



Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church

Asheville, North Carolina

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Sermon: "Why Wait?"

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Isaiah 62:1-5

1 Corinthians 12:1-11

Stephen Schwartz's musical *Wicked* provides the big-Broadway back-story behind the Wizard's of Oz's most deliciously villainous villain "The Wicked Witch of West".

The musical is known for its top-notch special effects: a green lady on a broomstick "defies gravity," a giddy Glinda travels via bubble to help her new friend become "popular." Flying monkeys soar through the air and an out-of-the-blue twister sends a little Kansas farmhouse crashing down onto stage left.

But beyond this over-the-top, magic-to-do production is a very simple and familiar story of a friendship between two people – in this case, a good witch and a bad witch. Their partnership is one that helps to give them new strength and new voice to belt out passionate melodies of anger, justice, hope and angsty teenage love.

And then they sing in harmony – of their deep gratitude for one another saying, "because I knew you, I have been changed for good."

The Bible is filled with bitter and sweet partnerships like this one. Cain and Abel. Ruth and Naomi. Jacob and Leah. Moses and Pharaoh. Jesus and the Pharisees. These relationships developed in the midst of various moments of adversity, and partners had real, lasting impacts on one another.

They either inspired bursts of song,
hypnotic harmonies, or chilling silence.

~

Who taught you about the value of your voice?

Its place? Its reach?

Was it...

That music teacher telling you to lip sing for the winter recital?

A grandfather encouraging you to keep on writing poetry?

A mother *shhing* you around adults?

A spouse refusing to hear your point of view?

An older sibling - for the first time - turning to you for advice?

A fellow church member asking you for a prayer?

We know all too well, that there been times in our lives where our voices have been boosted up or completely shut down. We have all had those moments when we wanted so badly to speak out – in defense of ourselves or someone else - but instead we shrink to silence.

And we also know of the times we have spoken too harshly, too quickly, and we wish we could have taken a moment to breathe - and speak with greater wisdom and care.

The Jewish people in our text understood the importance of not keeping silent. For generations, their voices had been dismissed by all-powerful empires seeking to control their land and people. The Babylonians destroyed their homes, forced them out of Jerusalem - into exile – leaving them to sing songs of lament to God in a foreign land:

“By the rivers of Babylon
- there we sat down and there we wept
- when we remembered Zion.”

They cried as they waited and waited in the wilderness.

And when they were finally invited back home – they found their city, their holy temple - that they had been praying to return to for years – in tatters.

~

I am sure there are prayers in this room that have been prayed for again and again – and are still waiting for answers –

It could be:

that phone call from a son or daughter overseas saying, “I am safe”,
the words “I forgive you” from a friend who has grown so distant
an acceptance letter from the school of your dreams,
the doctor saying “you are cancer free”

We pray for many things, but when our prayers feel left in tatters - what do we do? What do we say? We can shake our fists, or pity ourselves, we can shut down, or get mad at God, we can even fade to total silence.

The Jewish people, in this time, found themselves in the midst of such a dilemma – all was not well. How surprising then that instead of putting the breaks on their faith, instead of giving God the silent treatment, instead of allowing those in power to dictate the truth, they chose to shout together, in full voice, a prayer of liberation:

“For Zion’s sake, I will not keep silent,
and for Jerusalem’s sake I will not rest
until her vindication shines out like the dawn
and her salvation like a burning torch.”

~

Breaking our silence is not always easy.

As a young teenager, poet Maya Angelou was sexually assaulted by her mother's boyfriend. When he was captured and killed, she blamed his death on her having told the truth. So frightened by the power of her own voice, she didn't speak a word for five years.

But in that difficult time, she met a partner who helped draw her out of her silence: her English teacher Mrs. Bertha Flowers. Mrs. Flowers began to introduce her to the works of Charles Dickens, and Edgar Allan Poe and Frances Harper. Through these masterful writers, Angelou built up the strength to discover her own unique voice.

In an interview late in life, she reflects on silence, saying: "My mother knew it was dangerous for me to stop speaking. And all these 69 years later, it is still so.

If I am really shaken, I stop speaking....And I then bring myself out. I start - I sing, I speak. I speak loudly and firmly. I recite Poe, and Shakespeare, and James Weldon Johnson. Because *mutism* is like a drug. It is so addictive. You don't have to do anything." ⁱ

~

We all know there are lots of ways our voices shut down.

Many of you may be familiar with a poem from years ago, written by a pastor imprisoned in a Nazi concentration camp. He writes:

"First they came for the Socialists, and I did not speak out—
Because I was not a Socialist.

Then they came for the Trade Unionists, and I did not speak out—
Because I was not a Trade Unionist.

Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—
Because I was not a Jew.

Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me." ⁱⁱ

~

There are certainly lots of voices out there.

There are plenty of voices that preach hate and division - who's in and who's out.

There are mighty voices that seek to marginalize others -
who claim to know God's heart to be one of exclusion and mercilessness.

