



Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina
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THE FIFTH SUNDAY IN LENT
LISTENING ALONGSIDE: ECHOING CHRIST

Listen to the Silence
I Kings 19:9-13a; Luke 15:11-24

Tracy Jessup, Senior Minister at Gardner-Webb University, recently wrote about an article on patience that was in *The New York Times* a few years ago. An airport in Houston, Texas was receiving an enormous number of complaints from passengers about lengthy wait times at baggage claim. The response was to hire additional baggage handlers which reduced the wait time to eight minutes, but the complaints persisted. A more detailed study revealed that passengers walked one minute from the arrival gates to reach the baggage claim area; however, they had to wait seven more minutes to get their bags. Thus, 88% of their time was spent waiting.

Rather than trying to further reduce wait times, the solution was to move the arrival gates out of the main terminal and send all of the baggage to the furthest carousel. Even though passengers had to walk six times further to claim their bags, the complaints essentially stopped. Alex Stone, the author of the article, concluded that “occupied time (walking to baggage claim) feels shorter than unoccupied time (standing at the [baggage] carousel).”¹ It also reveals that we little patience for waiting.

We do not like to wait. No one likes to wait to see their doctor. We move from line to line at the grocery store to get into the shortest line (which somehow manages to take even longer). I had a friend who refused to go anywhere he had to wait in line: restaurants, movie theaters, or sporting events. He could not tolerate waiting.

There are other pauses in life that are difficult to withstand: waiting for medical test results which may take a few hours, a couple of days, or a week; waiting for college admissions notices or confirmation of a new job; waiting for a loved one to come home; waiting for an exciting event to take place; waiting for a loved one to get better . . . or not. The reality is that life hits the pause button more often than we like and we do not always handle those pauses well. And, to make matters worse, instead of regular updates on what is

¹Alex Stone, “Why Waiting Is Torture,” *The New York Times* (August 18, 2012), as cited in Tracy Jessup, *Monday Mornings*, devotional blog, (January 16, 2017).

happening or a sign that counts down our wait time, we often hear nothing but silence.

Earlier we heard a portion of the story of the Prophet Elijah's escape from the wrath of Queen Jezebel. Elijah had upset the Queen when he challenged her prophets of Ba'al to a "divine duel" in which their god was pitted against his God to see which one could set fire to a stack of wood first. The prophets of Ba'al prayed and begged and cried out to their god to send fire. But nothing happened. Then Elijah soaked his woodpile with water to add a little interest to the contest and, as soon as he prayed, God lit the woodpile with a bolt of lightning and Elijah lit into the false prophets and killed them all. That's when he got the idea to run away because he knew Jezebel would not be happy. When he stopped to catch his breath, he started feeling sorry for himself. Considering all that he had done on God's behalf, he thought God should have done more to protect him. He whined and commiserated until God did send angels to feed him. Then God invited Elijah to Mount Horeb (also known as Sinai) to meet him. At last, the prophet's dream of speaking directly with God would be fulfilled. Elijah found a cave in the mountain where he could spend the night safely and God told him that he was about to pass by and to go out and stand on the ledge. There was a fierce windstorm, but no God. There was an earthquake, but no God. There was a fire, but no God. Finally, there was nothing but silence, and Elijah stepped outside. He had wanted to meet God or at least to see God pass by as Moses had done, but after all that waiting, Elijah got nothing but silence. You and I feel a lot like Elijah at times.

One of the most familiar stories of waiting in all of scripture is the one we know as the Parable of the Prodigal Son, but which is also known as the Parable of the Waiting Father. Listen again:

Then Jesus said, "There was a man who had two sons. The younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.' So he divided his property between them. A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. But when he came

to himself he said, 'How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.'" So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. Then the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' But the father said to his slaves, 'Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!' And they began to celebrate. Luke 15:11-24

Most parents want their children to find their way in the world, even if it means leaving home, but this young man obviously made some very poor choices. He squandered his money and found himself broke and hungry and living among pigs, which for a Jew was the ultimate disgrace. Given his condition, I doubt the pigs liked it very much either. The father had no clue as to what was happening with his son or whether he was even alive. Nevertheless, the father waited.

