The Paradox of Our Faith: The Silence of Sound  

Many of you are already ahead of me this morning. The moment you heard or read the title of this sermon—“The Silence of Sound”—your memories immediately pushed B-17 in the jukebox of your brain and Simon and Garfunkel’s “The Sound of Silence” began playing:

Hello darkness, my old friend  
I've come to talk with you again  
Because a vision softly creeping  
Left its seeds while I was sleeping  
And the vision that was planted in my brain  
Still remains  
Within the sound of silence

Paul Simon wrote this song in 1964 when he was twenty-one years old. It was included in the first album he and Art Garfunkel recorded which sold only 2000 copies. Their career together nearly ended at that point until another arranger enhanced the song and it was included in the classic movie, The Graduate starring Dustin Hoffman. There are as many opinions as to the meaning of this classic song as there are copies of it on vinyl, tape, and plastic. At the time, our nation was in turmoil. Our President had been assassinated months earlier. We were involved in war. The Cold War was running hot. The struggle for civil rights was at a fever pitch. Surely Paul Simon understood that in the midst of the noise of rhetoric, argument, polemic, and coercion there was a good deal of silence when nothing truly meaningful was being said. Oftentimes when passions are stirred a lot of noise is made, but the most important matters are often enshrouded in silence.

There is a great deal of sound in our lives today. There is hardly a time when we are not surrounded by or involved with sound. Radios, televisions, stereos, IPods, telephones, IPads, and laptops talk, sing, and play for us constantly. The noise of traffic, conversations, construction, copiers, and

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other machines is non-stop. At the close of most days, if we were asked about the various sounds we had heard, the songs we had listened to, even some of the conversations we had, we would likely be clueless. There is so much noise that we do not listen. We are surrounded by sound, but we treat it as silence. Sound is silence when it has no real meaning for us.

And in the naked light I saw
Ten thousand people, maybe more
People talking without speaking
People hearing without listening
People writing songs that voices never share
And no one dared
Disturb the sound of silence²

When we replay the familiar story of Jesus’ entry into the city of Jerusalem on the Sunday before his crucifixion on Friday, we encounter another of the paradoxes of our faith which I call the Silence of Sound.

For three years Jesus had been teaching, preaching, talking, and sharing what was on God’s heart with anyone who would listen. Many people heard him, and a few really paid attention, but for so many people, his words were silence. They were white noise which blocked out all the sounds they did not want to hear so they could hear only what they wanted to hear. They heard that Jesus was the long awaited Messiah. They heard that he could heal the sick, give sight to the blind, make the crippled walk, and even bring the dead back to life. They heard that he was going to deliver his people and set them free from brutal oppression.

So, stirred by all the hearsay being bantered about regarding Jesus, people in the villages of Bethany and Bethphage were eager for a celebration. Captivated by the stories of Lazarus being raised from the dead, the crowds were convinced that the Messiah had come. Swept up in the fervor that erupted when Jesus climbed onto the back of a donkey, the crowd passed rumors like a California wildfire. Shouts, songs, and cheers went up all along their short journey into Jerusalem. There was a lot of sound, but it silenced the truth of what was about to happen. On Sunday all the noise was about the triumphal entry of a Messiah, but on Friday the silence was because he had been crucified on a cross.

²Simon.
Had they not understood who he was? Had they failed to listen to what he said was his mission? In that first sermon he preached in his hometown of Nazareth, he read from the scroll of Isaiah,

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

Luke 4:18-19

It was what they wanted to hear. It was what they and their parents and grandparents and all of their ancestors had longed to hear. Finally God was going to set things right. Finally God’s people would get everything they had been promised through the years. Finally justice would be done and the Romans would be sent packing.

All went well with Jesus’ first sermon until he began talking about justice including all people. Everyone was smiling and saying “Amen” until he reminded them that God showed favor on people who were not like them. The air was filled with praise until he suggested that God’s Messiah had come for all the world and not only for a select few. The complimentary remarks turned critical. Their pride became poison. The praise and adulation turned into ridicule and condemnation. It was as if Jesus had said nothing worthy of remembering. The silence of sound pushed him to the brink of a hill just as it would carry him to the cross three years later.

Every once in a while we have to ask ourselves whether or not we get it. Week after week we hear a lot about what Jesus did and what it all means. We talk a lot about what is important in the world and what ought to be done. We are told by a variety of people what matters most in life. We sing. We pray. We preach. There is a lot of sound that accompanies the Gospel, but what about the silence that sometimes surrounds our faith? In the midst of all the noise, do we hear the Gospel of Jesus Christ?

