

When God Is Silent
Psalm 13
Second Baptist Church, Memphis
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Silence is an endangered species.

In her book, When God Is Silent, Barbara Brown Taylor reflects on how uncomfortable we are with silence. She says that communication has higher value for us than contemplation. Information is in greater demand than reflection.

She points out that there was a time when only doctors wore pagers and the only person who carried a telephone around with him was the President of the United States, in case of nuclear attack. Now we are all that important.

She tells about someone who lodged a complaint with the National Park Service about the use of cellular phones in the wilderness. It seems that his long-awaited trek to a landmark peak was ruined for him when a fellow hiker to the top whipped out his cell phone and began describing the view to his children who were apparently reluctant to be torn away from the TV show they were watching at home.

As Taylor points out, it's more and more difficult for us to choose silence when communication is always possible. To let the telephone ring, to leave the email unread—this is hard to do.

To choose silence over communication, even just for a few hours, we risk the loss of connection with people who can't understand how anything could be more important to us than responding to them.

Even when we are all alone, our bodies are not silent. Taylor tells about the composer John Cage who visited Harvard and spent some time in an anechoic chamber—a room without echoes. Inside this room, his well-trained musical ear picked up two sounds—one high and one low.

When he described these sounds to the engineer in charge, he was told that the high sound was his nervous system in operation, and the low sound was his blood in circulation.

No wonder silence makes us uncomfortable. Silence means nobody's talking to us. It means things aren't happening. It means we're all alone. Total silence means death. [pp. 43-6]

In the natural world, complete silence means something is wrong. Remember Rachel Carson's classic work, *Silent Spring*. It presents this chilling vision of a world that is quiet because all the humming, scampering around things in it have succumbed to the poisons we humans have spread around. *Silent Spring*. [36]

Silence unnerves us.

The electricity goes out in the middle of the night, and it wakes you up. What wakes you up? The silence. The refrigerator, the water heater, the ice maker, the air conditioner all quiet. The silence is so loud it wakes you up.

Our world, our lives, are full of noise to the point that we don't even notice the noise until it's gone. Plenty of us who are well-defended against noise have no defense against silence.

No wonder we are really disturbed when even God is silent.

The silence of God. Psalm 13:

How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever?

How long will you hide your face from me?

How long must I bear pain in my soul

and have sorrow in my heart all day long?

Consider and answer me, O Lord my God!

Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep the sleep of death,

And my enemy will say, "I have prevailed";

my foes will rejoice because I am shaken.

Scholars call psalms like this one "psalms of lament". Out of the 150 psalms in the book of Psalms, about 38 of them are categorized as psalms of lament. And all of these psalms have a similar pattern and structure. Psalm 13 is one of those.

[Walter Brueggemann, The Message of the Psalms: A Theological Commentary, p. 58]

It starts out with these four questions for God. They're questions that don't really want an answer. They're more like complaints.

How long, O Lord?

Will you forget me forever?

How long will you hide your face from me?

How long must I bear pain in my soul and have sorrow in my heart all day long?

The worshiper in this psalm feels forgotten by God; God's face is hidden. In ancient court etiquette, a person was not allowed to look directly at the face of the king until the king indicated that this was allowed. This was out of respect for the king.

So if the king wanted to show his displeasure, he would simply never show his face to the person that he was displeased with. To hide your face was to show displeasure.

So this painful cry to God: Will you hide your face from me forever?

This is a psalm of lament over the silence of God, the unresponsiveness of God, the absence of God. It's kind of amazing to me that psalms like this were included in the Bible. To me it's a testimony to the miracle of the Bible, because regular church people like us wouldn't have put stuff like this in the Bible. It makes us and God look bad.

Those of us who are always trying to defend God to the rest of the world, protect God's reputation, we wouldn't have put this type of thing in God's holy book. This business about God's unresponsiveness.

It's no wonder that we avoid these kinds of psalms. Psalms like this are dangerous, they're a problem, because they lead us to acknowledge how life really is.

And unfortunately a lot of us in the church don't want to acknowledge just how messy and uncertain life really is. We desperately try to cover over the pain and difficulty and uncertainty of our lives—especially our lives of faith.

When's the last time you heard somebody pray in church and say, *How long will you hide your face from me, God? Will you forget me forever? How long?* I've never heard that.

We don't like the silence of God. It makes us very uncomfortable. And so what we often do is rush in to speak for God.

In his book *The Silence of Jesus*, James Breech recalls going to hear the poet W. H. Auden read some of his poetry at Princeton years ago. The lecture hall was jammed, he says, with hundreds of people all chattering with anticipation.

When the old man Auden finally came out on the stage to read, he read in a voice so soft that even the microphone didn't help enough. People immediately began whispering to each other what they thought Auden was saying until the poet himself couldn't be heard. His would-be interpreters had drowned him out. [BBT 94] Those who were trying to speak for him were drowning out his voice.

Sometimes I think all of us who are trying to be helpful in speaking for a soft voiced God may be talking so loud and so much about what we think God is saying or would want to be saying that God himself cannot be heard.

Those who are trying to speak for God are drowning him out. His would-be interpreters are so loud God himself cannot be heard. They never let it get quiet enough....

What are we doing to do with the silence of God? We rush in to speak for God. Or, also, we fill up our own speech with God-talk. We can't stand God's silence, and in our anxiety

about it we fill the void with an avalanche of words about God—how God is telling me this and telling me that.

Reassuring themselves, assuaging their own anxiety, I think, a lot of the Christians I know seem to hear from God all the time. God's always telling them where they should move or who they should marry or what they should say or what kind of cereal they should have for breakfast.

