

**Sermon Preached by Ms. Deanna Briody, McNulty Intern  
at Calvary Episcopal Church, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania  
on Palm Sunday, Year B  
March 24, 2024**

In the name of God, Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Many years ago, I was in conversation with a woman named Marwa. Marwa had lived a difficult life from childhood on, and now well into adulthood, she was asking questions about God, God's character, God's presence, God's existence. At one point in our conversation, I asked Marwa if she could articulate what it was that kept her from believing in a good God, if she could speak out loud what seemed to lie unspoken in her. "What keeps you from believing God is present?" I asked her, and being present, that he is full of love for you and for the world. Marwa pondered that for a while and eventually said, "What keeps me from believing God is here? What keeps me from believing God is love?" She looked me full in the face at that point, tears welling in her eyes. "He is silent," she said. In the face of so much evil, "He is silent." Marwa didn't know it, but her complaint over God's silence was not hers alone.

It's an ancient and perennial complaint, in fact, a difficulty that God's people have endured for millennium. If we turn to the scriptures, we see the lamentation over and the dread of God's silence rise and fall and rise again as the history of God's people unfolds. Here, just a few examples. Why are you silent, O God, while the wicked swallow up the righteous? O God, do not be silent, do not keep still, for your enemies have lifted up their heads. O God of my praise, do not be silent, for the mouth of the wicked is open against me. Though the context of each of these prayers and pleas is unique, the sentiment that runs through all of them is the same. The injustice, the wrongness of the world rings in our ears, and we are desperate for God to answer.

By answer, I don't mean we're looking to hear an audible voice, mind you, but we're looking for some kind of visible and timely response from the power that supposedly reigns over all the earth. We want to see divine presence, divine action at work. We want bad things to be addressed visibly, before our eyes. For those in the wrong to be put in their place. For those in the right to be cleared. For things to be fixed in a way we can see and feel, made good, made right, and in this way made comprehensible to us. But often God does not act in that way. Isn't this the case?

I'm sure we can all think of a time we have endured God's silence, God's ostensible inaction. We wait for justice, but we do not see it in our time. We hope for revolution, resolution, but it never seems to come. We look for a good end in a bad situation, a turn, an answer, an escape, a healing, a restoration, but the turn doesn't appear. The answer is obscured. The escape walled off, the healing uncertain, the restoration unseen. In other words, God is silent. Or maybe it's worse than that. Maybe God is absent.

Today is Palm Sunday, also called the Sunday of the Passion. It's a strange liturgy that we've observed here today, isn't it? We began our service by tracing the story of Jesus' earthly ministry to its gathering climax and taking our place alongside those who welcomed Him to Jerusalem as their Messiah, their anointed Savior. "Hosanna!" we cried. "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord." We sang all glory, laud, and honor to our Redeemer King. From there we proceeded to a garden called Gethsemane, where Jesus prays in anguish and His friends fall asleep while they wait. The garden where at last Jesus is betrayed and arrested. From there we traveled to the chambers of the high priest, where Jesus is questioned by the religious elite who plot to ensure the right verdict comes from the case, and then to Pilate's headquarters, where Jesus is questioned yet again, put before the crowd, sentenced to death, and tortured by a band of soldiers.

And lastly, we arrived at a hill called Golgotha in Aramaic or from the Latin, Calvary, where Jesus is nailed to two pieces of wood and raised up to hang until he suffocates and dies. This is no tame moral tale, is it? This is a drama, an epic, a tragedy with twists and turns so sharp they leave us breathless if we let them.

And while it is most definitively a particular story about a particular man, Jesus of Nazareth, who lived and died, it's also a story that echoes familiarly throughout history. The story of an unjust trial, the story of a lynching, the story of a false accusation, the story of a corrupt religious institution, of weak and destructive politicians, the story, in short, of a damning and damnable system. It's the story of evil at work in our world. And in this way, it's a story we all know all too well. And in our liturgy, in this story of evil at work in our world, we collectively are given a part, the part of the crowd that welcomes Jesus to Jerusalem and later ensures he is sentenced to death.

