



“The Silence of Jesus”

a sermon by

Gregory A. W. Green

First Presbyterian Church
Charlotte, North Carolina

April 11, 2006

Mark 14:53-61

Rabbi Benjamin Blech, in reference to God's role in the Holocaust, once said, "Jews cried, and their Creator did not seem to hear. Jews prayed and there was no response. Jews died, sanctifying the name of the Lord with their last breath on earth, and the heavens only responded with silence."

Elie Weisel, in his book entitled *Night*, which was written in reflection of his own exile to the concentration camp Auschwitz, put it even more poignantly. He writes,

Never shall I forget that night, the first night in camp, which has turned my life into one long night, seven times cursed and seven times sealed. Never shall I forget that smoke. Never shall I forget the little faces of the children, whose bodies I saw turned into wreaths of smoke beneath a silent blue sky. Never shall I forget those flames which consumed my faith forever. Never shall I forget that nocturnal silence which deprived me, for all eternity, of the desire to live. Never shall I forget those moments which murdered my God and my soul and turned my dreams to dust. Never shall I forget these things, even if I am condemned to live as long as God Himself. Never.

His words are chilling and are some of the most telling that ink has ever given birth to upon a page. They tell of dark times, times that rob the body of life, times that sear the soul, and leave hope buried beneath ash. They are those moments of infamy that leave one reeling – wondering about the nature of the world we live in and whether or not our existence matters, but even more significantly they leave us questioning the nature, character, and power of our God.

How do we make sense of our God after events like the Holocaust? How do we make sense of our God after the oil-stained water that entombed America's best and brightest upon the bottom of a harbor named Pearl? Or after the flesh melting assault of two atomic bombs upon Hiroshima and Nagasaki that suddenly altered the shape of the world forever with the ability and willingness to inflict previously unfathomable loss of life?

How do we make sense of our God after September 11th, with airplanes flying into buildings that once seemed impregnable, bodies pirouetting from countless stories above, crowds of screaming people running frantically down the street, and relayed cell phone conversations from husbands, fathers, daughters and wives who would never return home?

How do we make sense of our God after Katrina, with its lifeless bodies floating in murky bacteria infested waters, with urban poor huddled in mass coliseums, and cities reduced to rubble filled with rabble shooting at the very folks who were willing to risk their lives to save them? How about after the Tsunami that rocked Southeast Asia or after Genocide in Rwanda?

How do we begin to make sense of such madness? Who is at fault? Who is to blame? After all, someone has to be responsible. Someone has to be held accountable. Look at the world around us. Note that our days of infamy are becoming all too common. Who is to blame? Where is God amidst these atrocities? Why is he so silent?

This is history's strongest critique against God. If you look back through the ages, if you read the philosophers that have come and gone before us, very few of them doubted the existence of God, but many of them questioned his character, nature, and power in light of his apparent silence. How do we begin to make sense of a God who appears to remain silent with arms folded, while men and women raise their voices in anguish?

“A silent heaven is the greatest mystery to our existence. [After all], what mind is competent to grasp the sum of all this great world's misery, heaped up day after day, year after year, century after century?¹” Even the writer of Ecclesiastes joins in the critique, “So I returned” he said, “and considered all the oppressions that are done under the sun, and behold the tears of such as were oppressed, and they had no comforter; and on the side of their oppressors there was power, but [the oppressed] had no comforter.²” How do we make sense of such blatant injustice?

In our text for today, Jesus the Son of God, the Word Incarnate, is brought on trial before the religious and political leaders of his day. A mere four days removed from his triumphal entry into Jerusalem and already he has moved from the exalted one to one on the verge of execution, already he has been transformed from king to criminal.

The crowd that once praised him as the one who “comes in the name of the Lord” has been bought, one of his own best friends has betrayed him, and yet another will soon deny him. He is being given a trial, but the trial is a sham, a mere formality meant to ease the conscience, a cover-up meant to create the appearance of propriety. And the verdict has all but already been handed out.

His accusers knew in their hearts that their allegations were false – yet still they persisted. They knew that they were drumming up lies, twisting the truth, and manipulating the situation. Yet they still continued. Deep in their hearts they knew that they were the ones who were guilty. Yet still they pushed on.

The text tells us that many testified falsely against him, yet their statements did not agree. It says that they were intentionally looking for evidence to put him to death, but they couldn't find any.

And through the entire rouse, Jesus stood facing his accusers, listening to their allegations, and remained silent before their slander. How could he have done that? They were defacing him and demanding his life. It was obvious that the judge was

¹ Sir Robert Anderson, *The Silence of God*.

² Ecclesiastes 4:1

biased. It was obvious that the jury had been stacked, and that the whole ordeal was rigged. Yet still he remained silent.

Why doesn't he speak? Why doesn't he try to persuade them, or at least coerce them to take a different road? Why doesn't he use his power to free himself? Why does he remain silent before his accusers?

We must not forget that there is some grace in silence, particularly when the answers to our questions and allegations are ones that we may not want to hear. We must also not forget that the "will of God is always bigger than what we bargain for."³

The Jews, who had been suffering under enemy occupation for centuries, had been crying out for God to speak, for God to act. But they did not expect God to come down in person. They did not expect the Word to become flesh. Nor did they expect him to come with the intent of saving them from themselves, instead of from Rome.

They say that actions speak louder than words, which if true – nothing speaks louder than an innocent and loving God willing to remain silent before his accusers. If such is the case, than nothing speaks louder than an all-powerful God who is willing to hang battered upon a cross for an ungrateful and wayward people. The novelist Italo Calvino makes the point that "silence can also be considered a kind of speech, since it is a rejection of the use to which others put words."

Perhaps Jesus remained silent because they only came to him with allegations, with mixed truths, and faulty arguments. Perhaps he remained silent because he knew they were only going to see what their minds wanted to see and instead of coercing them to the truth – Jesus wanted to woo and win their hearts?

Perhaps in our world today God is silent in the face of our atrocities because his grief is stronger than ours and sometimes the only way to give credence to injustice is to sit quietly in horror and weep?

Having witnessed just a fraction of creation's raw power through the splitting of an atom, perhaps the silence of an all-powerful God in the face of our atrocities is in fact a grace.

Perhaps God is silent because he has ordained us as caretakers of creation and commissioned us as his ambassadors and we have remained silent? Howard Hendricks makes the point that "In the midst of a generation screaming for answers, we Christians are stuttering."

Or perhaps when we are overwhelmed by the sad incidents of human life and ask, "Where is God and why is he so silent?" God is in fact pointing back to the cross as the unreserved manifestation of love so inconceivably infinite as to answer any challenge and

³ Jim Elliot

to silence any and all doubt forever. The cross is not only public proof of what God has accomplished, it is the earnest of all that he has promised for all time.

Perspective is everything. There are some who looked at Jesus and saw nothing more than a local from Nazareth – the son of a carpenter. There were others however who looked at him and saw the Son of God. What you see when you look at Jesus makes all the difference.

On a wall in a cellar in Cologne, Germany; where Jews had hidden from the Nazis, there was found an inscription. The anonymous author, who presumably perished with his fellow victims, left these words: “I believe in the sun, even when it’s not shining. I believe in love, even when not feeling it. I believe in God, even when he is silent.” Let us believe in God, even if he appears to be silent.