

Luke 23:33-43 & Luke 1:68-2

³³ When they came to the place that is called The Skull,
they crucified Jesus
there with the criminals,
one on his right and one on his left.
And they cast lots to divide his clothing.

³⁵ And the people stood by, watching;
but the leaders scoffed at him, saying,
“He saved others;
let him save himself
if he is the Messiah of God,
his chosen one!”

⁶⁸“Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,
for he has looked favorably on his people
and redeemed them.

⁶⁹He has raised up
a mighty savior for us
in the house of his servant David,
⁷⁰as he spoke through the mouth
of his holy prophets from of old,
⁷¹that we would be saved from our enemies
and from the hand of all who hate us.

³⁶ The soldiers also mocked him,
coming up and offering him sour wine, ³⁷ and saying,
“If you are the King of the Jews,
save yourself!”

³⁸ There was also an inscription over him,
“This is the King of the Jews.”

³⁹ One of the criminals
who were hanged there
kept deriding him and saying,
“Are you not the Messiah?
Save yourself and us!”

⁷²Thus he has shown the mercy
promised to our ancestors,

and has remembered his holy covenant,
⁷³the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham,
to grant us ⁷⁴that we,
being rescued from the hands of our enemies,
might serve him without fear,
⁷⁵in holiness and righteousness
before him all our days.

⁴⁰ But the other rebuked him, saying,
“Do you not fear God,
since you are under the same sentence of condemnation?”

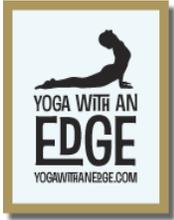
⁴¹ And we indeed have been condemned justly,
for we are getting
what we deserve for our deeds,
but this man has done nothing wrong.”

⁴² Then he said, “Jesus, remember me
when you come into your kingdom.”

⁴³ He replied, “Truly I tell you,
today you will be with me in Paradise.”

⁷⁶And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High;
for you will go before the Lord
to prepare his ways,
⁷⁷to give knowledge of salvation to his people
by the forgiveness of their sins.
⁷⁸By the tender mercy of our God,
the dawn from on high will break upon us,
⁷⁹to give light to those who sit in darkness
and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the way of peace.”

Silence Broken Open



Years ago, Tripp, Katherine, Stuart and I
took a community yoga class downtown.

My favorite part was the end,
when we did corpse pose.

Yoga was harder than I thought,
and of course

Tripp was better at the poses than I was,
so, corpse pose at the end
was a great equalizer.

For those of you that don't know,
corpse pose is exactly what it sounds like.

You lie there on your back like a corpse.

You let go;
you close your eyes,
you let your muscles relax
and there is silence.



You are supposed to concentrate
on your breathing,
slow inhale, slow exhale.

The instructor would guide you a little,
but mostly, this was a time of rest

—it was silent except
for maybe the soft music in the background.
When the instructor ended our time,
she would gradually call you
from the rest/slumber,
relaxation.
*Wiggle your toes or
begin to move your fingers.*
I was always sad the silence ended.

There is a shortage of silence in our lives,
don't you think?
Even the thought of silence
can cause panic in some of us
—me included.
I think I want it,
until I have it,
and then it can be deafening.
NPR did an article last year
on a group called, One Square Inch of Silence,
whose mission it is
to find a spot in the continental US
where no human noise
could be heard.
The criteria for this silence,
is that no human noise disrupts
the natural sounds for at least 15 minutes.

The group's founder, Gordon Hempton
speculates that there are fewer
than 10 places in the US
where human noise can't be heard:
anything from voices and music
to cars, trains, airplanes,
air-conditioning units—
a place where all that noise ceases.
One square inch of human noise free space,
means that for miles around that inch,
there is only natural sound.

One such place
is the Hoh Rain Forest
in Washington's Olympic National Park.¹
The non-profit's goal
is to secure places for listening;
for places of natural silence
to exist so that we can truly hear.



So, what does that one square inch sound like?
Here's a bit;
take a listen.

<https://www.npr.org/2018/08/10/633201540/are-you-listening-hear-what-uninterrupted-silence-sounds-like>

(Play at 6:16- 6:22 and pause it...)

The reporter from the NPR story
stayed for almost an hour
in that spot and came out, teary.
Listen to what he says:

(play again, 6:23-7:24)

The silence was a gift.

In small ways
we are treated to this gift of silence.
Have you ever been running errands
and decided to turn the radio off
and just drive?
Have you ever sat in your house,
when no one was there
and just let yourself be still in the silence?
Would we *ever* entertain
a much longer silence,

¹ <https://www.npr.org/2018/08/10/633201540/are-you-listening-hear-what-uninterrupted-silence-sounds-like>

here in this space
after our time of confession?
The silence in these stories Luke tells,
is a gift and it is a silence
not often heard.

