

Wesley United Methodist Church

April 2, 2017

“When God Is Silent.

John 11:1-45

I recall Thanksgiving 2011 as the worst one of my life. It came about two months after the death of our daughter Erika. It was midnight hour in the valley of the shadow of death. The shock had worn off, and I was trying to accept the unacceptable. I could not imagine life ever becoming good again. As our custom, on Thanksgiving Day we were in Germany with our family and had gathered for dinner at the home of our daughter, Christel. Routinely, we bowed our heads and said the Thanksgiving prayer. I bowed my head, but words wouldn't come. I could not say “thank You” when I was anything but grateful. I know we prayed, but they were not my words. Have you ever had such a moment when God seemed distant and prayer almost pointless? Have you experienced a time when heaven seemed to be shut up, when God is silent?

Jesus had such a time. Hanging on that awful cross he cried out in agony, using words from Psalm 22 that he had probably memorized as a child: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” A thousand years earlier King David uttered those same words at a low moment when he experienced the silence of God. It may have been when King Saul was trying to kill him; or perhaps when David's own son Absalom was trying to steal his throne. “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

When God is silent or absent, there are some reasons. The first that I noticed is you are deeply hurt by life and are blaming God for some of it. That was my situation in 2011. I found out that God did not reject me for treating him as my personal complaint department. God is a big God. If I want to beat up on him a little, he will not reject me. He is like an earthly father who allows a daughter to fuss at him even though her real problem is that she was not selected as a cheerleader. Even though melanoma and death are the result of the world rather than God's plan, God allows us to unload our hurts and frustrations on him. “Cast your burden on the Lord and he will sustain you.”

Another reason for God's silence could be our sin. In Proverbs 15 we read, “The Lord is far from the wicked, but he hears the prayers of the righteous.” Some people can't find God for the same reason. I recall a couple who came to me in frustration several years ago, because they could not get clear answers to their prayers. As we talked about their prayers we found out that they only come to God when they needed or wanted something.

One more reason for God to be silent is one that was shared with me by a pastor friend who had served in Jamaica as a missionary. He told me that sometimes when God is silent, he is preparing to grant us a greater revelation of himself than ever before. The silence is God's way of saying, “Listen up! I'm about to teach you something really big!”

One day Jesus' close friends, Mary and Martha, were deeply worried because their only brother Lazarus was seriously ill. They sent word to Jesus to come quickly, knowing that Jesus loved Lazarus like a brother. But all they heard from Jesus was silence. Lazarus died and was buried. Still no Jesus. Finally, four days after the funeral, Jesus showed up. Martha showed admirable restraint when she said to Jesus, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” What she was saying was, “I can't believe that you didn't come as soon as you got the message. You were off somewhere healing complete strangers while your best friend here was dying.” Martha did not understand until later that Jesus' absence was the prelude to a new and greater revelation of himself. He was about to declare the way by which every believer can survive death and live with God forever. Jesus was about to deliver a roadmap to eternity when he declared, “I am the resurrection and the life. Anyone who believes in me, though he die an earthly death, will in reality never die.” Millions of Christians across the centuries, who could hardly remember who Lazarus was, have been comforted by this assurance about our eternal destiny.

If recently you have experienced the silence of God; if God has seemed distant; if God has been for you as slow as butter in a refrigerator; do some self-analysis as you come to the table for Holy Communion. Do you have a broken heart? Are you grieving? Are you upset about something and keep it to yourself? Turn that grief, broken heart or whatever it is that bothers you over to the Master. Jesus understands. The Bible tells us that “Jesus is a man of sorrows, acquainted with grief.”

Perhaps the reason God is silent is your sin. Did you ever confess it and asked him for forgiveness? If you do, you will find God running to meet you, just as the father of the prodigal Son came running down that dusty road to welcome home his wayward son.

But what if God's silence is caused by the reason of granting a deeper, more wonderful revelation of himself than you have ever known before. Some years ago when I served in Avondale, there was a position open at Canon City First UMC as an associate pastor, and I wanted it. Well, that didn't happen and I was VERY disappointed. I think I cried for several days. Only 16 miles of commute instead 75 miles. I was stressed and anxious and God didn't seem very close. Now I

realize that God was preparing me for something better. I learned to lean on the Holy Spirit. And you are the lucky recipients of God's grace. I also learned that God's power cannot be achieved fully within the life of a Christian unless that person has a deep need for God's power in his or her life. For the last 40 years, I have been inviting the Holy Spirit each day to fill and dominate my life. God has answered that prayer in great ways. I might never have learned that truth if I had not first encountered his silence.

Could it be that God is preparing us for a greater revelation of himself, maybe it will begin today at the altar of Holy Communion? I never expected to get a theology lesson at the Mid Michigan Correctional Facility in St. Louis, MI. But I did. Almost every time I would hold a service, they insisted on singing a song that is full of spiritual truth. It's a tremendous comfort to anyone who encounters the silence of God. I don't recall the all words, but the chorus goes like this: "He's an on-time God, yes, he is. He's an on-times God, yes, he is. He may not come when you want him to, but he's always right on time. He's an on-time God, yes, he is."

Here at the Table of Holy Communion, I invite you to meet God who even in his silence is loving and right on time.