

# “A Time to Keep Silence”

sermon digest

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Job 2:11-13; Romans 8:26-27

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The wise counsel comes from the Ecclesiastes 3, from the oft-cited poem: “For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven.” Toward the end of the opposing activities of life the word comes “a time to keep silence, and a time to speak.” The identity of the writer in Hebrew is *Qoheleth*, the speaker in an assembly. Jerome called him “the preacher.” Does the preacher, any preacher, ever know a time to keep silence? The author of this book of wisdom does not elaborate. The particulars in the verse are only examples of the central message about the timing of life. I have my doubts about an appropriate time for hate; but, for *Qoheleth*, hate serves the poetic contrast to love. So, call it poetic license.

The wise teacher is right about silence and speaking. There are moments in life when words fail us. Indeed, words do not exist to address the chasm of what we experience or witness. To be dumbstruck, speechless, awed into silence is not only the appropriate response to the moment, silence sometimes speaks more clearly and more eloquently than words can ever express. When we gather to offer our words of worship to God, reverence calls for silence; and silence often carries far more meaning than words.

After generations of editing, the Book of Job has come down to us in four sections: the Prologue that explains the plight of Job, the speeches of Job and his friends debating the nature of God and the source of suffering, the voice of God from the whirlwind, and the Epilogue where God restores Job’s fortune. Like the proverbial “patience of Job” cited by James 5:11, the identity of the “friends of Job” is called into question by the content of the book. In the fifteenth century, Jean Fouquet painted them as pious critics standing over the pathetic body of a man lying in ashes covered by hair cloth. Fouquet called them, “False Comforters.” Whether they are friends sincerely offering consolation and comfort or opportunists delighting in the misfortune of a popular hero is a valid question. Although belied by later speeches, the friends exhibit both compassion and understanding on entering the scene of suffering. At first sight, Job moves them to mourn and weep aloud, to tear their robes and throw dust on their heads in sympathy, and finally to sit with him on the ground for seven days and nights in silence. The friends understood that this moment was beyond the reach of words: “no one spoke a word to him for they saw that his suffering was very great.” This was a time to keep silence.

***Language is limited by understanding.*** Through silence, Job’s friends were confessing that Job’s suffering was beyond the limited experience of their minds to grasp and beyond their words to express.

I was a graduate student in seminary when my young wife died suddenly on a Sunday morning. The people came to church that morning and heard the sad news. The service was cancelled. All day long, people came and went from our house and stood in clusters of conversation on the lawn. I realized the need for a public service to gather our grief and attempt to speak to the moment before I left for the funeral in Texas. Two professors led the service on Monday morning. I have no memory of anything that was said, but I do remember the gathering of friends, a group of graduate students, before the service. The faculty members asked questions and listened. We prayed together. Then, one by one, each of my friends took my hand, looked into my face, paused in silence and left the room. The silence said, “we have no words of understanding; we only have compassion and presence to offer.”

It is not about etiquette, behavior appropriately adjusted to the situation. It is about confessing our human limitation to understand. It is about the clearest message for the moment, that the mystery transcends our grasp. Paul notes our struggle with words in times when we “groan inwardly,” and “we do not know how to pray as we ought.” There are some experiences in life for which God has no word to offer, but God hears sighs too deep for words.

Acknowledging the limitations of language is at the bottom of our coming to terms with the messages of the Bible. I was shocked to hear Carlyle Marney say that there is no divine language, that all language is human and has grown out of the human struggle to communicate. But we keep looking for God’s words, the perfect language to express the absolute truth for every occasion. For centuries the Church assumed that Latin, the language of Jerome’s translation of the Bible was the holy language, although his translation was called the Vulgate, the vulgar or common language. Latin became the accepted language for the Mass until the vernacular was allowed by Vatican Council II last century. Finally the Roman Catholic Church acknowledged that English or German might indeed be as holy as Latin for worship. I keep thinking that some evangelical Christians will eventually come to the same conclusion about the language of the King James Bible. Although I believe that the Bible can be a conduit for understanding God, the words of the Bible are not above human confusion and distortion.

***How do we speak to the unspeakable moments of life?*** Speaking on the anatomy of human grief, our friend Dr. Richard Dew in his lecture on grief has a list of statements people are heard to say to the bereaved and observes that most of our cliches are inadequate for the depth of pain and loss felt by someone who is struggling with the death of a loved one. I call it funeral home language or Hallmark theology. Folks no doubt mean well. Some of the statements are poetic attempts to make death sound beautiful and even desirable. Others are attempts at theodicy, the justification of God. But, somehow our explanations of the mind of God in the face of human tragedy come out as trivial and unworthy.

I am guilty. As a young pastor and student of theology I had the idea that I was commissioned and qualified to speak for God in times of crisis. I was not particularly convinced that I had the final word, but I was certain that I was expected to say something profound that would lead to the resolution of grief.

A story out of the legacy of George Buttrick caught my attention decades ago. Buttrick tells about a pastor’s visit to a family after the death of their son on the battlefield of war. The father was embittered by the loss of his child and angered at the God represented by the pastor’s presence. He demanded of the pastor an accounting for the ways of God. He asked, “Where was your God when my son was dying on the field of battle?” To which the pastor responded, “The same place He was when his son was dying on the cross.” Ah, a smart,

biblically correct, theologically orthodox come-back for the cry of outrage against God! It took a few decades of hearing the outrage and feeling the anger for me to begin to understand that people do not need and will not hear smart answers in a time of crisis, and they are not particularly attracted to a theological discussion. Furthermore, the God of creation is not dependent on my explanation of the divine nature or the divine location in time of human tragedy.

I think we all got a sense of the senseless futility of explaining God, when on the Pat Robertson show Jerry Falwell attributed the cause of 9/11: "I really believe that the pagans, and the abortionists, and the feminists, and the gays and the lesbians who are actively trying to make that an alternative lifestyle, the ACLU, People For the American Way—all of them who have tried to secularize America—I point the finger in their face and say 'you helped this happen.'" He later apologized for the ridiculous accusations. At the extreme, Falwell was doing what preachers have done for centuries, claiming the right to speak for God.

Some events in life are beyond explanation. Murray Haar interpreted Job in light of the Jewish Holocaust and concluded: "The Holocaust is a revelatory event that can compel Jews and Christians to open their collective eyes to the failure of God, as traditionally understood. . . . Auschwitz provides an unavoidable and necessary lens through which we must re-read our scriptures and traditions." (*Interpretation*, Vol 53, No. 3, p. 274) Sometimes the best theology is silence. When events are unspeakable, and God is unexplainable, all that we can do is wait in reverent silence for the ultimate Word of God when God is all and in all.