I wish God spoke to me all the time in such clear and uncertain terms. But that's not the way it works for me—at least not usually. A few times in my life I've had a real clear, definite sense of God calling me in a certain way. But that's pretty rare.

And to tell you the truth, I'm usually a little suspicious of those who claim often to hear God speaking to them as clearly as they do a friend talking on the telephone. These people don't seem to struggle at all. They don't seem to be burdened with such unhappy things like doubt or worry or perseverance or loneliness.

I think in my very first sermon here at Second Baptist I confessed to the fact that most of the time I struggle and wonder and speculate and discuss and feel maybe a twinge of God's guidance here and there and maybe see God's shadow just as he goes around a corner ahead of me as I scramble to follow and not lose him.

Or I finally notice that through the scriptures I've been reading and prayers I've been praying and books I've been reading and friends I've been talking to there might be something there that God is showing me.

Most of the time it's in looking back over what I've done that I see God's hand most clearly.

And sometimes I really do feel the silence of God. The absence of God. The times when I pray to God for help or ask God for guidance, and there seems to be nothing. The times when my prayers don't seem to be making it past the ceiling.

A couple of months ago in a sermon I talked about playing Hide and Seek. Sometimes it seems like we're playing hide and seek with God. Sometimes it seems like we're hiding and God is seeking. That's what I was talking about in my sermon a couple of months ago.

But other times, and this is what I'm trying to get at today, it seems like we're seeking and God is hiding.

That may seem kind of strange to us—God hiding. But the Bible says that sometimes God hides. The prophet Isaiah said, *Truly you are a God who hides himself.* I think I've experienced that. The psalmist talks about God hiding his face.

Do you ever feel like God is absent from you? Do you feel like God ever withdraws from you, that God is not close to you? To say that you experience the absence of God is not necessarily to say that God is really absent; it is to experience God as absent.

King Saul felt the absence of God. Before the battle with the Philistines in which he and his sons were killed, he tried to make contact with God. He tried to pray, but the heavens turned to iron. He said, *I'll lie down and have a dream and God will speak to me,* but he could not sleep. He sent for

preachers. *Is there any word from God for me?* They had nothing.

He finally broke down and went to a fortuneteller; he was so desperate for some word to break the silence. He felt the absence of God; he felt distant from God.

And of course there are the psalms with their desperate pleas:
Lord, don't turn your back on us.
Don't hide your face from us.
Will you forget us forever?
Don't leave us alone.

Jesus must have even felt it too: *My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?* he asked. No answer.

I don't know if the distance between us and God increases sometimes. I can imagine there are times when God might just say, *Try it by yourself.* It might be that sometimes God needs to let us do it on our own to develop some strength.

There was a United Church of Christ Pastor named Harold Wilkes who had no arms. He died just a few years ago. He was telling one time about the experience of learning to put on his own clothes. He said his mother always dressed him. She fed him, she dressed him, she fed him, she dressed him.

One day, she put his clothes in the middle of the floor and said, *Dress yourself.*

He said, *I can't dress myself.*

She said, *You'll have to dress yourself*. And she walked out of the room.

Harold Wilkes said that he kicked, he screamed, he kicked, he screamed, he yelled at his mother, *You don't love me anymore*.

Finally he realized that if he was going to get any clothes on, he would have to put them on himself. After hours of struggle he got the clothes on. He said that it was not until later that he learned that his mother had been there in the next room crying all along.

[Fred Craddock, *The Cherry Log Sermons*, p. 58]

In Psalm 13, after all the complaints, the kicking and screaming—*How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?*—after all that, there is silence.

The profound silence of God. There is this waiting in absence. Sometimes you just have to struggle and wait. Sometimes you just have to wait until there is a response. Because there is nothing else you can do.

Here in Psalm 13, we don't know how long the wait was. You never know. But then finally things are changed. And then there is this (verses 5-6):

But I trusted in your steadfast love; my heart shall rejoice in your salvation.

I will sing to the Lord, because he has dealt bountifully with me.

This is the life of faith as it really is when we're honest—absence and presence, complaint and praise, struggle and peace, fear and faith. They're all mixed in together.

I don't know if God grows distant from us. I do know that sometimes we feel some distance. How do we handle that? How do we ask, *How long?* and yet still end up confessing, *I trusted in your steadfast love; I will sing to the Lord?* How do we live with the silence of God?

We haven't played hide and seek at my house in awhile. The kids are getting older. But I remember when Ivy was just a toddler. She had this habit of going off excitedly to hide, getting herself hidden under a chair or in a closet, and then yelling out, *Ready!*

Of course, I would repeatedly review the point of the game—*You're supposed to hide, not give your position away. You're supposed to hide and be silent.* But maybe I missed the point. The joy comes in being found, after all. Who wants to be left alone, undiscovered? Not even God.

But like short attention span children easily distracted, we seek God for a little while and then go off and turn on the TV without ever giving ourselves a real opportunity to discover God in his hiding place.

There is a moment in the book of Isaiah when God laments: *I was ready to be sought out by those who did not ask, to be found by those who did not seek me. I said, "Here I am, here I am," to a nation that did not call on my name.* [Is. 65:1-2]

Meister Eckhart says that God is like a person who clears his throat while hiding and so gives himself away.

[Philip Yancey, Reaching for the Invisible God, p. 116]

And maybe it is only in the silence that it is finally quiet enough that we can hear the faint clearing of the throat that gives away the presence of God.

Maybe even the moment of most profound silence can become the moment of the discovery of God's most profound presence.

You'll never experience that joy of discovery and the growth that comes from struggle, if you never truly live with the silence of God.