

# Lives that Speak of God

A sermon preached by the Rev. Ledlie I. Laughlin  
Fifth Sunday in Lent ~ John 12:20-33 ~ March 24, 2021

For the past few weeks, Jennifer Turner and I have been in conversation with a number of “inquirers” eager to learn more – about St. Columba’s, the Episcopal Church, and what it is to live God’s love! Not surprising in light of this past year, questions arose about why God allows so much pain? The problem with faith is that we never know for sure. While we may find that faith in God is life-giving, essential, even – for some – the ultimate concern of their lives, the journey of faith is invariably marked by seasons of profound doubt and loneliness. For God is not always to be found or felt or present when we seek God. God has an unfortunate way of being silent.

The signs of God’s presence elude us; the voice of God is inaudible to our straining ears. The pains and crises of our lives prompt us to question the embarrassing absence of a God who is said to love us. Indeed, the volume of God’s silence has been sufficient to lead many to despair and has prompted many to abandon the enterprise of faith all together. For, we never know for sure.

There are some among us who have been fortunate enough to experience glimmers of God’s presence, enough to convince us that God *is*, enough to keep us awake, looking and listening for more. I do not assume this to be the case for everyone with us today; some may be looking for that first meeting, trusting that the church would long ago have disappeared were there not *something* to keep the rest of us coming. Maybe there are some who know God’s presence all the time, but such a one would be rare indeed. I certainly know that God is not always present to me. I traverse seasons of profound doubt and often experience faith as a hunger and yearning for God, rather than as knowing or apprehending.

For many, Lent is a season of earnest searching for God. Often, however, in those times we search most eagerly, God’s absence is all the more pronounced. When we aren’t paying much attention, we don’t notice God’s silence.

Silence, a novel by twentieth century Japanese author, Shusaku Endo, is set in Japan in the mid-sixteenth century. It is the story of a Portuguese Jesuit missionary sent to Japan at a time following a period of great flowering of Christianity in those islands. Now, however, with a change in the Japanese shogunate, the practice and teaching of Christianity is strictly forbidden, laws enforced by torture and death. Silence is the story of a priest who believes God is calling him to share the Gospel of Christ with the Japanese people, yet finds that those who profess faith in Christ are persecuted, subject to an agonizing death. His faith remains firm through most of the tale, yet the priest must rely on and be fed by past convictions and experience. For God is silent through out.

Following the governments’ cruel drowning of two Japanese peasant Christians who refused to step on a bronze image of Christ in an act of apostasy, the renunciation of their faith, the priest reflects. “What do I want to say? I myself do not quite understand. Only that today, when for the glory of God [the two men,] Mokichi and Ichizo moaned, suffered and died, I cannot bear the monotonous sound of the dark sea gnawing at the shore. Behind the depressing

silence of the sea, the silence of God ... the feeling that while men raise their voices in anguish God remains with folded arms, silent.”

After another man is sliced down, we are told, “What [the priest] could not understand was the stillness of the courtyard, the voice of the cicada, the whirling wing of the flies. A man had died. Yet the outside world went on as if nothing had happened. Could anything be more crazy? Was this martyrdom? Why are you silent? Here this man has died – and for you. You ought to know. Why does this stillness continue? This noon-day stillness. The sound of the flies – this crazy thing, this cruel business. And you avert your face as though indifferent. This ... this I cannot bear.”

At the end, the priest is broken; exhausted, defeated, forced – himself – to trample on the image of Christ and apostatize the faith that defines his very being. Many years later, the fallen priest living a seemingly meaningless existence, offers to another that which he technically can no longer offer, the absolution of sin. And the book concludes:

“The priest had administered that sacrament that only the priest can administer. No doubt his fellow priests would condemn his act as sacrilege; but even if he was betraying them, he was not betraying his Lord. He loved [God] now in a different way from before. Everything that had taken place until now had been necessary to bring him to this love. ‘Even now I am the last priest in this land. But our Lord was not silent. Even if he had been silent, my life until this day would have spoken of him.’”

The significant revelation of this conclusion is not the sense of reconciliation and a too neat summary that all that went before had been leading up to this. The significant revelation is the priest’s realization that God was not out beyond; rather, that God was somehow speaking through his life, that his life was the Word of God, that God was present because he was present: “my life until this day would have spoken of [God].” Our lives speak the Word of God, the presence of God. God is not silent if you are there. Even in our seasons of profound doubt and loneliness, the God we seek is reflected in and revealed through our lives.

Says Jesus, describing this mystery to the bewildered disciples, “Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their life will lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.” As many have realized, God’s presence is found most poignantly when we reach the end of our rope, when we hit bottom. True it is that a life of faith calls us to abandon much that we hold dear.

Recall the prophet Jeremiah’s teaching about the perseverance of God and the pathos of God’s love for us. Said Jeremiah, “This is the covenant that I will make: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.”

“According to an Hassidic story, several pious Jews once asked their rabbi about the fundamental creed of the Hebrew Scriptures, the *Shema*:

“Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one Lord; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and with all your might. And these words which I command you this day shall be upon your heart; and you shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. And you shall bind them as a sign upon your hand, and

they shall be frontlets between your eyes. And you shall write them on the door-posts of your house and on your gates.’

“The Jews asked, ‘Rebbe, Rebbe, why is it written that these words shall be *upon* your heart? Why not rather, *into* your heart?’

“The rabbi replied, ‘Because it is not within the power of man to put those words into his heart. All we can do is lay these words upon our heart so that, when our heart breaks, they can drop in.’” (Lawrence Jaffe, Liberating the Heart: Spirituality and Jungian Psychology, 1990)

Perhaps this is what happened to the priest, and to Jesus’ disciples before him. Perhaps this is what we await when God is silent. Alas, the prerequisite may be a broken heart. Yet each of us know, by experience or intuition, that our hearts shall be broken – if not yesterday or today, someday. Our hearts shall be broken because we love.

The key in all I have said is that the agency of faith is not ours but God’s. The one who writes God’s law upon our hearts is sometimes silent. But it is God, not us, who placed that law upon us; it is God who speaks through our lives.

Invariably, I begin each Lent with a list of good intentions, what I am going to do or not do, how I am going to change this or that, focus on this or that. Sometimes I realize that which I set out to do; sometimes I do not.

“By this Fifth Sunday of Lent, we are perhaps readier to listen to the Lord, more open to learn from Christ, more honest about *our* limits and *God’s* grace. At this point we realize God has brought us to this holy season so *God* may touch us and *God* may turn the church’s heart around and *God* may lead us from the ways of death to the ways of life.

“We begin this season quite confident of our ability to reform.” Just as the priest set out confident of his ability to proclaim the Gospel. “We will end it, God willing, less self-important and more humbled. We began Lent filled with all the good things *we* will do. We will end it, we pray, ready to declare all the good things *God* has begun with us..., ready to glory in God’s steadfast love, ready to die with Christ that we may be lifted up with [Christ].” May it be so with you.

