

Sermon Title: “Responding in Silence”
Rev. Kevin Omi
Scripture: Exodus 17:1-7 (at end)

March 19, 2017
Sycamore Congregational Church UCC

Summary of Exodus 17:1-7: Under God’s direction, Moses hits his staff on a rock to provide life-giving water for Israelites.

Opening Prayer (offered spontaneously)

Our theme for Lent this year, Praying into Silence, may be deeply challenging – what does it mean? What’s the difference between praying **in** silence and praying **into** silence? What is **silence**? **Why** do it? What does it have to do with **Lent**?

I even thought about doing something that would make all of us very uncomfortable, *especially* me. Instead of standing up in the pulpit and delivering a sermon like this, one full of words, I could come down, pull up a chair and sit in silence in front of you for 15 minutes. It would probably be a good idea of letting you know ahead of time I was going to do this. If it was a surprise, it might make all of us very uncomfortable. At the end of that time, assuming you and I could stand it, I would stand and simply say, “the word of God, for the people of God”. That would be challenging, wouldn’t it?

We use the term, awkward silence, to reflect how difficult it can be to be in silence with acquaintances, let alone strangers. It is difficult, especially for those not raised in Japan, to read or interpret silence. In some cultures, conversational norms largely eliminate silence. We are uncomfortable with silence because we can’t interpret what the other person is feeling and thinking.

Silence, especially when we are together, can seem pointless or a waste of time. In this worship service, we have a one-minute interval for silence and it is pretty quiet in here. Every Sunday, we invite you to pray during that time. How many of you use that time to share words in your mind with God? I know I do. After all, that is what we expect to do. It is our time to pray in our individual minds to *God*, and to do so is both important and a blessing. For some of you, that may be the only time during the week in which you are able to carve out a moment to pray to God. God surely hears and welcomes each of your prayers.

I have always had the image of each of us lighting our individual candles of prayer and imagined the sanctuary being filled with light, which reaches heaven-ward. As precious as this time is, while we are *externally* silent, we aren’t *inside* our heads and hearts.

What about *meditation*, isn’t *that* silent? During our Thursday Interfaith meditation gathering, over the course of 15 months, our group of 6-10 people has worked up to being able to sit together in silence for 15 minutes at a time. We have two of these zazen, or sitting meditation intervals, each time we gather. 15 minutes can seem like a long time to be silent.

Part of the discipline of this spiritual practice is to become aware of, then accustomed to, the constant flurry of interruptions our minds attempt to introduce. Our minds react to a dog barking, we think of tasks we need to do, we notice a candle flickering, or we experience bodily sensations. To help us deal with these interruptions, we use a variety of ways of centering ourselves, with a word, phrase, or paying attention to our breath. The goal of this practice is to prepare us to experience the nature of reality, ultimate reality that our active minds keep us distracted from being able to perceive – not just when we meditate, but all the time. I could share much, much more about this, but for this morning, I simply lift up silent meditation as an example of one spiritual practice that gets closer to the notion of praying in silence.

So far, I have been talking about praying IN silence. Now I move to the idea of praying INTO silence.

Meditation practice is a set of spiritual practices that that prepare us, that get us ready for, perhaps the most difficult thing of all, to sit in silence and wait for God to reveal Godself.

Over our lifetimes, we develop a number of different images of God to help us cope with the boring or terrifying prospect of truly sitting in silence and waiting for God. After all, God's sense of time is much longer than ours. Think about how long it took to form the cosmos. God's time is measured in eons – so we might be waiting a long, long time!

Moses shared one of these images of God very effectively last Sunday: God as a loving parent, God as a caring, loving presence that listens to our words and soothes us. This is part of the way we explain God to our Preschoolers. There are times in our lives when this is exactly the kind of God we need – but it is only one of many.

Some of the hymns we sing, especially like “Jesus Loves Me” or “God is Ever by My Side” appeal to the notion of a parental or ever-present God. Human images of God can be very helpful, especially when we are feeling vulnerable, anxious, or sad. At times in our lives, we want God or Jesus to rescue us, to save us, perhaps from ourselves or what life has thrust upon us.