There are even familiar voices in own lives - who have deeply disempowered us

Out of these places of shut down silence, that we are hearing right now, today, here is God's voice:

“You shall no more be termed Forsaken,
and your land shall no more be termed Desolate;
but you shall be called My Delight Is in Her,
and your land Married
for the LORD delights in you.”

At this very moment, God is equipping us for speaking.

In times of uncertainty, we need not wait on anything. God, as partner, is offering a promise of abundant hope

God is taking us up – as we are – in our brokenness and in our silence – forsaken and desolate

And God renames us: delight, married, partner, friend, disciple, leader, fellow traveler, beloved

No matter how arduous the journey ahead – God calls on us – all of us - to lift up our voices, time and time again, with kind and courageous prayers of liberation and renewal.

~

And these voices of hope can sometimes rise up in the most unlikely ways, and most unlikely places.

Last month, 20 Grace Covenant youth and adults headed to Nashville for our youth mission education trip. Our task for the weekend was a simple one - to do ministry – but it wasn't the sort of old-school, “paint a wall and pat yourself on the back ministry.” (As we well know, Jesus wasn't known for his masterful carpentry skills).

Instead we were there in Nashville - most importantly - to listen. To listen to the stories of our homeless sisters and brothers – folks who are so often ignored, written-off, or silenced.

One afternoon, we were given the task of packing our lunches in bags and packing an extra lunch for someone on the streets. We then split up into groups, and took our feet to the city, walking around in the cold – searching for different people in need - to share lunch and conversation.

We met a whole lot of different people along the way, ordinary folks with heartbreaking stories, and then there were those who stood out – those whose stories we couldn't help but carry home.

There was Crow, with a tattooed tear below his eye. He shared that his family had abandoned him once he got out of prison. The people he has met on the streets have become his family now. We asked how he keeps up hope day after day, He said with a smile, "God's got my back – always has – always will."

We met a homeless artist, who freely offered advice to our middle school boys, "Don't smoke, he said, "stay in school" and "listen to your parents – even if you don't always agree with them. They're trying to do what's right"

We encountered Joanne. She showed us pictures of her 16-year-old daughter Katelyn and said, "I am doing all I can to give my girl a better life then I ever had. All I need from you all – is your prayers."

A group of us bumped into Mike, a homeless newspaper salesman who upon seeing one of our youth, Sam shivering from the cold, opened up his bag and pulled out a knit hat and red scarf. "Here put this on." He said, "Take it. It's cold out there today."

They were living it. They are living it.
No more forsaken or desolate
you shall be called My Delight, married
for the LORD delights in you.

~

In this season of Lent, this season of wilderness walking,
God has given all of us words like this to speak and believe – here and now.
*What are the words you are wishing to speak into the broken places of our community,
of our world, of our own lives?*

Surely we can speak faithfully into these hard places –
with bold passion and deep grace

~

A few months ago, in Jackson Mississippi, 9 year old Aidan Sykes sat down with his father Albert to ask him about the day he was born.

"The doctor held you like a Sprite bottle, Albert said, "I thought he was being too rough with you, but he looked at me and said here's your baby. And that was the most proud moment of my life. It was like looking at a blank canvas and imagining what you want their painting to look like in the end, but you can't control their paint strokes. My fear was just, I got to bring up a black boy in Mississippi, which is just a tough place to bring up a kid period. There are statistics that say black boys born after the year 2002 have a one in three chance of going to prison. And all three of my sons were born after the year 2002."

"So Dad why do you take me to protests so much?" asks Aidan. Albert gently laughs,

"I want you to see what it looks like when people come together. But also that you understand that it is not just about people who are familiar to you, but its about everybody. Did you know that the work that Martin Luther King Jr. was doing was for everybody?"

"I understand that," answers Aidan. "What is your dream for me, Dad?"

"There's an old proverb about when children are born, they have their fists closed, but that's where they keep all of their gifts, and as you grow, your hands learn how to unfold because you learn to release your gifts to the world. So as you grow, I want you to learn to live with your hands unfolded."

~

God has created us to live open handed
– open hearted – clear voiced

God gives us everything we need to speak,
so that together we might be voices of justice and healing in this aching world.

God has given us this place, of diverse ideas and opinions
so that we might partner together in faith
and speak the gospel into spaces where God's voice is being drowned out.

God has freely given us God's Word
to be a living reminder that we need never be silent or alone in the wilderness.

Don't wait for things to be right.
Don't wait for a degree or title
Don't wait to grow up or grow confident
Don't wait for everything to be checked off the list first
God offers to walk along side us – work along side us – and speak through us.

So wherever you are today, whatever you are facing -
God's voice says you are not forsaken.

Whatever you have done, whatever you will do –
God's voice says you are not desolate.

You are God's delight. You are God's partner. We are God's partner.
God has equipped you for speaking.

Break your silence.

ⁱ "Maya Angelou: Finding My Voice." Online video clip of interview: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wVpRt1sxaM8>

ⁱⁱ The Reverend Friedrich Gustav Emil Martin Niemöller, version of the poem found in the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington D.C.