

Luke 23:1-12
Pregnant Pause
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This morning my intention is to undertake what may be one of the most difficult questions any person will face. I say *any* person, because for many non-believing individuals this is the experience that keeps them from the very faith we describe. And that is the question: why was God silent or apparently absent at the time I needed him most? I'm sure many of you have prayed earnestly for something in your life, you know what it is. And maybe that thing became a reality. We like to zero in on the great triumph stories, like when an illness is cured, where a job was found, where victory won the day. But what about those times when the only discernable response we get from heaven is confusing silence?

Then the whole company of them arose and brought him before Pilate. ² And they began to accuse him, saying, "We found this man misleading our nation and forbidding us to give tribute to Caesar, and saying that he himself is Christ, a king." ³ And Pilate asked him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" And he answered him, "You have said so." ⁴ Then Pilate said to the chief priests and the crowds, "I find no guilt in this man." ⁵ But they were urgent, saying, "He stirs up the people, teaching throughout all Judea, from Galilee even to this place."

When Pilate heard this, he asked whether the man was a Galilean. ⁷ And when he learned that he belonged to Herod's jurisdiction, he sent him over to Herod, who was himself in Jerusalem at that time. ⁸ When Herod saw Jesus, he was very glad, for he had long desired to see him, because he had heard about him, and he was hoping to see some sign done by him. ⁹ So he questioned him at some length, but he made no answer. ¹⁰ The chief priests and the scribes stood by, vehemently accusing him. ¹¹ And Herod with his soldiers treated him with contempt and mocked him. Then, arraying him in splendid clothing, he sent him back to Pilate. ¹² And Herod and Pilate became friends with each other that very day, for before this they had been at enmity with each other.

Holy God, we gather before you in this quiet moment now to place our lives before your open word. Hoping to receive from you the gift of yourself in it. Tune our ears and our hearts to the sound of your speaking, and the sound of your silent ever present with us. We ask this in the name of Jesus, the Word made flesh, amen.

There's a lot of talking going on in the verses we just read. Talking is something that always going on. People everywhere, demanding that their voice be heard. Only, in today's text, very little of it is coming from Jesus. Only 4 words to be exact. It's interesting that there are times when Jesus is very vocal and outspoken, earlier in our series he stepping into the pulpit of his home church, **"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor, liberty to the captives, sight to the blind, freedom to the oppressed."** Ground breaking words! And there are other times when words are strangely absent. When Jesus silently kneels down to write in the sand as the Pharisees stand, with rocks in their hands, ready to stone a woman caught in an act of infidelity. Sometimes words, sometimes silence. This is one of those silent times.

In preaching class we learned the technical term for what's taking place here is a pregnant pause. Silence that's pulsating meaning and possibility, it's the kind of silence that gives words their meaning.

People always clamored over Jesus, words spread about him. When Jesus began his Galilean ministry reports spread around the country (4:14). Later he cast out a demon and reports about him began to reach every place in the region (4:37). Then he healed a paralytic in front of the Pharisees and teachers of the law, and again they came from every village of Galilee and Judea, and from Jerusalem (5:17). His twitter feed was trending. And you'd think he would want to maintain the wave of influence, proving his authority with more words. At least that's what we would do.

We live in an age of such rapid turnover in media stories that our collective memory for a person or an event is very brief. Unless that person is constantly working at keeping themselves relevant. It's an exhausting cycle.

A lot of people are talking about Jesus, and this is not surprising. What is surprising was how little desire Jesus had to make his name famous through self-promotion.

One of the people who had heard all along about Jesus and his miracles was King Herod. Herod had wanted to meet Jesus for a LONG time. But King Herod never saw a single miracle when Jesus was in Galilee. He thought: perhaps if I send him an invite, he'll jump at the chance of a royal audience to prove his case. But Jesus wasn't interested in performing for Herod. Jesus wasn't interested in performing for anyone.

Now there is one of those truths that you come to realize mainly when you become a grown up. Not always, but most of the time. That is: what we want is not always what we need. When I was young all I wanted all the time was candy and lots of it, and to play baseball with my friends at the park. But there were times when trips to the candy store and games of baseball were not what I needed—like at dinner time and when it was time for sleep. But there sometimes we grow up and we realize life is more than candy and baseball. That what we think is the best thing for us, may not always be the best thing. And sometimes we need help figuring out what that is

A few weeks ago, we looked at the story of the paralytic who was lowered into the presence of Jesus, and the friends who thought they were helping him get his legs restored. But Jesus met the deeper need, he healed his soul by forgiving his sins. You would think that the very best thing in the world for that paralytic would be for him to simply stand up and walk, then everything would be better. But like that paralytic our most apparent need, is not always our deepest need.

