

Don't Keep Silent
A Sermon for Sardis Baptist Church
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Luke 9:28-36
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“And they kept silent and in those days told no one any of the things they had seen.”

This verse of today's lection haunts me.

Think about it. Peter, James, and John follow Jesus up a mountain. And at its peak, they witness a miraculous event: Jesus turns Tide-white, and Elijah and Moses appear, and a cloud envelops them. And inside of this terrifying cloud (terrifying in every sense of the word; for they are awestruck with wonder and frightened breathless at the same time), inside of this terrifying cloud, they hear God's voice, and it says, “Jesus is my child, my chosen, and you need to listen to him.”

How often do we get to see and hear and witness the presence of God in such a direct manner?!? Not very. That's not to say that God's presence isn't often revealed, it's just to say that most of the time, God's revelation is veiled. But not here. Not In this place.

And what do these three men do? They act like a bunch of men. They bottle it up, and they shove it deep, deep down inside their souls, and they swallow it. And they don't say a word. Not one. First rule of Transfiguration Club. You do NOT talk about Transfiguration Club.

Now I know some of you in the congregation have read this text, and the versions from its sister gospels many times. And you may quickly point out to me the wonderful movement from speaking to hearing to silence in this passage. Peter, in the midst of all this goodness, can't just be quiet and enjoy it – he suggests the construction of a residential development to mark the significance of the event. God's thundering voice ends that suggestion, and the men are instructed to listen, which they do. And then they leave that place in silence. And of course, Jesus is silent throughout this scene too – he lets his newfound transcendence speak for itself.

And maybe Luke wants us to believe that the disciples' silence is a way to echo the example of Jesus. They don't laud their inclusion in this experience, nor do they use it to promote their own welfare. And of course, in Mark's gospel, Jesus often encourages his followers to tell no one, because “it's a secret.”

The problem though, is that these three did keep silent – there's no evidence to show the mountaintop occurrence informs their voice, and most certainly not their faiths, as Jesus makes his way to Jerusalem. Their silence is palpable on a dark Friday and even on a bright Sunday. The voices of women at an empty tomb defy such silence, and thank goodness!!! It's only after the resurrection events that Peter and James and John decide to break their silence.

My objective today is not to discredit these men – they more than atoned for their silence in their work to develop the early church. And it's because they eventually found their voices that we know the story of the Christ.

And my objective today is not to get bogged down by the details of transfiguration – it's a really bizarre event – one that's hard to make much sense out of. And quite frankly, I think we can find a better use of

our time. And honestly, I'm sure one of my last three sermons on this topic did a better job of explaining the particulars.

My objective today is to think about when we've been in God's presence, and chosen to keep silent. And to think about the ramifications of such silence for our world.

In my role as pastor, but also as parent, husband, brother, son, co-worker, friend, church-member, deacon, neighbor, human being – I'm often asked to hold information in confidence. That silence is necessary for building trust. But it is a difficult silence.

When one has advanced knowledge of a birth, or a wedding, or a new calling, or a healing, or good news, God is present, and the world, indeed everything around it, dazzles in white. And there is a temptation to share all that is good, and especially the kind of good that's too good to be true.

So also, when one has a connection with neighbor, strong enough to be trusted with vulnerable information – grief, pain, heart ache, struggle – information they must share with you for support, God is also present, and we are enveloped in a cloud, terrifying in every sense of the word, and calling us to listen to and for the One who offers peace. And such a silence is hard.

I think these are two appropriate examples of silence. They are necessary to develop trusting, transformative, Christ-centered relationships.

But our duty to keep personal silences cannot and should not be used an excuse for public silence.

What do I mean by that?

I mean that Peter and James and John were not obligated to broadcast the events of the mountaintop. But I do think they were obligated to broadcast, that is to not keep silent, the transformative spirit they experienced as followers of Jesus. In his life, in his sharing of all that he had, Jesus profoundly shaped these men. And the voices that they could offer to such an experience, were voices equipped to bring forth God's inbreaking realm.

I do not have an obligation to broadcast the confidences of those whom I love, and have been loved by. But the intimacy, trust, and friendship that have been developed by such transfiguration moments has profoundly shaped me. That is to say, I am the person I am because of the God I have seen and known and heard in the lives of my neighbors. That is to say that the people of this congregation, along with many other saints, have led me to many a mountaintop, and revealed God's presence in ways just as miraculous, maybe even more miraculous than transfiguration. And if I am to be true to myself, I cannot EVER keep silent about such things.

And so I hear that Peter and James and John were silent. And it haunts me.

Each Sunday morning, and other days, too, I visit little mountaintops – the world is bright, Tide-bright, at communion tables, and daycare drop-off, and in texts to my wife, and in needed phone calls or visits with friends, and in prayers at the hospital or before a meal or at bedtime, or even flipping pancakes on Shrove Tuesday.

But then the world happens, and I keep silent – conference calls, and neighborhood banter, and the usual commerce: grocery store check-outs, or restaurant meals, or a trip to the hardware store, or whatever the place of serious, objective decorum may be – I dare not speak of politics, and certainly not of faith. I'd best keep silent till a more appropriate time, a time that's better suited to be heard.

And of course the headlines show us unthinkable, unsolvable issues. Jesus may have glowed on a mountaintop, but Rome was no less vicious when they came back down. And I'll bet those disciples thought, "It's probably best to keep this in our back pockets for now. Besides, it's gonna take a miracle bigger than that to fix this world down here."

And I may feel the presence of God at the table, but there's so much work to do. How many people in just this city alone didn't have means to buy breakfast this morning? And we call ourselves Christian communities with open tables, but our denominations can't even settle on who can sit at those tables, or serve at those tables. I'm not sure my little moments of transfiguration can make a dent in such brokenness.

As we approach this season of Lent, we, like John and James and Peter, descend a mountaintop. The one we follow heads to Jerusalem. And we'll go there, too. He goes with the confidence that his voice – "God's will be done, God's kingdom come, right now" – his voice will transform a broken world.

And I think it begs the question: Do we believe that our voices can do the same?

One thing is certain Sardis Baptist Church, our silence won't.

May God give us strength to speak at the foot of a mountain.

Amen.