

TEXT: Isaiah 50:4-9a
THEME: Sustaining the weary with a word
SUBJECT: Listening
TITLE: Encouragement

Palm Sunday
05 April 2020
Messiah Moravian
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The walk Sherri and I take through the neighborhood has changed in the last week. The route has remained the same, but words of encouragement have appeared: be happy, smile, enjoy family, stay strong, be healthy, keep going (I appreciate that one). These words are accompanied by chalk drawings of the sun, rainbows, flowers, and smiling faces. Sidewalk art to brighten the walk.

We saw one of the artists (assume there is more than one), a young girl in her early teens with a gallon size pail filled with large pieces of many colored chalk. She appeared to be fully engrossed in her work, content not anxious. Perhaps she was avoiding school work, glad to be outdoors rather than staring at a screen. Good for her!

Larry David, of “Curb Your Enthusiasm” and “Seinfeld” fame, has recorded a PSA: public service announcement. He is seated in an old, well worn arm chair in the corner of a room. After demurring that he doesn’t typically do things like PSA’s, he encourages people not to go out, to stay home and watch TV. He says if you have ever watched his show, you know that nothing good ever happens once you leave the house. So, be safe and at the same time protect old people by staying home.

The prophet Isaiah is offering words of encouragement to people living in exile in Babylon. They feel abandoned by God and do not believe God will rescue them. They are so dispirited that when the prophet assures them of God’s care, they attack the prophet physically. The prophet will not be deterred; he sets his face like flint, he will fulfill his mission regardless of the opposition.

What do we find encouraging when we are weary, dispirited? Bobby McFerrin sings:

Don’t worry, be happy
In every life we have some trouble
But when you worry you make it double
Don’t worry, be happy
Don’t worry, be happy now.

The chorus is repeated a “hundred” times as if it were performative speech, words that if repeated enough create the reality they name.

In need of distraction, Sherri and I watched “Long Shot.” This is not a movie recommendation unless you have exhausted every other means of distraction at your disposal. It did, however, give me a good illustration for this sermon. The character played by Seth Rogan is in love with the character played by Charlize Theron (perhaps the reason for the title of the movie is now apparent). Seth’s friend encourages him to repeat a thousand times, “I am worthy of love.” Saying it makes it so, so the theory goes.

The prophet has a different approach. Every morning he arises in silence; he listens in silence. Before he says a word, before he turns on the TV or reads the newspaper, before he brews coffee, he listens to the silence. He listens as one who is a disciple, who is instructed by a master teacher.

May Sarton beautifully captures the prophet's morning routine in her poem, "Beyond the Question."

The phoebe sits on her nest
Hour after hour,
Day after day,
Waiting for life to burst out
From under her warmth.

Can I weave a nest for silence,
Weave it of listening,
Listening,
Layer upon layer?

But one must first become small,
Nothing but presence,
Attentive as a nesting bird,
Proffering no slightest wish,
No tendril of a wish
Toward anything that might happen
Or be given,
Only the warm, faithful waiting,
Contained in one's smallness.

Beyond the question, the silence.
Before the answer, the silence.

Robert Alter's translation of Isaiah 50:4 reads:

The Master, the Lord, has given me
a skilled tongue,
knowing how to proffer a word to the weary.

To proffer: to hold out (something) to someone for acceptance; offer. The poet wants to become nothing but presence, attentive, not *proffering* any wish, open to the word offered in silence. The prophet does the same, *proffering* only the word he receives in silence.

Maggie Ross boldly asserts that all our ills come from the loss of silence and our failure to listen. Silence is not an absence of noise (though that sort of silence helps), but a limitless interior space.

Silence is our natural state. Lack of silence erodes our humanity. In silence we realize our shared nature with God.

Written a hundred and seventy years ago, these words by S. Kierkegaard sound as contemporary as breaking news. If I were a physician and someone asked me “What do you think should be done?” I would answer, “The first thing, the unconditional thing for anything to be done, consequently the very first thing that must be done is: create silence, bring about silence; God’s Word cannot be heard, and if in order to be heard in the hullabaloo it must be shouted deafeningly with many instruments, then it is not God’s Word; create silence!

I don’t know how you cope with being weary, dispirited, or what coping mechanisms have proved false and which true. But I do know that silence is the life-giving atmosphere we were intended to breathe, the heaven-sent mana that feeds the soul, mind, and even the body. It is most importantly the bridge between the visible and the invisible. Silence is sacred.

Waiting morning by morning in silence as one who is taught is how the prophet, and how you and I, can hear an encouraging word. In the still small voice, in the sound of a light whisper, a sustaining word is uttered by a God who longs to bring order to the chaos of our lives.

A prayer by J. Philip Newell. (slightly adapted)

Out of the silence at the beginning of time
you spoke the Word of life.
Out of the world’s primeval darkness
you flooded the universe with light.
In the quiet of this place
in the darkness of this moment
I wait and watch.
In the stillness of my soul
and from its fathomless depths
the senses of my heart are awake to you.
For fresh soundings of life
for new showings of light
I search in the silence of my spirit, O God.