

Betsey Moe
Sermon 9.28.08
“A Time for Silence”
Ezekiel 3:22-27

Psalm 51
“Open my lips, and my mouth shall proclaim your praise.”

Ezekiel 3:22-27

22Then the hand of the Lord was upon me there; and he said to me, Rise up, go out into the valley, and there I will speak with you. 23So I rose up and went out into the valley; and the glory of the Lord stood there, like the glory that I had seen by the river Chebar; and I fell on my face. 24The spirit entered into me, and set me on my feet; and he spoke with me and said to me: Go, shut yourself inside your house. 25As for you, mortal, cords shall be placed on you, and you shall be bound with them, so that you cannot go out among the people; 26and I will make your tongue cling to the roof of your mouth, so that you shall be speechless and unable to reprove them; for they are a rebellious house. 27But when I speak with you, I will open your mouth, and you shall say to them, “Thus says the Lord God”; let those who will hear, hear; and let those who refuse to hear, refuse; for they are a rebellious house.

I am told that when I was a child, I loved words – specifically those that came from my own mouth. I asked questions, I made observations; I formed nonsense words for the fun of it. My parents used to call me “a little magpie.” I can still see them turning around from the front seat of our Ford Bronco – putting the whole family in jeopardy – just to tell me for the love of Pete to please look out the window and be quiet. Nothing frustrated me more than being silenced. I would cross my arms, turn towards the window, and sulk for oh, probably twenty seconds, and then I’d start talking again. As I got older, the issue between my parents and me became who got that sweet last word. As when I was younger, I did not appreciate being cut off when I still had words to say, but by then I had learned that it was not in my best interests to fight the system too much. It is not a surprise that God eventually called me into a profession in which I read and think and speak many *words* to bring the Word of God to life.

I get the feeling that Ezekiel was a man who loved words. He was a priest in the house of Israel who held close the words of his tradition, who saw it as his calling to preserve the words of the law and God’s words of promise. And so I suppose that the word of the Lord that came to him in chapter three was shocking. God told him that he was to be bound with cords and isolated from the people, and God would make him speechless. The *only* words Ezekiel would be allowed to speak would be words straight from the mouth of God, starting with “Thus says the Lord God.” This was a new way of doing prophecy; prophets like Ezekiel were used to working on a two-way street, communicating to the people on God’s behalf as well as communicating to God on the people’s behalf. If the people were doing evil in the sight of the Lord, the prophet would work on their side, on their behalf, in a way, speaking God’s correction, so that they would have the chance to change their behavior and affect God’s response to them. There was give and take.

In this case, Israel has used up their chances to be corrected. Israel has become so sinful, so oblivious to God and to God's ways that having Ezekiel try with his words to correct them and then to plead their case was now inappropriate. It was time for the two-way communication to become one-way; it was God's turn to speak.

This picture of God seems harsh, doesn't it? If I had been Ezekiel, I would have wanted to cross my arms, turn toward the backseat window and let the words flow even faster. But in Ezekiel chapter three there is nothing. Nothing but a prophet all tied up in his house, and silence.

The silencing reminds me of a parent giving a child a time-out after misbehaving. For Israel, it is a time-out on a large scale for them to sit and think about what they've done. Do you ever watch *The Super Nanny*? The TV show where they find the most obnoxiously misbehaved children in America and bring in a British babysitter to make everything right? Everything I know about parenting I've learned from *The Super Nanny*. Which is sad because I've only watched it three times. The one thing I think she does best is use "the naughty chair." In the first episode I watched, one little kid was sent to the naughty chair almost immediately by the Super Nanny. After 10 seconds, he got up. And then he went kicking and screaming when she sent him back. It turns out that he had never served a full time-out in his life because his parents had not enforced it. But the Super Nanny wouldn't stand for it. When *she* sent him to the naughty chair, he had to sit there the full 5 minutes and not say a word. If he did get up or talk, his time would start over. And he learned fairly quickly that she meant business. The first commercial break was filled with tension: Has the Super Nanny been too strict? Will this kid prove to be too much for her? Can the show even go on, or will TV stations have to fill the following 40 minutes with a re-run of Law and Order? But of course, by the time our TV hour is through, the Super Nanny is enjoying a picnic in the backyard with mom and dad and baby sister, and the boy who spent two solid days in the naughty chair is asking them if he could get them some more lemonade. The firm discipline of the Super Nanny has saved the day once again.

