



The Place Where There are No Answers

A Palm/Passion Sunday Sermon—Rev. Adam E. Eckhart
March 28, 2021—First United Church of Christ, Cong., Milford, CT

1.
Barbara Brown Taylor shares a story in her book, *When God is Silent*.

I met a man last summer—a preacher—who nursed his wife until her death at fifty-something, from cancer. When she stopped breathing, he said, the silence in the room destroyed all language for him. No words could get into him and none could get out. He resigned from his church. Months and months later, his voice is still raspy. “It makes you want to go to Dachau,” he said. “You want to go to the place where there are no answers.” “He did not sound angry when he said that. He sounded like someone who had been scorched by the living God and knew better than to try and talk about it.”ⁱ

If you have lived long enough and had faith in God long enough, you have likely heard the booming silence of God, too. When you were younger, perhaps a grandparent died and you felt like when you had prayed that they would get better that God answered with silence. You wondered if you did not pray hard enough or had enough faith.

But then it happened again, and you start to notice a pattern: injustice, suffering, prayer, God’s seeming silence.

I can only imagine how many prayers seem unanswered right now among the families of the 530,000 people in the US alone who have died from COVID, or the families of the eight people who died in Georgia or the ten in Colorado from shootings.

The Hebrew Bible (Old Testament) begins with God speaking more regularly with humans, but Richard Friedman points out

that God speaks less and less directly to people as the Bible goes on, especially after God speaks to the Hebrews when they receive the Ten Commandments from Moses—the people ask Moses to never let God speak directly againⁱⁱ. Taylor has theories about why we don’t hear from God in the same way. We’re scared. We’re all mouth and no ears. Talk has become very cheap. Taylor suggests that while the flesh of Christ was crucified 2,000 years ago, these days we crucify the Word of God by devaluing the essential sacred nature of language.ⁱⁱⁱ

2.
This year of pandemic has exposed some of us to more conversation than we’re used to. But underneath the surface of those conversations is great spiritual depth, which reminds me of at least four things. First, humans often don’t give straightforward answers. We give qualified answers: “Yes, but...”; “No, but...”. We dodge or give non-answers. We jump to conclusions and answer a different question than was asked. For a species that yearns for straight answers from God, we fail to give simple answers to each other—and probably to God as well.

Second: When we do give straightforward answers, it is often to dismiss the deeper probing in the question. We are direct exactly when there is hope for nuance.

Third: sometimes there are no words to give a satisfactory answer. Many of those questions start with why. ‘Why is there this pandemic?’ ‘Why did a person do that horrible thing?’ ‘Why do bad things happen to good people?’ I can’t think of an answer that settles those matters once and for all.

Fourth: some questions aren't asked to be answered exactly, but more to be heard and to be honored as a manifestation of the person's pain and wounds. In those cases, we might do better to stand in solidarity with the question asker, hold their hand (if we can), listen to them, listen together to the booming silence, and perhaps, after proper honor is given to the pain, then and only then shares how we may have experienced similar challenges and pain.

3.
Holy Week tells the story of God who often does not give us answers in the words we want, but instead gives us the Word. We are drawn back to this story of Jesus moving from Sunday's triumphal entry to Thursday's Last Supper to Friday's suffering death because it is the uncanny mirror image of the usual human story of injustice, suffering, and divine silence. Here the same elements transpire, but to God's Son, the precise one whom we hoped would answer our questions and deliver us from all pain and sorrow.

On Friday in Mark's Gospel, Jesus on the cross cries out the first verse of Psalm 22: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"^{iv} That day, God gives no answer.

The Holy Week story, the passion of Christ, and especially the cross is the place where we and God have no answers together. At the cross, the human and divine questions 'why?' converge and echo into the void. Two days' silence from us and God together.

ⁱ Barbara Brown Taylor, *When God is Silent* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998), 37.

ⁱⁱ Exodus 20:19.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid. i, 53-55.

^{iv} Mark 15:34 (New Revised Standard Version).

We weren't there at the historical cross, but whenever we share in sacred silence or in suffering with others and with God, we stand at the cross with Jesus in spirit, honoring that suffering which God will not dismiss or explain away.

4.
The best Good News must wait for now. It awaits us on the other side of Holy Week.

For now we simply can anticipate that Jesus who utters the first verse of Psalm 22 from the cross knows that the psalm moves toward confidence that God will intervene and save the one who cries out.

In the meanwhile, however, even in the shadow of the cross, there is consolation.

The church is the place where we struggle with persistent questions of God and faith, but seek to make safe space for those who have no tidy answers and give no easy answers for ourselves or on God's behalf.

The church is where we remember the Palm Sunday parade not with the naïve hope of the original participants but with adoration for Christ whom we know enters Jerusalem to agonize with us in human suffering. This story, and how it spans the relationship between us and Jesus Christ, is one of pain recognizing pain.^v

Only after the pain and silence are fully formed and honored do the living God and Christ move forward with the next Word, on Easter morning. Amen.

^v This alludes to the sports phrase "Game recognize game." I owe a debt to Serene Jones for her lectures twenty years ago on Good Friday and Christ's suffering, which shape my reflections here.