Our part changes in such a jarring way over the course of our liturgy that if we're paying attention we wind up with a kind of existential whiplash. We go from exalting Jesus' messianic call to demanding his condemnation. We go from singing "All Glory, Laud, and Honor" to screaming "Crucify Him." I've begun to wonder if this turn that we see in the crowd, that is in ourselves over the course of this liturgy, is at its deepest the authentic human response to God's silence. Because in the passion and death of Jesus Christ, God's silence, God's ostensible inaction, which has so troubled his people throughout time and space, takes on a literal and embodied shape. After all, this Jesus, who we've just hailed as our anointed King, our Savior, our only God, our only hope, he's brought before fallen earthly powers. He has given the chance to respond to evil. He's called upon to answer the wrongness of the world, to assert justice, real justice, so we think, once and for all. He's shoved into the lights of history, pushed onto the world stage.

And what does he do? Listen again. Many were bearing false witness against him, and the high priest stood up in the midst of them and asked Jesus, "Have you no answer to make? What is it that these men testify against you?" But Jesus remained silent and made no answer. They bound Jesus and led him away and handed him over to Pilate, and the chief priests again accused him of many things, and Pilate asked him, "Have you no answer to make? See how many charges they bring against you." But Jesus made no further reply. Six hundred men piled into the courthouse of the palace to watch Jesus be mocked. Several wrapped a purple cloak around his shoulders, the color of royalty, and fashioned him a crown made of thorns. "Hail, King of the Jews!" they shouted, striking him across the face, spitting on him, bowing in mock homage. And still Jesus was silent. And when he is lifted up on the cross, those who passed by derided him, saying, "Ah, you would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, save yourself and come down from the cross." The chief priests mocked him likewise, and even those who were crucified with him reviled him. And still Jesus was silent. In the face of so much evil, as my friend Marwa once said, the incarnate God is silent. He is accused. He is beaten. He is mocked. He is made into a spectacle.

And as the prophet Isaiah described, still, he opened not his mouth. And it's in the face of this intolerable silence, this agonizing inaction, that our cries of "Hosanna, Hosanna, blessed are you," become "Crucify him, kill the man." We have no need for a silent Messiah. I wonder if today's liturgy reveals something about fallen humanity. That is, about you and me, of which we do not often speak, especially in church. Jesus isn't really the God we want. Let's be honest, wouldn't we, on the whole, prefer a charismatic revolutionary to a naked Jew hanging shredded and lifeless from a cross? Would we not choose, more often than not, a celebrated social reformer over incarnate love, dying, humiliated, and friendless? My guess is that somewhere inside us, more often than not, we would prefer a different God than the one we find in Jesus. Because in Christ's passion and death, we do indeed encounter a silent God.

But this is the vital piece, sisters and brothers. Not all silence is equal. Jesus is not silent as a distant spectator is silent, watching unmoved from heavenly sidelines. And Jesus is not silent as a victim is silent, passive and helpless as unchecked powers rage around and over him. No, Jesus is silent as the Son of God who has become a willing sufferer. Jesus is silent as the Word that created heaven and earth and who nevertheless chooses, actively chooses to endure in his own flesh and blood the worst of the world's evil, the sum of human hatred and malice and to do so without objection. To share in our suffering, our despair, our forsakenness, our death without complaint, without resistance. I gave my back to those who strike, the prophet Isaiah records, and my cheeks to those who pulled out my beard. I did not hide my face from insult and spitting. No, I have set my face like flint. I know I shall not be put to shame.

This week, this holy week, we will enter the silence of God and dwell there. We will hear it in our liturgies, in the readings, in the spaces within the music. But as we journey through these days leading up to and following Christ's crucifixion, we will come by the grace of the Holy Spirit to see that when it comes to our God, when it comes to this Jesus, silence is not absence and stillness is not inaction. On the contrary, God is here pouring out his endless love, becoming our salvation. Amen.