is this God's will?" Clarity of vision and strength of purpose go hand-in-hand.

It probably will not surprise you to find out that I am *not* envious of Job. I would rather celebrate the mystery of faith than suffer for being faithful and virtuous. From the beginning of the story until now, Job suffers silently. Sure, Job cries out in his suffering, and while you and I hear God speak in the beginning, Job does not. God's silence is frustrating, and when God finally speaks to Job, I am not sure how comforting or reassuring this is to him.

Scripture says that God speaks out of a whirlwind, a tempest, at a time when Job's cup is not running over, and when the Lord speaks, God is almost defiant saying: "Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?" If I am Job and not absolutely terrified, I would be almost as defiant as God seems, demanding answers to tough questions: "Words without knowledge, huh? Do you know why that is? Because you have not explained any of this to me!" How frustrating would it be to hear God reply, "Gird up your loins like a man," especially if one were a woman? Yes, this image of God is testosterone-filled, and one cannot help but wonder if Job, whose spirit is crushed, would not benefit from something other than "rub-a-little-dirt on it" love.

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Being God, however, is not the easiest job in heaven or on earth, and God confesses this Job: “Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Who determined its measurements? On what were its bases sunk? Who laid the cornerstone when the morning stars sang together and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy?” God does not expect answers from Job.

God’s questions are rhetorical, like one that Lydia asked during the 3rd quarter of last night’s football game. As we watched my alma mater play Forrest Gump’s, the Gamecocks silenced the crowd by staying within a touchdown until late in the game. At one point in the third quarter, I turned to Lydia and said, “What if Carolina wins?” And Lydia said, “What if we get a pet unicorn?” By asking questions, Job confesses his hopes and fears, and by answering them with another set of questions, God seems willing to share in Job’s suffering and for Job to share in God’s.

Yes, God suffers. God agonizes over the wager made in the beginning of the story. God suffers as Job suffers one crisis after another. Please note that God’s suffering is not related to sin, at least not God’s. In Isaiah, servants suffer. In Jesus Christ, God suffers as intimately and personally as any of us ever have or will, and even Christ, whose story is not unlike Job’s, is frustrated by God’s silence. Jesus feels forsaken. He cries out to God, and God’s responses in the New Testament are less explicit than they are in Hebrew Scriptures.

Something about silence is spiritual. Jesus cries out. God is silent, and the sins of the world are purged through Christ’s sacrifice. God gathers us to worship. In silence, we wait for God. We pray and meditate. We withdraw from the stresses and sorrows of the world to give thanks for the serenity that the Lord provides.

One opposite of silence is noise, and noise, at least as I have experienced it, is a hiding place, a cave into which one may crawl as an act of self-protection. Noise excuses us from thinking. It provides an alternative to acknowledging suffering or confronting its causes. Noise does not change anything.

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Rarely is it an agent of healing. Suffering is just beneath the surface and will take center stage when it is dark enough and quiet enough to listen to that which is deep within us and not that which is external to our experience. Clouds gather regardless of how much we crank up the volume: “Who has put wisdom in the inward parts, or given understanding to the mind?” Not you or I or Job. Wisdom and understanding are ultimately gifts of God.

Noise is not the only opposite of silence. Restlessness is just as distracting. We speak of “uncomfortable silences,” meaning silences that call us to sit with truth, often truth about the relationship with the person that seems to call for chatter. Silence is not the problem; discomfort with silence is. Being comfortable in one’s own skin is a mark of serenity and a gift of grace.

In that oft-quoted passage from Ecclesiastes, Scripture says that there is “a time to keep silence, and a time to speak,” and this phrase comes after “a time to tear and a time to sew” and before “a time to love and a time to hate.” Silence is situated between that which builds up and that which tears down. It is the fulcrum on which much of the stuff of life pivots.

Somebody somewhere probably taught you that if you cannot say anything nice about someone do not say anything at all. If this is related to a difference of opinion, I agree, but if it is related to domestic violence, I disagree. I am grateful to Paige Miller for reminding us that October is domestic violence awareness, because this is a subject about which we as a culture are too silent. In some cases, this silence may be attributed to fear. Reporting abuse may result in further abuse. In other cases, scars have cut so deeply and one’s soul is so bruised that it seems impossible to speak. Being abused causes one to question the existence of God and/or the faith that God has given to this person, and yet it is vital to remember to cry and cry out. Out of the depths, the psalmist cries. Job cries, and God responds, and even when God’s response seems less than satisfying, that does not change the fact that God loves us, and loving us, God suffers with us.

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In addition to being Domestic Violence Awareness Month, October is also Breast Cancer Awareness Month, LGBT History Month, National Hispanic Heritage Month, World Blindness Month, Down Syndrome Awareness Month and National Ultrasound Awareness Month among other observances and celebrations. As I go through this list, it seems to me that we, as a culture and a people, are embarrassingly unaware, and maybe that is because we talk too much and do not listen enough. We greet noise with noise when we should be listening or we are silent when the Word of God calls us to speak truth to power.

Job is not afraid to speak truth to power or maybe he is simply at a place in which he feels that he has nothing else to lose. Job screams and yells and begs and pleads, and at last God responds to him. God, in this story, does not always seem like the “mother who will not forsake her nursing child” or “the father who runs to welcome the prodigal home,” and yet God is faithful still. Throughout this story, God cites and recites the credentials acquired in creating the universe. God lays the foundation of the earth, determines its measurements and stretches sea and clouds on its face. This, in my mind, is the aspect of the story inspires awe and wonder and love and praise.

The scary part of the story is when God asks Job, “Can you lift up your voice to the clouds, so that a flood of waters may cover you? Can you send forth lightning(s), so that they may go and say to you, ‘Here we are?’” The same God who sinks the universe with a flood is the same God who protects Noah and his family. This same God protects Job if not his family, and this same God offers to abide with us, even if we, unlike Job, are unfaithful. God’s grace is sufficient.

Remember Job’s innocence in this story is a given. So is God’s love for Job. Listen closely to how this passage ends: “Can you hunt the prey for the lion, or satisfy the appetite of the young lions, when they crouch in their dens, or lie in wait in their covert? Who provides for the raven its prey, when its young ones cry to God, and wander about for lack of food?” Assurance drips from every word of this

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statement. God provides for ravens and human beings, for you and for me, as noisy and ravenous and restless as we are. God forgives our impatience, our reluctance to speak truth in the face of injustice and our discomfort with silence. Help us, O God, to wait patiently and listen closely to what you say to us. Help us to be still, to be grateful and to know that you are God. Now to the One who by the power at work within us is able to do far more abundantly than all we can ask or imagine, to God be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

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