

## A WEEK OF HOLY TERROR: THE SOUND OF SILENCE

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Mark 15:1-15

Silence. Silence, when we think about it, is normally considered or perceived to be an absence, an emptiness, a lack. Yet, silence holds a profound power that resonates throughout the human experience. Silence is a space where thoughts come together, where inner strength is cultivated, and where unspoken truths find their voice. In a world saturated with noise, silence offers a refuge for introspection. Silence possesses an undeniable capacity to shape perceptions, to influence outcomes, and, ultimately, silence speaks volumes.

Through this season of Lent, of which we are in the fourth Sunday today, I've been preaching the sermon series called "A Week of Holy Terror," looking at the events from Palm Sunday to Easter Sunday, events in which we see the awful terror that was inflicted upon Jesus.

Our scripture for today continues the story of Holy Thursday. Holy Thursday is the day in which Jesus and his disciples celebrated the Passover meal together, and then, when it was dark, he led the disciples out of Jerusalem, out of the city, and up to the Mount of Olives to a place called Gethsemane. And there he prayed. But then Judas arrived with a small mob and arrested him and carried him back into Jerusalem, to the palace of the high priest, and brought him before the council, known as the Sanhedrin. And they tried him there. First, they attempted to try him for treason, but they couldn't get their witnesses' stories to corroborate with one another. So then, the High Priest asked Jesus if he were the Messiah. And Jesus answered, *Yes, he was*. And they found him guilty of the crime of blasphemy, and they condemned him to death. But the Jews were ruled by the Romans and did not have the authority to impose capital punishment on anyone. So, they needed to take Jesus to another trial, to be brought before the Roman governor, Pilate.

Pilate served as Governor—or Prefect—over Judea for about ten years. He was removed from office after a particularly violent response to an insurrection against Rome. It was too much for even the Romans to stomach, and so they reassigned him to another post.

On this day, this Friday morning, the chief priests and scribes take Jesus to Pilate. They had to do this early in the morning. They had to get all their work done in the darkness because the Romans began their trials at daybreak. What we have here is not really a trial, or at least it's a very truncated version of one. It's a story that Mark offers us in his gospel.

They brought Jesus to Pilate, and Pilate asked him the first question: *Are you king of the Jews?* As you will recall, Jesus was found guilty of blasphemy for

claiming to be the Messiah. But the Romans had no laws against blasphemy, so the Jews transliterated the term *Messiah* into something the Romans would understand. They called him *King of the Jews*, which would have made him guilty of treason. Pilate asks, *Are you King of the Jews?* And Jesus' answer is very short: *You say so.*

Meanwhile, the chief priests are also at this trial accusing Jesus of other things as well. Pilate hears all this and takes it into consideration, and he turns to Jesus, who has said nothing, and asks, *Have you no answer? All these charges they're bringing against you, don't you have some defense?* But Jesus says nothing. Pilate, we are told, was amazed at his quiet, his strength.

Then we are told that there was a custom that at this festival that Pilate would release a prisoner—a Jewish prisoner who had been arrested by the Romans—and give them a pardon and let them go free. And so the people began asking that he do this. *Hey, you promised us a prisoner every year? And we want you to release Barabbas.* Barabbas had been the leader of an insurrection against the Romans. We don't know who or what or any details. But in this rebellion Barabbas had been responsible for killing one or more people, probably Romans. He was being held in jail for murder and insurrection. The crowd asked that Barabbas be set free. And Pilate asked them back, *Well, what about this man? You know, the King of the Jews? If someone's really your king, shouldn't you want him to be released?* And they said no.

Pilate knew what was going on. He knew that it was because of jealousy that the chief priests and the council had arrested Jesus, that they wanted him out of the way. They were jealous of his power and his influence over the people. *What do you want me to do with this man, King of the Jews?* And the crowd shouts back those horrible words: *Crucify him!*

Pilate asks again, *What's he done? What's he done that's so evil that deserves crucifixion?* And the crowd is adamant: *Crucify him!* And so Pilate goes with the will of the crowd. And he releases Barabbas. He has Jesus flogged and hands him over to be crucified. And thus begins the day of Friday—Good Friday.

Now, the overarching question that I have from both of these trials of Jesus is the question of his pervasive silence. Why is it that Jesus did not speak? Why did he not fight back against the lies told against him? In his appearance before Pilate, the only words he utters are, *You say so*, when Pilate asked, *Are you King of the Jews?* And when he was before the Sanhedrin his only words were, *Yes, I am*, when asked if he were the Messiah. Why didn't Jesus talk more? Why didn't he speak up in his own defense? Why did he allow himself to be railroaded in this manner?