Zechariah is rendered mute and silent
for longer than 9 months.

His silence must have been so loud.
He doesn't speak until after his son is born,
and when he does speak,
his song says more
than his words alone could.

Jesus, after uttering, *you say so*
when questioned by Pilate,
does not speak;
he endures his trial before Pilate in silence
and Herod's taunts in silence;
he hears the crowds shout *crucify him*,
and he remains silent.

In Matthew's gospel,
Jesus doesn't talk to women like he does in Luke
and only cries out when he gives up his spirit
on the cross.

In our reading here,
Jesus finally speaks from the cross
and they are words that we cling to,
desperate for their truth.

In these stories Luke tells,
both Zechariah and Jesus are silent
until just the right moment.
In both stories,
silence is a gift
—and when it is broken open,
we are given more
than we could ask for.



These stories are our beginnings and endings.

Humble and terrifying.

This is last Sunday in the liturgical year;

Advent begins next week and
starts our church calendar anew.

The church calendar year
is more like a loop than a straight line.

It tends to curve around on itself,²

and that is why we are reading

a Good Friday text

on the last day of the church year;

the crucifixion coupled with

the prophetic song

of John and Jesus's births.

This taste of pre-Advent

where we wait for the baby

and anticipate the coming and reign of Christ;

and this taste of pre-resurrection

where we wait for Jesus to rise from death

and anticipate the coming and reign of Christ's kingdom

are the tension

where the church

and her faithful people live.

These stories are the dissonance

that womanist, theologian Delores Williams recalls

from growing up in the South

in her African American church.

She remembers Sunday mornings

when the minister shouted out:

"Who is Jesus?"

² Paul D. Duke, Calling Forth the Kingdom (Living by the Word Christian Century, November 8, 1995)

The choir responded in voices loud and strong:

"King of kings and Lord Almighty!"

Then, little Miss Huff,

in a voice so fragile and soft

you could hardly hear,

would sing her own answer,

"Poor little Mary's boy."

Back and forth they sang –

KING OF KINGS...Poor little Mary's boy.

Delores said, "It was the Black church

doing theology."

Who is Jesus?

"King of Kings" cannot be the answer

without seeing "poor little Mary's boy."³

We cannot rally behind Christ the King

without having the story

of his fragile birth tied

to his devastating death.

Because our proclamation of his reign

will always hold those two images in tension

with what our culture holds

as valuable and necessary for power.

In a culture and climate

that is crowded with often violent noise—

where going to school, Walmart or church

could be peppered with the sound

of gun shots and screams;

where speeches, campaigns and rallies

are filled with slurs, digs, and hate

where our rhetoric is hijacked to tear us apart

rather than bring us together

where freedom of speech now means

freedom to be mean and disrespectful;

³ Barbara Lundblad,

<https://day1.org/articles/5d9b820ef71918cdf200338c/on-scripturethe-bible-barbara-lundblad-a-different-kind-of-king-john-18-33-37>

where happenstances conversations
are stifled because of earbuds and smartphones
—our discernment becomes
what to do with all this noise?

Who's voice will we believe
and rally behind?
Who will we retweet
and whose op ed article will we share?



Silence.

Jesus is silent
as they cast lots for his meager clothing
—it cannot be much,
how could a traveling rabbi
from a small town afford a nice robe?
Jesus is silent as the leaders scoff at him saying,
'he saved others
let him save himself,
if he is the chosen one!'

Jesus is silent as the soldiers mock him,
offering him soured wine
—can you imagine your thirst
as you slowly die, painfully hanging from a cross
and have foul smelling, soured wine
thrust in your face?

Jesus is silent as the soldiers mock him,
'if you are King of the Jews,
save yourself!'

The King of Kings and Lord Almighty is silent
as one of the thieves next to him derides him,

“Are you not the Messiah?
Save yourself and us!”
Poor little Mary’s boy.

Silence.

Zechariah hears Gabriel’s chiding remark,
‘I am Gabriel.

I stand in the presence of God,
and I have been sent to speak to you
and bring you this good news.
But now, because you did not believe my words,
which will be fulfilled in their time,
you will become mute,
unable to speak,
until the day these things occur.’

Silence.

Zechariah is desperate to tell Elizabeth
and the other priests what he has seen.
His head is swimming
with the undeniable of what
he has just encountered.
He was only giving the incense offering
and now he’s been rendered mute,
incommunicado.

