



He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers; or else I will come and strike the land with a curse – Malachi 4:3.

And so ends the Old Testament, on a note both of hopefulness and warning. After the conclusion of that verse came a period of about 400 years when God is silent. Known as the Intertestamental Period (the time between the Old and the New Testaments) it began with the conclusion of the prophet Malachi's ministry (about 420 BC) and lasted until the early first century AD, when John the Baptist began his ministry. This period is also referred to by variations of the phrase *the silent years*, because the prophetic witness of God to his people had grown silent.

As we continue the series of messages, *The Journey to Advent*, we will use a portion of Psalm 22 as our Scripture text. Psalm 22 is a bit of a harrowing passage, made all the more so by Jesus quoting the first verse of that psalm as he hung on the cross. The words, *My God, my God, why have you forsaken me* have become a template for scores of people as they have journeyed through their own time when God seemed to go quiet to them.

Psalm 22:1-11 –

1 My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, so far from my cries of anguish?

2 My God, I cry out by day, but you do not answer, by night, but I find no rest.

3 Yet you are enthroned as the Holy One; you are the one Israel praises.

4 In you our ancestors put their trust; they trusted and you delivered them.

5 To you they cried out and were saved; in you they trusted and were not put to shame.

6 But I am a worm and not a man, scorned by everyone, despised by the people.

7 All who see me mock me; they hurl insults, shaking their heads.

8 "He trusts in the Lord," they say, "let the Lord rescue him. Let him deliver him, since he delights in him."

9 Yet you brought me out of the womb; you made me trust in you, even at my mother's breast.

10 From birth I was cast on you; from my mother's womb you have been my God.

11 Do not be far from me, for trouble is near and there is no one to help.

That's quite depressing, isn't it? Right now you might be thinking, *thanks a lot for bringing me down Dave. I was sure looking for some hope and inspiration today. Thanks for getting my day and my week off to such a*

good start! Well, I'm sorry to acknowledge that reality often intrudes into life. Silence is tough, and silence is a companion to all of us at some point in life. The fact that the people of God endured through about 400 years of silence made it all the more powerful when Advent, and the manger, finally arrived.

It is hard for us, I think, to talk about the silence that we often perceive from God. It is difficult for us to tell someone, *I feel like God is silent when I pray. I pour out my heart to him and it's as though there is no reply.* And it's difficult to hear someone tell us they feel they are receiving nothing from God but silence. We don't know what to say, so we often tell them to *cheer up, smile, and count your blessings*, which is not very helpful.

Although it's difficult to talk about that silence, let's do so this morning.

I want to start by reminding you that –

Times of Silence Are Normal.

If you have been in, are currently in, or ever will be in a time of silence, a time when you hear or feel nothing from God, know this – you are not different; you are the norm. There is nothing unusual about feeling as though God is silent. Even Jesus, as expressed this, as he quoted the first verse of the 22nd psalm while on the cross – *My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?* (Matthew 27:46 and Mark 15:34). How do you feel when you read the passage of Jesus saying those words? It's tough, and a more than a bit unnerving, isn't it?

Here is something important to remember, however – what you feel is not reflective of reality. We often equate our feelings with truth, such as when we say *no one cares about me.* Has anyone here ever said that before? Most of us have probably muttered that phrase before, or at least thought it, but it's not true. Of course we have others who care for us; what we feel is not always reflective of reality.

It's easy for us to feel God's presence when life is going well, but when life is not going well we wonder where God has gone. Does he care about us? Does he hear our prayers? Never forget that truth is not tied to our emotions and the perception of reality they place upon us. We too easily fall prey to the idea that unless things are always going well for us, unless our faith is always strong and without doubt, there is something wrong with us. There is absolutely nothing wrong with us when we go through times of silence. One of the great affirmations of faith is that God is always with us, whether or not we sense it, feel it, or even believe it.

I believe the need to be reassured of this is one of the reasons why people are increasingly interested in expressive, or emotion-based worship. I am not being critical of that kind of worship when I say that, but merely making an observation. Did you know that, worldwide, the fastest growing form of Christianity is Pentecostalism? In our own society, people are increasingly drawn to what I would call *experiential worship*; that is, worship that draws people in emotionally and places emphasis on the supernatural moving of God. People want to *feel* something; they want to *experience* something, and so it is natural to be drawn to this type of worship. But, again, I say that regardless of what we feel, God is always with us, God is always working on our behalf, and God always cares about us and loves us. Whether or not you *feel* that to be true is beside the point, because our emotions do not reflect truth and reality, certainly not when it comes to the promises of God.

We Learn From the Silence.

The theologian Barbara Brown Taylor says of the difficult, silent moments that they *hold more lessons...and that contrary to what many of us have long believed, it is sometimes in the bleakest void that God is nearest.* Too often, I believe, we give up when the silence comes, when in reality, if we could hold on a little longer we would enjoy the benefits and the blessings of discovering how God strengthens us during those times. To cut short a time of silence might cause us to miss something very important that we might not otherwise learn. I don't know about you, but I don't learn much from the blessed times of life, and I suspect that is true for most of us. I wish I could learn from the blessed times, but I learn far more from the silent, difficult times.

