

Varieties of Quiet

Proper 20B: Mark 9.30-37

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The ninth chapter of Mark got me thinking about silences, or “varieties of quiet” to borrow a phrase from Christian Wiman. When you think about it, there are a lot of different kinds of silence, aren’t there?

Like the silence after a preacher tells a joke no one else thinks is funny. I think you know that one. It’s a robust and full-bodied quiet, with notes of embarrassment and pity. It has a long finish. Really long if you’re the one who’s just told the joke.

Actually, since the vestry wardens either hadn’t heard it, or were polite enough to pretend, maybe I’ll tell you the one I told them on Zoom Friday morning. It’s the one about Carl who joins a monastic order in which the monks are only allowed to speak only one word a year. After his first 12 months he goes to the abbot to speak his word and says, “The.” A year later he returns and says, “Food.” And at the end of his third year he says, “Stinks.” To which the abbot replies, “Carl, you’ve been here for three years now and you’ve done nothing but complain.”

Silence. There may be as many forms of it as there are words in a language. And I’m beginning to wonder whether all sorts of silences, not just the reverent and prayerful ones, are worth paying attention to when we come across them in scripture?

For instance, in our gospel reading today, Jesus tells his disciples that he will be betrayed and killed and that he will rise again three days later. “But,” says the text, “they did not understand what he was saying, and were afraid to ask him.”

You know that silence, don’t you? Nobody wants to look foolish, so everybody looks at their sandals, avoids eye contact, says nothing and hopes the conversation will move on.

Then the group walks on to Capernaum, and, when they arrive, Jesus asks what they had been arguing about on the way. They fall silent, Mark says. Because they’d

been arguing about who was the greatest. So, this is not the silence of ignorance or confusion. It's just the opposite. It's the guilty silence that happens when someone tells a truth about us right out loud that we'd rather ignore. The fraught silence of knowing all too well that someone knows you all too well, and doesn't have the good manners to keep quiet. Which is yet another kind of quiet, I suppose. The silence of polite avoidance. I think everyone except Jesus knows that one.

Such are the silences in our gospel reading. They caught my attention. So, I started looking for silence upstream a bit in Mark 9. The chapter begins with the Transfiguration. Remember that story? Elijah and Moses appear with Jesus on a high mountain. James and Peter and John are there to see the three shining prophets, and Peter suggests they make dwellings for them. "He did not know what to say," Mark tells us, "for they were terrified." It's one of Peter's more infamous moments of *non-silence*. He just couldn't keep the quiet he should have. As a result, the sky began to speak, saying, "This is my Son, the beloved; will you please stop talking and listen to him!"

Then Moses and Elijah disappear. The four friends began to make their way back down the mountain, and do you remember what Jesus says? He tells the others to stay silent about the wonders they've just seen until the Son of Man has risen from the dead. It's the silence of what scholars of Mark call the "messianic secret." The strange fact that Jesus keeps telling people, not to shout the good news from the housetops, but to keep quiet about it. As if it's the kind of truth that can't just be told. Or at least not just right then or right there.

Upon their return from the mountain, an anxious crowd is gathered around the rest of the disciples. I remembered the poor, hurting boy at the center of this scene. One who had been possessed by a demon since birth that would seize him, dash him down, make him grind his teeth. I remembered all those horrors but not the first thing Jesus is told about the boy: "Teacher, I brought you my son; he has a spirit that makes him unable to speak."

Billy Collins once wrote of "...silence that had piled up all night/ like snow falling in the darkness of the house." That's how this chapter began to feel to me,

each of its silences unique as a snowflake, but they kept piling up as I read back through Mark 9, listening for everything that wasn't said.

Varieties of quiet. The familiar silences in our lives. The silence of confusion, of embarrassment, of fear. The silence that should have been observed but wasn't, and the silence of the secret that we're sternly ordered to keep. And yes, the heartbreaking silence of a boy's epilepsy, to which Jesus turns, filled with compassion and dismay, and says, "You spirit that keeps this boy from speaking and hearing, I command you, come out of him, and never enter him again!" A silence, God be praised, that is mercifully cast out. Forever.

This may be a different sort of sermon than what you're used to. It certainly is for me. I was taught in no uncertain terms to have a single and crystal clear point when I preached or to keep quiet.

But for today, at least, I'm suggesting we sit with a stretch of scripture that seems to be asking us, at least read from a certain angle, to consider the various kinds of silence in our lives. To give them the attention they deserve or require, so we'll know when we need to stay quiet a little longer and when our silence needs to be broken. To consider when silence is brave and when it is complicit. When it is avoidance and when it the very definition of taking in the full brunt or beauty of whatever or whomever God has placed in front of us right here and right now.

Which, at the end of our gospel story, is just what Jesus does. Into the embarrassed, awkward silence that followed that silly argument about who was greater than whom, Jesus placed a someone in front of his speechless friends. He took a little child and put it in their midst. He wrapped that child up in his arms and said, "Whoever welcomes one just like this in my name welcomes me."

It's a brilliant and beautiful move, isn't it? To speak the truth, even if, or precisely *because* it shuts everyone up uncomfortably for a beat. Not as a punishment, but as an opening. Jesus helps them to see the silence that the truth has just made as an opportunity. A chance to make a different way forward a little clearer.

In this case, the opening was into Jesus's inverted view of greatness. But he still doesn't fill the scene with explanation. He still leaves a lot unsaid, even as he sits there with the child in his arms in the quiet for us to wonder at as well.

There are many varieties of quiet in scripture, just as there are in our lives. There won't be only one faithful response to them all. So don't start pestering whatever child happens to be nearby the next time the room goes awkwardly quiet. But something the silences in scripture do seem to have in common is that they are almost never something entirely interior, personal, or private. Silence is usually something that happens between people, not within them ... a connection, not a separation. It might even be that the silence itself is not the opening. Maybe the opening is the person or the people on the other side of it.

So, maybe to be faithful to the way of Jesus is to attend to the silences in our lives in community. To see them — even the confusing, uncomfortable, painful ones — as sacred openings, not so much into personal enlightenment, as into the healed, restored, flourishing relationships with God and with one another Jesus keeps trying to show us how to make.

So, let's commit together to give the silences in our lives the attention they deserve or require. Because it's for one another and for this broken world that we need to know when we need to stay quiet a little longer and when a silence needs to be broken. That we need to know when silence is brave and when it is complicit. When it's a form of avoidance and when it is a door God is asking us to step through, maybe into one healed relationship, by which the world Jesus loved too much to leave its silences alone, is made just a little more whole.