A Palm Sunday faith is fun and energetic. After long weeks of introspection and contemplation, it is joyous and celebratory. It cannot be silenced. Jesus told the Pharisees who warned him to quiet his followers that even if he did hush them the stones would shout out. Apathy can be quiet, but conviction and truth will never be silenced. And yet, by the end of the week, there was silence. The sounds of celebration on Palm Sunday became the silence of fear and disbelief on Friday. The paradox of our faith is that if
we are not careful, the faith that seems so vibrant on Sunday can wilt under the pressures and fears of Friday.

Palm Sunday is an entry into this important week, but it is only an entry point. It is not the end of the journey. Lent is not over. Our quest is not finished. And the question for our faith on Palm Sunday is do we believe that Easter Sunday will make a difference in our lives and in the world? Do we believe that what Jesus promised in Nazareth is fulfilled in Jerusalem? Do we believe in the redemptive work of Jesus Christ for all the world or is there only silence in all the sound?

Over the past two weeks, the world has been awed by the behavior of Pope Francis. We are used to seeing a Pope who is the symbolic leader of the Roman Catholic Church. We are accustomed to the royalty of the papacy with all of its extravagant trappings. We are not used to a Pope who carries his own luggage and pays his own bill from money in his pocket. We are not used to a Pope who mingles in the crowds and rubs elbows with the rest of us on public buses. For some people, I am certain Francis’ behavior is not befitting a pontiff, but for a servant of Jesus Christ it is right on target. The new Pope’s behavior speaks volumes that his words alone will never convey.

The message of the Gospel of Jesus Christ is that redemption, mercy, and justice is for all people. I hope that the Pope and every other believer in the world will fully grasp that message this Easter. I hope that we will hear it not only in the sermons of Palm Sunday and Easter Sunday, but also in the silence of Maundy Thursday and Good Friday. I pray that the silence of Saturday when we remember that Jesus lay in the tomb and all creation held its breath wondering if any of it had been true will remind us that the Gospel is Good News for all of us.

It is Sunday, and we are excited about Jesus entering the city of Jerusalem like a king. It is Sunday, but Friday is coming when he will be nailed to a cross.

It is Sunday, and the Good News of the Gospel appears to be coming to fruition, but it is Sunday and Friday is coming when all of the injustices in the world will be apparent on the hill of Calvary.

It is Sunday and there is much noise about God’s Messiah. It is Sunday, but Friday is coming and there are many people who have not heard or experienced this Good News. There is hunger and poverty, prejudice and
hatred, war and retaliation, bickering and back-biting. There is a lot of noise on Sunday that sometimes silences the reality of the Gospel for the rest of the week. But it is Sunday, and Friday is coming.

Thank God it is Jesus who rides the donkey into Jerusalem and not someone who will bask in the accolades and exploit those few minutes of fame. Thank God it is Jesus who continues to teach on the steps of the temple, defy the arrogant authorities, and touch the lives of the people around him. Thank God it is Jesus who is willing to take on the task of a servant and demonstrate to all his disciples what it means to be called of God. Thank God it is Jesus who does not turn and run when the sounds of an angry mob attack him. Thank God it is Jesus who endures the cries for his crucifixion from the very people he came to love. And thank God that it is Jesus who on the cross speaks into the silence and begs for mercy for us all.

It is Palm Sunday and the sounds of faith are all around us. Let us be certain that they are sounds of faith and not the silence of our own fears and desires. Let us be certain that the sounds of this week do not silence the voice of our hopeful and redemptive faith. Amen.
Almighty and Merciful God, we join our hearts and voices with those of old as we wave our palms and shout our Hosannas in praise to you. We are grateful for your presence among us, for the example of mercy and sacrifice demonstrated by our Lord, and for the suffering he endured for our sake. We are grateful for our own call to live lives of discipleship and obedience so that we might reflect your goodness to those we encounter. We are grateful for the voices of children that inspire and challenge us to follow you with a childlike faith. For these and every gift that we receive from your generous hand, we offer our thanks and praise.

We are also aware, Gracious God, that like those of Christ's first disciples, our shouts of "Hosanna!" will all too soon become cries of "Crucify Him!" and our praises will turn into jeers and denials. Even as we prepare to celebrate the most significant and joyful observance of our faith, we must first pass through the betrayals of Maundy Thursday and the grief of Good Friday. May the darkness and difficulty of the coming days prepare us for ministry in the dark and difficult places of our world. Grant that we might offer healing to the sick and hurting, companionship to the lonely, compassion to the needy, peace to those who suffer violence and hope to those in despair. Give us courage as we walk through this sacred week that we might be ready to receive the fullness of your Resurrection grace. In the name of Jesus the Christ and by the power of your Holy Spirit we offer these and all our prayers. Amen.

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