We have, in too many ways, I think, a shallow faith in this country, and maybe in most of Western civilization. It is a faith that tells us we must always live in blessing rather than silence, happiness rather than sadness, and assurance rather than doubt. A lot of people live a good deal of life in the difficulties, and if we project a message that people who are in the silence and doubt are somehow deficient in their faith, they will become outcasts and exiles to the church, and many of them have become just that.

When I struggle through such moments, I like to read the psalms. I like the psalms because they confront us with the full range of the human experience. They are full not only of joy and blessing, but of anger,

disappointment, and hurt. The 23rd psalm is, for example, amazing in its understanding and acceptance of the shadow of death. The 22nd psalm, a portion of which serves as our text this morning, certainly relates some very difficult emotions.

The times of silence also teach us something very important about life and it is this – we are so consumed with ever-present search for happiness and meaning that we see the times of silent as something to avoid at almost any cost. In our culture we perpetuate a myth that happiness should be our constant in life, but that is not the case. The search for happiness, however, becomes ever-consuming for many, many people, and they believe that it's somewhere “out there,” as though it were a commodity that could be found and then installed in life. Happiness, however, is not “out there.” Happiness is not something we will find anywhere outside of ourselves, because happiness is the byproduct of how we live, and what the gospel teaches us is that living according to what God asks of us will bring happiness to us.

I believe that the silence also helps us to come to terms with our grief. When I use the word grief, I don't mean only the grief that comes with the loss of a loved one or friend. Grief can also come from a job loss, a health change, children leaving home, the loss of our youth, a friend moving, or many other experiences. When we think of grief in this more expansive way we realize it is always lurking just below the surface of life. In fact, I have discovered that you don't have to scratch very deeply into the surface of anyone's life before some form of grief comes pouring out. The times of silence confront us with our grief and places that grief squarely before us, where we must deal with it. Without the silence, we probably would not confront and deal with that grief.

The silence of God does not equal the absence of God.

I used to read a good deal of writings by skeptics and unbelievers, and I did so to help me better understand that point of view and to help me to formulate responses. I read books from the pop culture skeptics such as Sam Harris, Richard Dawkins, and Christopher Hitchens and the more classic skeptics, such as Bertrand Russell. I came to a point where I stopped, however, because I found their logic and arguments very unconvincing, and because they succumbed to some very elementary traps of bad theology and logic. One writer, for example, was very found of saying that *absence of evidence means evidence of absence* (Victor Stenger, *God: The Failed Hypothesis*). If there is an absence of evidence of God, he wrote, that must mean there is an absence of God. There are so many problems with that statement that if he had been a student in my class I would have given him a D- at best. To begin with, he wrote what was a self-fulfilling statement, and then stumbled over a definition of evidence. What constitutes evidence, and who gets to decide what is objective evidence, in particular? The truth is, we all see what we want to see, to some extent, no matter how objective and scientific we might claim to be. I don't need anyone's purported scientific evidence to prove to me that God is there, even in the most silent of times. I choose to believe that God is there, whether or not I have proof and whether or not I hear anything back from the silence.

I walk early in the morning six days a week. At this point in life I need to work a bit harder to stay in shape and to stay healthy. One of the things I do as I walk is to turn that into a prayer time. On these cold mornings my prayer is often *please help me to get warm Lord!* One of the constant comments in my prayers during those walks is that I don't expect a big or obvious answer, or even an answer I can see, comprehend, or understand. I have some different expectations of God at this point in my life, and I have learned that's okay. I do at times wish that I would hear more obviously from God. I wish I would get the big answer written across the sky, but I don't. I don't, however, worry about it, I don't feel troubled by it, and I don't puzzle over it.

Before the Incarnation, before the manger – the time of God's great crashing into history – was this long, 400-year stretch of God's stillness and silence. And though skeptics will quickly pounce upon any hint of silence as evidence of God's absence, I find that to be shallow and unfortunate, and I fear that some people fall into their erroneous equation that silence equals absence.

I'm going to offer you what will sound like a strange analogy, but hang in there with me. I have become very curious about the fascination our culture has with zombies. *The Walking Dead* has been a popular TV show for a number of seasons, there are other TV shows and movies, and there are zombie walks in Louisville. What accounts for their popularity? Is it a fascination with that genre of entertainment? I tend to think it is this, and maybe you'll think I'm weird for coming up with this example, but it's just the way my brain works – I

think it reflects that many people feel like a member of the walking dead. They don't feel anything. They believe there is little life in them. They feel like spiritual zombies, so they are drawn to that which reflects their feelings. If that is true, and I believe that it is, it becomes even more important to tell people that silence does not mean that God is absent.

Psalm 22:4 says, *in you our ancestors put their trust; they trusted and you delivered them.* I believe that verse is very descriptive of our culture, as a number of the millennials can make that same affirmation. They can affirm that their ancestors – my generation and others – put their trust in God and believed in deliverance, but they are not sure that they can place their trust in God, and much of the reason why is because they mistake silence with absence.

Let us proclaim that God is always there. Let us proclaim that the silence is not God's absence but a time for us to learn important spiritual truths. Let us proclaim that God is with us always, that God is always working on our behalf, and that God will see us through every challenge and difficulty. Always. Always. Always!