One of the most common examples I hear of this is the person who says this: if I could just find a spouse, then I would be happy. Their deepest need is not that they don't have a spouse, it's that they haven't learned the source of true contentment and happiness in their life is found in God, and not in another person. And until they are able to place God at the center and find their satisfaction in him, they won't be ready for a healthy relationship.

But Herod wasn't really looking for someone to heal his soul. Herod wants to see a sign and wonder. Herod wants someone to perform for him. The way Luke describes it sounds less like a trial and more like a circus. Ok Jesus, I'm here, you have my attention, now do something spectacular.

But Jesus stood silent.

Of all the characters in the Passion stories, Peter, Mary, Pilate, Judas, you'll probably never hear someone say, "you know, the character I most resonate with is Herod." But I wonder. Again, wouldn't you love for Jesus to show up in your life to perform some miraculous sign for you? Just one?

Wouldn't it be nice if Jesus showed up at your next doctors visit and said, that ailment you've been worried about...gone. Or on your way home from work after a hard day, for him to whisper in your ear: "I give you my permission to tell your boss to take this job and shove it." Or if Jesus miraculously took away all of your loneliness, or self-consciousness, or anxiety. Then would we believe? I wonder.

The Pharisees saw all of the miracles, but they didn't believe. The crowds saw the miracles and still they turned away and betrayed Jesus in the end. The guards at the tomb saw the greatest miracle of all and they still did not believe. This makes me wonder, maybe believing, the place where faith begins does not start in the eyes with what we can see. Maybe belief is born from our heart, our soul. Maybe belief comes at the time when all the distractions and noise is gone and what we have before us is silence. Because it is the silence that makes room for you to decide what to believe. Choosing to place your life and trust in God is always a choice. It's not an act of emotion or merely intellectual assent. It is an act of the will, in the face of overwhelming odds to say yes to the mystery—come what may.

But Herod misses this, even as Jesus stood silently before him, the King was given the chance to make the choice of his life. And the choice he was offered, and the choice that we are offered is whether we will worship God as God, or whether we will reduce him to his instrumental value.

Early in my ministry I met a man named Greg. Greg was the CEO of a midsized financial company in New York, and by all earthly measures Greg had a very successful life. Until that was taken away from him. He was removed as CEO after a few less than ideal years. I met him after he had been out of work for a year. He described how awful it was to have to explain to his wife and son why they were having to move out of their home and into an apartment. He told me these things only to turn to me and ask me to pray.

One of the most heroic things a person will ever do is to choose to let God be God, and simply worship. God cannot have instrumental value to you. In the words of one pastor: You cannot worship a God for whom you have a use. And when you reduce God to what he can do for you, you lose God—and eventually yourself.

Herod wasn't interested in a savior, he was lost in his own luxury and power. He wasn't looking to find the thing that would finally fill his heart, frankly he was looking for a distraction because he was bored. When Jesus refuses to perform for him, Herod threw a robe on him and mocked him.

I think this is kind of what we do when we insist that Jesus perform for us as well. We turn Jesus into a caricature of who he really is when our faith is built upon what we expect Jesus to do for us. We turn him into Magician Jesus when we want him to make our boss or that annoying co-worker go away. We dress him up as a more powerful version of ourselves when we ask him to always tell

us we're right or to be on our side in every occasion. We turn him into boyfriend Jesus, when we want all the comfort and assurance without any of the conviction or acknowledgement of our own culpability and sin. We can decorate him all we want, we can even mock him, but Jesus still will not perform for us. If you have endured some crisis after praying to avoid it, don't be too surprised if Jesus remains silent when you ask him for that green light to stay green just a little bit longer.

We come to worship to bow our lives in the presence of the one who doesn't always respond to every whim, but who stands above them and is sovereign over them. We come to worship because our souls thirst for God. So how do you grow in a faith that is strong enough to worship even when Jesus is silent in our requests for health, or job, or loved one?

Let me tell you. Everyone who has made the heroic choice to believe in the face of crisis was prepared for these moments. And the way they got prepared was through a lifetime of worship, prayer and Scripture reading. This is why we are teaching our children not just about God, but we are instructing them in the rhythms of worship and prayer so they can be equipped to listen and respond to God's word on their own. That's why we give bibles to our high school or college graduates as they head off to a time of great transition. To prepare them for those hard moments that come for all of us. We give them a word that continues to speak even when the miracles don't come.

If the silence is difficult for you, fill it with the sound of God's word. Read it daily. If you don't have a bible, take one of these. Better yet, see me after worship and I will personally see to it that you receive one. If you don't have a reading plan for not to worry keep this bulletin with you and tuck it in your bible. There is a weekly reading plan on it for you.

If you will begin to immerse yourself in the daily practice of reading God's word, I cannot promise that it will keep difficult things from happening. But I can promise that it will give you a word that will break the silence. By the Holy Spirit God continues to speak through the mystery and the beauty of His Word, it's almost miraculous. Amen.