Watching *The Super Nanny* makes me think about the benefits of discipline. Many of the parents on this show are too tired or too afraid to lay down the law in their house, and their kids suffer for it. It's good for me as a parent to see this, to be reminded that children need to know their boundaries and to know when they've crossed one. Children who do not, who cannot, take their parents seriously will suffer.

I wonder, at this point in Israel's history, if Israel was not taking the judgment of God seriously. They were so used to playing the magpie, living and speaking without restraint, that they had forgotten how to listen to the corrective words of God. What if Israel's forced silence wasn't harsh punishment as much as it was God's gift to them? What if it was a chance to stop kicking and screaming, a chance to breathe, a chance to remember who they were called to be? Forced silence may have saved them from themselves.

It's easy to say that forced silence was exactly what Israel needed at that time, to study it as history that we hope never to repeat. But perhaps Ezekiel chapter three is a call to us to

take some time out and seriously consider God's judgment. The church is certainly no less sinful than the people of Israel. Try as we might to glorify God, we, too, are often oblivious to God and to God's ways. In the words of the PC(USA)'s Brief Statement of Faith, "we ignore God's commandments, violating the image of God in others and ourselves; we accept lies as truth, exploit neighbor and nature, and threaten death to the planet entrusted to our care." But somehow, perhaps because we are assured of forgiveness in Jesus Christ, we've tended to go light on our own sin, living unexamined lives. Unfortunately, without a clear understanding of our own sin, we cannot fully grasp and live in the grace of God.

How do we get to that place of sober understanding? By letting go of our need to fill empty moments with the sounds of our own voices. By being silent and listening for the voice of God.

When we start paying attention to other parts of scripture, we see how often silence provided the right conditions for repentance and growth: Moses, having fled from Egypt after killing a man, was watching flocks in silence, when God came to him in the burning bush (Exodus 3). The prophet Elijah, feeling faithless and fearful, waited for God to meet him on a mountain. God wasn't in the wind or the earthquake or the fire that came by, but in the sheer silence. Out of that silence, God spoke with Elijah, giving him a clear direction of what to do next (1 Kings 19:11ff). And then there's the forced silence of Zechariah, the would-be father of John the Baptist, who was struck mute for nine months because of his disbelief at having a son. For him, silence was the only thing that would make room for the mysterious birthing of grace. Silence saved these men from themselves and allowed them to listen like never before.

Henri Nouwen, the late Catholic priest and social activist who always had much to say, wrote a book called, *Out of Solitude*. In it, he says, "In solitude we can *listen* to the voice of him who spoke to us before we could speak a word, who healed us before we could make any gesture to help, who set us free long before we could free others, and who loved us long before we could give love to anyone." In solitude, in silence, we have a chance to listen to that gracious voice.

When God takes away Israel's ability to talk back to God in Ezekiel, when God essentially says, "It is my turn to speak and your turn to listen," God has a lot to say. We're reading Ezekiel chapter three today; after this, there are 33 chapters filled with God's words of judgment until we get to anything that remotely resembles hope. But without the thirty-three chapters, without the prolonged period of listening, Israel may not have recognized hope when they heard it.

What would happen if we were given a moratorium on speaking words to God? What if when we prayed, rather than bombard God with our words, we were to sit in silence – significant silence – and listen to what God had to say? We would have to expect that God would call to mind the ways we had fallen short. But if we were to wait long enough, past our own internal kicking and screaming, we would hear God's final word of grace to us – a word which was proclaimed 2,000 years ago after an excruciating weekend of silence

as Jesus lay in a tomb – and we would be transformed. Then, God would open our lips, and our mouths would proclaim God’s praise.