He wants to tell them what happened.
He wants to shout for joy
when Elizabeth confirms that yes,
she is in fact pregnant
even though she’s too old.
He wants to tell his coffee and bagel group of priest buddies
all about what it was like
to be in the presence of Gabriel—
how the messenger filled the whole room!

He wants to tell everyone
how foolish he feels for doubting
the good news he's received
...but instead,
he is silent.

Zechariah wants to tell Mary
about his visit from Gabriel
and ask her questions about hers.
He wants to laugh and cry out
when Elizabeth is filled with the spirit
and sings for Mary and her baby.
And oh, when the Elizabeth gives birth
—how he longs for his son to hear his voice.
He wants to tell him how perfect he is,
his little toes and fingers.
And that adorable yawn.
But he doesn't,
he is silent.

In Jewish tradition,
the 8th day is something to take note of.
God finishes the work of creation
and rested on the 7th day.
We know the value of 7 days.
But the 8th day is different.
The 8th day is special.
The 8th day signals a new creation,
a new dawning of time.

On the 8th day baby John cries out at his circumcision;
this new creation breaking the silence.
It is the 8th day that Zechariah,
confirming that his son's name will be John:
that his silence is broken open;
shattering the noise of violence,
oppression, destruction and death—
it is the 8th day when Zechariah sings,

⁷⁸By the tender mercy of our God,
the dawn from on high will break upon us,
⁷⁹to give light to those who sit in darkness
and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the way of peace.”

(pause)

There, hanging in the stench
and shadow of death,
are three men.
And while there has been lots of noise,
one of them has yet to speak or cry out.
Another man, desperate, dying,
cries out to the one who is silent,
‘Is it true?
Are you the Messiah?
Please—save yourself and us!’

Silence.

It has never been about saving himself.
None of this has been about anything
that is self-serving.
It has always been other centered;
it has always been about love, justice, mercy,
forgiveness, freedom, abundant life
—*save yourself*
doesn’t play a part
in this drama at all.

And in my emptying,
my unwavering will to see this thing through,
even here on the cross,
my dying is me saving you.
That’s what no one seems to understand.

⁷⁶And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High;
for you will go before the Lord
to prepare his ways,

⁷⁷to give knowledge of salvation to his people
by the forgiveness of their sins.

Talk of salvation hangs thick in the air
—Jesus remains silent.⁴

*Jesus, remember me
when you come into your kingdom.*

Just as the 8th day broke Zechariah's silence,
it is the mention of kingdom
from the heart of a criminal
that breaks Golgotha's silence.



The place called the skull.
In Jerusalem,
the spot that may fit that description
is a bus station.
Noisy.
Lots of groups of pilgrims and tourist.
Anything but silent.
The place of the skull
where Jesus is dying and hears
a thief call to him,
*Jesus, remember me
when you come into your kingdom.*

Odd, since nothing about their situation
would indicate that there is any reason
to hope in a promised kingdom.

⁴ Patrick J. Wilson, Luke 23:33-43, Feasting on the Word, Year C, Vol. 4 Eds. David L. Bartlett, Barbara Brown Taylor (Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY 2010) pg. 335

This is the place of the skull,
where Rome hangs up rebels and criminals,
all that are a threat
to peace and security.

This is where Rome crucifies people
as a sign and warning,
do not do what these men did.

In all that noise, *Jesus remember me,*
hangs in the air –echoing Ps. 25:7,
“Do not remember the sins of my youth
or my transgressions;
according to your steadfast love remember me,
for your goodness sake O Lord!”

Do not remember me
according to my wickedness
but remember me
according to your goodness.⁵

The silence is broken open
as Christ turns to him and say,
‘Today, you will be with me in paradise.’
He could have just as well said,

“by the tender mercy of our God,
the dawn from on high will break upon us,
to give light to those who sit in darkness
and in the shadow of death
to guide our feet into the way of peace.”

Friends, we may need to find a path
that will take us from all the noise.
So that the silence might hold for us
what it held for Zechariah and Jesus
—promise of what is to come.

⁵ ibid

May we find silence that holds anticipation
of the new creation;
the anticipation of the reign
of a new king;
the anticipation that in our darkness
a **dawn** is about to break.

A dawn where sin is forgiven
and we are remembered
in light of God's goodness.

May any air of silence be thick with a promise of salvation.

May the silence surprise us
and overwhelm us.
May the silence we crave
be one pregnant with divine possibilities.

"Blessed be the Lord God of Israel
for he has looked favorable on his people
and redeemed them."

Amen.