Well, the answer is quite simple. The answer is obedience. Jesus was being obedient to God. Just a few hours earlier, when Jesus was praying to God in

Gethsemane, he implored God to *remove this cup from me*. But he follows it up immediately with, *Yet not what I want, but what you want*.

Now remember, Jesus had been in deep prayer for hours at this point. He knows what God's plans are. He had already warned the disciples of future events. He had told them, *We are going up to Jerusalem, and the son of man will be handed over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death. Then they will hand him over to the Gentiles. They will mock him and spit upon him and flog him and kill him. And after three days, he will rise again*. Jesus knows what's going to happen to him, and the human side of him would like to avoid, if at all possible, the pain and rejection and humiliation and death that is coming to him. *If at all possible, take this cup from me. Yet not what I want, but what you want*. Or, in other words, *Thy will be done*.

But God has a plan. And Jesus gives of himself and willingly plays his part in what God is doing. And that plan is not something God has just made up on the spur of the moment. This plan has been woven into human history for generations, even from the beginning. Jesus' silence here is a reflection of the words of the prophet Isaiah, who wrote this about God's servant: *He was oppressed and he was afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; like a lamb that is led to slaughter, he did not open his mouth* (Isa 53:7).

But what about free will? That's the question that comes to my mind. Doesn't this make Jesus some pawn in God's game who has no choice of his own? No. Jesus had a choice. He could easily have left Gethsemane and just walked over the hill in the darkness of the night never to be seen again. But he doesn't do that. No. Jesus remains wholly faithful to God in all that he does. He stays on the path of God's plan, a plan for the salvation of the world, a plan that requires the son of God to be sacrificed. The sacrifice is to pay the price of the sins of the world. And the life of the Christ is the only suitable payment for this. Jesus willingly gives himself to God's will, to God's plan. And that is why Jesus remains silent. Because there's no point in speaking or arguing, he has no intention of changing the course of events that God has set out. He must be arrested. He must be tried by the Sanhedrin and handed over to Pilate. And he must be executed. You cannot change this. Jesus could try and explain all of this to the authorities, but he knows they're not going to listen to him. They're not going to believe him. They just want him out of the way. His best course of action is to say nothing, to remain silent. Only two times does he speak. One is to answer the high priest who asks if he's the Messiah. And second is when he answers Pilate when asked if he is King of the Jews.

The gospel that we're reading from today, the one that we call Mark, was likely written to a community of Christians who were living in a Roman city, possibly Rome itself. And in an environment like that, those Christian believers living in a Roman city could expect to be persecuted for their faith. In fact, in chapter 13, Jesus warns his followers of the persecution they can expect. Jesus tells his followers,

*Beware, for they will hand you over to councils, and you will be beaten in synagogues, and you will stand before governors and kings because of me, as a testimony to them.* And this warning that they will stand before governors and kings sounds a lot like what Jesus endures during Holy Week. His silence, his behavior, is offered as a model for those Christians who themselves may endure persecution, for those that Mark is writing to. Jesus' strength and dignity become something for them to imitate. In the face of such torment, they will know that their silence is not weakness; it is power. Weakness can be observed and seen in the lies of the Sanhedrin and in the voices of that crowd shouting, *Crucify him!* That's the weakness.

Time and time through his life, Jesus prayed. We read about it. He goes up a mountain, he takes a boat out on the water, he goes to an olive orchard. He always makes time to pray, especially in trying and difficult moments. And the reason he prays is to orient himself with God and God's will. And that is why we should make it a regular practice of prayer, why we should find that quiet spot where we can talk and listen to God. And from our listening, to open our hearts to God's will, to open our hearts to God's plan and find our place within it.

What is our job in this? What is our task? What is our sacrifice? What does God want us to do? That's what we are to ask. That's what we are to discern. And then in obedience, without deviation, we are to follow that plan, walk that path as Christ did for us.

That is your challenge in the last weeks of this season of Lent, to listen intently to God and to be obedient. I doubt that you will hear what you desire to hear; I doubt that God will give you next week's lottery numbers, or the secret to fame or happiness. But it will be an offer of joy—the joy of obedience to the one who loves us.

And one last thing: There is a second layer to silence that I must mention, and that is 'speaking up.' But not like the crowd with their cry for crucifixion, but a cry for those who themselves are silent because they have no voice. We need to be open to the notion that God's will is for us to speak up for those that others refuse to hear—the poor, the imprisoned, the immigrant, the refugee, the minority, the children, the ill, the disabled, the elderly. Jesus calls his followers to listen for their silence and give them voice, to become their advocate, their friend.

Because Jesus was silent, he was mocked and beaten and slandered and killed. It is our calling to speak out for the silent so they may experience God's divine love as we have. Amen.