We don't know how long he waited. It might have been a few weeks or months or years. Plug in whatever time frame seems unbearable to you and you'll understand what he felt. However long it was, we do know that he kept waiting. Fathers do that. Mothers, too. A couple of Christmases ago, Catherine gave me a pair of coffee mugs. One had the outline of North Carolina on it and the other one had the outline of New York State on it. There are dots tracing a path from one state to the other and each has a part of a quote from *The Wonder Years*, a show we both enjoyed. One part of the quote speaks of the special relationship fathers and daughters share and the other one says, "Still, some things are deeper than time and distance, and your father will always be your father. And he will always leave a light on for you." The same thing goes for sons, and this father left light a light on for his boy and waited. And all he heard was silence.

Most of us do not like to wait—and we like silence even less. Silence makes us uncomfortable. I admit that when I am alone in our house, I often turn on the radio to fill the quiet. Most of you would agree that when you

check into a hotel, the first thing you do is turn on the TV. Some of you who live alone may leave a radio or TV on in every room of your house to blunt the silence and make it seem less lonely. Waiting is hard and silence makes it all the more difficult.

There is, of course, nothing such as absolute silence, at least not while we are alive. Do you remember the story of the anechoic chamber at Harvard University which the musician John Cage entered expecting to experience total silence for the first time in his life? Instead, he heard two sounds, one high and one low: the sound of his nervous system and the sound of his circulatory system, reminding him that he was alive. Even when we wait to hear what we desperately want to hear, there are reminders that life goes on all around us.

Because we live, waiting silence—as relative as it may be—offers us more than a frustrating and uncomfortable waste of time before we get on with life; waiting silence allows us the opportunity to reset, to reassess, to think, to ponder, to pray. Like Elijah on the mountain, waiting silence actually might be a direct meeting with God. What if we begin to think of our wait times as “holy pauses” which hold great potential for us? What if our waiting offers opportunity for us to experience the grace of God and to hear God speak?

In the Lyman Beecher Lectures a few years ago, Barbara Brown Taylor suggested that when we pray, we tend to do all the talking primarily because we are afraid that God won't speak or, sometimes, that God will speak. God's silence is threatening to us, so we fill the air with our words. She noted that when her parishioners would come to talk with her, it was not to share what God had said; instead, it was to complain that God was not speaking at all.²

Our book of faith is the Bible which is all about God speaking. God speaks creation into existence. God called Abram and Sarai to go to an unknown land and begin a nation of his people. God summoned Moses to set his people free and dictated the Ten Words which still guide us today. God spoke to prophets and priests and poets and folks like you and me. Throughout scripture we often hear God speak. And then we discover that God is often silent as well.

²Barbara Brown Taylor, *When God Is Silent: The 1997 Lyman Beecher Lectures on Preaching* (Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 1998), 51.

There was that terrible silence between the moment Abraham heard God tell him to sacrifice his only son Isaac and the moment he raised his knife above the boy's body. There was total silence during the four hundred years of Hebrew slavery in Egypt until God met Moses at a burning bush in the desert. God was largely silent during the forty year sojourn in the desert and did not always speak promptly when his people returned to the Promised Land. And for long years, the Hebrew people heard nothing as they waited for God's Messiah to come.

When the action picked up, there was still more silence. Zechariah was silenced for the nine months as his son whom we know as John the Baptist grew in his mother's womb. When Jesus prayed fervently in the Garden of Gethsemane he heard only silence. After Jesus spoke his final words on the cross, silence hung heavy in the air. And the three day silence of the tomb was more than many of the grieving disciples could bear.

Was God silent because God was absent? Is God absent now? Is God's silence some cruel joke, a test to see how long we will hang on without giving up? Or is the silence an attempt to get us to pay attention? I suspect that the silent waiting we experience from time to time is exactly what Elijah experienced on the holy mountain. We are programmed to think of God in ways that feed our concept of God—wind and storm and fire, for example—things to which we really pay little attention. Yet God is so different from what we want God to be for us that often the only time we can truly experience God is when we shut out the sounds and sights that scream "God" at us and look for God in the silence that prevails.

The spring term of my junior year in college was a difficult time for me. I had to confront some of the attitudes and needs and actions that were mine. I was anxious and lonely and confused. My prayers seemed empty and unfocused. Somewhere I heard that the purest prayer we could utter is simply the word "Father," a testament to the relationship we have with God. At a moment when the waiting and silence were more than I could bear, I prayed over and over, "Father. Father. Father." My prayer was nothing more than an acknowledgment of whom I believed God to be for me.

