



Lives that Speak of God

*A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Ledlie I. Laughlin
The Fifth Sunday in Lent ~ March 29, 2009*

Jeremiah 31:31-34

The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the Lord. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, 'Know the Lord', for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.

The problem with faith is that we never know for sure. While we may ultimately find that faith in God is life-giving, essential, even – for some – the ultimate concern of their lives, the journey of faith is invariably marked by seasons of profound doubt and loneliness. For God is not always to be found or felt or present when we seek God. God has an unfortunate way of being silent.

The signs of God's presence elude us; the voice of God is inaudible to our straining ears. The pains and crises of our lives and the despair of our cities, prompt us to question the embarrassing absence of a God who is said to love us. Indeed, the volume of God's silence has been sufficient to lead many to despair and has prompted many to abandon the enterprise of faith all together. For, we never know for sure.

We who are faithful have perhaps been fortunate enough to experience glimmers of God's presence, enough to convince us that God is, enough to keep us awake, looking and listening for more. I do not assume this to be the case for everyone here today; some may be looking for that first meeting, trusting that the church would long ago have disappeared were there not something to keep the rest of us coming. Maybe there are those who know God's presence all the time, but such a one would be rare indeed. I certainly know that God is not always present to me. I know that I experience seasons of profound doubt and loneliness.

Curiously, the season of Lent has the potential to illuminate God's absence. It is curious because Lent is for many the season of our most earnest searching for God. Yet, as many know, it is because we are searching so eagerly that the absence is all the more pronounced. When we aren't paying much attention, we don't notice God's silence.

Silence, a novel by twentieth century Japanese author, Shusaku Endo, is set in Japan in the mid-sixteenth century. (1976, Monumenta Nipponica, Tapplinger Publishing, Co., NYC) It is the story of a Portuguese Jesuit missionary sent to Japan at a time following a period of great flowering of Christianity in those islands. Now, however, with a change in the Japanese shogunate, the practice or promotion of Christianity is strictly forbidden, laws enforced by torture and death. *Silence* is the story of a priest who believes that God is calling him to share the Gospel of Christ with the Japanese people, yet he finds that those who profess faith in Christ, are persecuted, subject to an agonizing death. While his faith remains firm through most of the tale, the priest must rely on and be fed by past convictions and experience. For God is silent through out.

Following the governments' cruel drowning of two Japanese peasant Christians who refused to step on a bronze image of Christ in an act of apostasy, the renunciation of their faith, the priest reflects. "What do I want to say? I myself do not quite understand. Only that today, when for the glory of God [the two men,] Mokichi and Ichizo moaned, suffered and died, I cannot bear the monotonous sound of the dark sea gnawing at the shore. Behind the depressing silence of the sea, the silence of God ... the feeling that while men raise their voices in anguish God remains with folded arms, silent." (p.93)

After another peasant man is sliced down, we are told, "What [the priest] could not understand was the stillness of the courtyard, the voice of the cicada, the whirling wing of the flies. A man had died. Yet the outside world went on as if nothing had happened. Could anything be more crazy? Was this martyrdom? Why are you silent? Here this one-eyed man has died – and for you. You ought to know. Why does this stillness continue? This noon-day stillness. The sound of the flies – this crazy thing, this cruel business. And you avert your face as though indifferent. This ... this I cannot bear." (p.182-83)

At the end, the priest is broken, utterly exhausted and defeated, forced – himself – to trample on the image of Christ and apostatize the faith that defines his very being. Many years later, the fallen priest living a seemingly meaningless existence, offers to another man that which he technically can no longer offer, the absolution of sin. And the book concludes:

"The priest had administered that sacrament that only the priest can administer. No doubt his fellow priests would condemn his act as sacrilege; but even if he was betraying them, he was not betraying his Lord. He loved him now in a different way from before. Everything that had taken place until now had been necessary to bring him to this love. 'Even now I am the last priest in this land. But our Lord was not silent. Even if he had been silent, my life until this day would have spoken of him.'" (p.286)

The significant revelation of this conclusion is not the sense of reconciliation and the almost too neat summary that all that went before had been leading up to this. The significant revelation is the priest's realization that God was not out beyond; rather, that God was somehow speaking through his life, that his life was the Word of God: "my life until this day would have spoken of him." Our lives speak the Word of God. Even in our seasons of profound doubt and loneliness, the God we seek is reflected in and revealed through our lives.

We hear echoes of today's Gospel: "Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their life will lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life." (John 12:24-25) It is true, as many know, that God's presence is found most poignantly when we reach the end of our rope, when we hit bottom. It is also true that a life of faith calls us to abandon much that we hold dear.

But the silence of God that we know too well, and the priest's revelation of God's voice being spoken through the life of a broken individual is given new meaning by the words of Jeremiah. "This is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people." (Jeremiah 31:33)

I love this verse: it reflects God's love, God's perseverance, even insistence, in the covenant God has with us; it reflects the pathos of that relationship. God gave us the commandments through Moses, but those we could not keep. God made a covenant with us through Noah, Abraham, and Joshua – which was fine for a while, until we wandered off. God continually seeks us out and offers new teachings by which we are to be faithful, by which we are to know God's love for us. Somehow these elude us and we fall away.

Finally, in Jeremiah, it is as if God is saying, these people simply cannot follow laws imposed from without – even laws of love, so, now, I shall write them upon their hearts; my law, my love, will be within them. This stands as God's promise to us: a precious truth to hang on to, especially when God's voice is silent. God's law is written upon our hearts. God is our God; and we are God's people – even when, especially when, we do not know it.

"According to an Hassidic story (cf. Lawrence Jaffe, *Liberating the Heart: Spirituality and Jungian Psychology*, Toronto, Inner City Books, 1990, p.46), several pious Jews once asked their rabbi about the fundamental creed of the Hebrew Scriptures, the *Shema*:

"Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one Lord; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and with all your might. And these words which I command you this day shall be upon your heart; and you shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. And you shall bind them as a sign upon your hand, and they shall be frontlets between your eyes. And you shall write them on the door-posts of your house and on your gates."

"The Jews asked, 'Rebbe, Rebbe, why is it written that these words shall be upon your heart? Why not rather, into

your heart?

“The rabbi replied, ‘Because it is not within the power of man to put those words into his heart. All we can do is lay these words upon our heart so that, when our heart breaks, they can drop in.’”

Perhaps this is what happened to the priest. Perhaps this is what we await when God is silent. Alas, the prerequisite may be a broken heart. Yet each of us know, by experience or intuition, that our hearts shall be broken – if not yesterday or today, someday. Our hearts shall be broken because we love.

The key in all that I have said is that the action and agency of faith is not ours but God’s. The one who writes God’s law upon our hearts is sometimes silent. But it is God, not us, who placed that law upon us; it is God who speaks through our lives.

Invariably, I begin each Lent with a list of good intentions, what I am going to do or not do, how I am going to change this or that, focus on this or that. Sometimes I realize that which I set out to do; sometimes I do not.

“By the Fifth Sunday of Lent, we are perhaps readier to listen to the Lord, more open to learn from Christ, more honest about our limits and God’s grace. At this point we realize God has brought us to this holy season so God may touch us and God may turn the church’s heart around and God may lead us from the ways of death to the ways of life.

“We begin this season quite confident of our ability to reform.” Just as the priest set out confident of his ability to proclaim the Gospel in a foreign land. “We will end it, God willing, less self-important and more humbled. We began Lent filled with all the good things we will do. We will end it, we pray, ready to declare all the good things God has begun with us..., ready to glory in God’s steadfast love, ready to die with Christ that we may be lifted up with [Christ].”