

God's Silence
Maundy Thursday 2015
Mark 14

The temptation on this night is to ask after our own frailty and sin as both are embodied in the pitiful and pitiable disciples. The temptation is to make it all about us because, well, it is. But tonight I find myself asking after God. How could be, I wonder, when Jesus is distressed and agitated and in need of a word from his Father, how could it be that God is silent? What has become of the voice that only Jesus heard at his baptism in Mark: "You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased." Or the voice from out of the cloud at his transfiguration addressed to Peter, James and John: "This is my Son, the beloved; listen to him."

One by one, those who had been listening to him abandon him. Even the three, who had heard the voice of God on the mountain when Jesus was transfigured, fall asleep, leaving Jesus to say to the only one listening, "Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me." Imagine, here, a pause—a pause that the sentence in Mark cannot contain. Imagine silence. Imagine only a tear falling that is the Father's love for the Son, whose destiny is now to be with us and for us in death as he has been in life. Hearing nothing, Jesus prays, "Not what I will, but what you will." Three times, Mark tells us, he prays the same words. Three times God is silent.

God cannot—I repeat—*cannot* deliver him from death, because God is love. You would think the opposite would be true. But God's love, unlike ours, does not end with death. Therefore, from the beginning, God destined his Son, his only Son, God's beloved, to accompany us into the grave. Why in the world would God do that? "*If God be for us,*" Paul writes almost as if in response to our incredulity tonight, "who can be against us? He who spared not his own Son but delivered him up—handed him over to death—for us all..." Jesus alone is destined to love us with the love that does not end at death, even as he is destined to be raised by

the love that will prove stronger than death. Why does he *have* to die for us? *Because God has loved us in this way!* Because short of death and resurrection, we would not know the love that is love, and death would still have dominion.

From Gethsemane to Golgotha, therefore, the conversation ends between Father and Son, according to Mark, until Jesus' one final cry: "Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?" Hear, in Jesus' cry of dereliction, God's complete assumption of our human condition, God's bearing in himself our choice to live without God in the world. According to New Testament scholar Raymond Brown, Jesus does not "question the existence of God nor the power of God to do something...: [only] the silence of the one whom he now calls [not Abba, Father, but,] for the first time, 'My God.'...Feeling forsaken as if he were not being heard, he no longer presumes to speak intimately to the All-Powerful as 'Father,' but [speaks] the address common to all human beings, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'"

Where is the God on whom the abandoned, the forsaken, the rejected and reviled call at the hour of their death? Here at the center of human history, God is hidden in flesh of our forsaken flesh. Precisely in our God-forsaking forsakenness, God is: "Not a remote and aloof spectator or non-participating director of this event" [Barth] but rather, as Elie Wiesel so powerfully proclaimed in the darkest hour of God's seeming silence, "God is here and hanging on the gallows."

This is God and God is like *this*. "God is not greater than [the Son] is in this humiliation. God is not more glorious than [the Son] is in this self-surrender. God is not more powerful than [the Son] is in this helplessness. God is not more divine than [the Son] is in this humanity," Gregory of Nyssa said. "It is of *this* God that the Crucified speaks...[telling us] that we shall not find God where we think we should look for Him, namely, in a supposed height. It means that

we must be ready to be told by Him that we shall find Him precisely where we do not think we should look for him, namely, in direct confrontation with and at the very heart of our own reality...where each of us is stripped and naked, where each is suffering and perishing, where each is engaged in futile complaint and accusation, where each is alone. The lonely man of Gethsemane and Golgotha, the lonely God, then comes together with lonely [men and women] in [their] deepest need.” Therefore, Barth says. “Each of us can then say that in this place, even though [I am] forsaken and alone, [I am] not forsaken and alone, since [God in Christ] has stooped down and come to this place and been forsaken there. There among the smitten and abased, among whom we would prefer not to reckon ourselves, God has raised his throne....”

What else can we say except this place of death is where God wills to be with us. This Man of Sorrows is who God wills to be for us. Put another way, God is love and love’s only way is the way through suffering and death.

Dear sheep of his own fold, lambs of his own flock, sinners of his own redeeming, I do not know all the hells you have endured or are enduring. I do not know the particular darkness in which you have dwelt or now dwell with no one to help. I do not know the rejection you have borne or bear this very night, nor the quiet desperation in which, forsaken, you have cried out. I know only him whose love, unlike our own, does not end in death. Thanks be to God.