Barbara Brown Taylor reminded me of that experience when she wrote about an ancient Sufi teaching that tells of a man who constantly spoke the words, "Allah! Allah!" until they became sweet on his lips. One day a skeptic taunted him by saying that he heard the man pray day after day but he had never heard a response. "Where are the answers to your prayers," his

challenger asked? Having no answer to that biting question, the man gave up his prayers altogether. When he slept, he dreamed that he was in a garden and the soul guide named Khazir was walking toward him.

“‘Why did you stop praising?’ the saint asked him. ‘Because I never heard anything back,’ the man said. ‘This longing you voice *is* the return message,’ Khazir told him.

The grief you cry out from
draws you toward union.

Your pure sadness
that wants help
is the secret cup.

Listen to the moan of a dog
for its master.
That whining is the connection.

There are love dogs
no one knows the names of.

Give your life
to be one of them.”³

In the very act of stepping out onto the ledge to find God, Elijah met God in the silence which enveloped him. In his persistent waiting for his son to return, the father maintained his relationship with his lost child. In the prayer which asks nothing more than the bond between parent and child, we discover that we are not alone. Waiting offers us space to look for God and silence allows us to hear God in fresh ways. The key is to continue doing what we are doing to seek God. Airline passengers who walked a short distance to do nothing but wait on their bags were frustrated and irritated. Those same passengers who spent an even longer time walking to get to their bags felt like their time was purposeful. If we do nothing but fold our hands and wait for God to speak, we will likely hear nothing. If we go about our

³Taylor, citing a combination of two tellings of the story: A.J. Arberry, *Tales from the Masnavi* and Coleman Barks translation of *Rumi*. The eleven lines of verse are from Rumi, “Love Dogs,” in *The Essential Rumi*, translated by Coleman Barks with John Moyne, A.J. Arberry, and Reynold Nicholson (San Francisco: Harper, 1995), 155; 78-9.

business and keep our eyes and ears open, we will likely find God in surprising places.

Lent is not a period of time to sit and wait for Jesus to rise from the tomb; instead, it is an opportunity to make the most of the journey while we follow Christ to the Garden of Resurrection. Our waiting is an opportunity to discover what it is that we truly long for and the silence we encounter may well be the voice of God speaking in our hearts. Listen to the silence and discover God in familiar and surprising ways. Amen.

April 2, 2017

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

O God, who speaks to us and who hears us speak, who hears our pleas and calls us by name, indeed we wait upon you knowing that your great mercy toward your children will never fail. We thank you, O Lord, that you have called us to be your people and have given us one another for encouragement and companionship. We thank you that even when we run from you, like a loving parent, you wait patiently to welcome us home. We thank you for the abundance of your blessings and all the ways that you nurture and sustain us. Come into our waiting hearts and replace our emptiness and insecurities with your presence and peace. Create within us a longing to know you and the ability to discern your voice when you call.

Forgive us, Righteous God, when you call and we do not hear, when we are so distracted by all the noise and the busyness around us that we fail to recognize your voice. Forgive us when our ears are not tuned to hear the messages you have for us. Forgive us most of all when we hear your voice and the cries of those who suffer around us and we are too preoccupied or apathetic to respond. In this season of Lent, O Lord, as we travel with Christ along his wilderness journey, teach us, once again, to be still and know that you are God. Teach us to make space for solitude and silence in our lives and in our hearts, and help us to listen attentively for the quiet murmurings of your Spirit.

Merciful God, we pray not only for ourselves but also for those in our community, and around the world who live in need and in despair. We pray for those who are sick and ask that you empower us to bring healing, in your name. We pray for those who suffer abuse and violence and ask that you equip us to be peacemakers among them. We pray for those who mourn and for those who are lonely and ask that you help us to bring them comfort. In circumstances where chaos and conflict seem to reign, may we live as ministers of reconciliation. For those whose lives are stifled by suffering and hopelessness, may we be messengers of your hope and peace. Empower us to be creative and diligent in meeting their needs, drawing not from our own strength or merit, but from trusting in your mercy and power. In the name of the One who gives us abundant life for today and hope for the days to come, we pray. Amen.

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