Let me be clear – and I have underlined this in my sermon: There is nothing wrong with relying upon the notion of God or Jesus as savior. But God is not a human being; and the hard reality we learn as we move from childhood into and through adulthood, is that God does *not* always save, either other people or those we love. That can be very problematic. If we expect that God will always show up, perhaps with a metaphoric cape streaming behind his or her broad shoulders, what happens when sad or bad things happen? Does that mean God doesn't exist or doesn't care? Over the years, I have met several people who have left churches because they were raised with the idea that God is control – which is wonderful when good things happen, but devastating emotionally when God does not appear to be in control and bad things happen.

Another image of God is that of an older sibling, someone wiser than ourselves, that can guide us along a path - a spiritual guide, guru, or in Star Wars, a Yoda. This is the image of Jesus we hear in the phrase, “come, follow me.” Many of our scriptures throughout the year focus on the divine human, Jesus, leading us in activities to help heal the world.

The hymn, “Will You Come and Follow Me” uses this image. Our work as a congregation, in fact, our primary *identity* as a congregation, relies on the idea of doing work together – of doing “stuff”, whether that is the Rummage Sale or Bazaar, gardening, organizing the Women’s Fellowship closet, teaching children, making beautiful cards, or cooking together. Sycamore follows the model of ministry found in the Letter of James, which includes these words: “But be **doers** of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves...**doers** who act—they will be blessed in their doing.” We learn and live out our faith, by doing.

Now let’s get uncomfortable together.

To truly pray into silence, without relying on notions of God as a beloved parent or even Jesus, is to risk that God won’t show up – or even worse, that God might not care – or even exist. This is the dark path our Lenten theme asks to consider and we are far enough in Lent for me to dare to expose this deepest fear we all have.

What if we pray into silence and God doesn’t answer? Does silence mean that God is not there or is indifferent? Are we brave enough as individuals and a church to ask that question? <pause> Are we brave enough to actually sit together in discomfort and seek the will of a silent God? Not just once, for a few minutes, but over and over again? Perhaps for decades – read Mother Theresa’s book...

Good Friday and Holy Saturday, the day of the crucifixion and of the even more terrifyingly empty next day, Holy Saturday, give us just two days, out of 365 when we, if we are brave enough to do so, offer us the chance to confront these questions again. Few churches even try to deal with Holy Saturday. Some churches will have vigils that lead into Easter. At the start of an Easter Vigil, you know that it will ultimately end with the Good News of the resurrection. Good Friday is one of the least attended services of the year. So much so, that some churches, like ours, share it.

Last year we invited Arlington Community Church to join us for our Good Friday service and a several people came. This year we invite you to drop into their observance of Good Friday, anytime between 12 and 3, for a time of quiet music and periodic reading of the 7 last words of Jesus.

These include the most *painful and scary words* tradition has placed on the lips of Jesus, “My God, My God, *why* have you forsaken me?” and behind these words are the even scarier question: “Are you really there, God?” – or are we just making things up? Can we pray into deep, perhaps impenetrable silence or does our discomfort result in our imagining a parental God is speaking to us?

Today’s story, like all the stories in the Bible are the antidote to these questions. David read to us about the people of Israel who were desperate for water. They called upon Moses, as their human leader, to save them. They are angry with him, in part because this was the second time they ran out of water: “Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?!”

I want to underscore a couple of points: 1) anger is a cheap emotion; wise individuals and leaders look beneath anger to underlying ideas or emotions that are camouflaged by anger. These underlying emotions can include fear, loss of control, or anger at oneself that is redirected towards the leader. Those emotions, especially loss of control, are the ones that need to be identified and addressed, not the anger. Sometimes simply acknowledging we are not in control can be helpful. The next step beyond that is to accept the notion that God may *also* not be in control.

Because the people are so thirsty, Moses calls upon God for help and God enables him to provide water for the people. Moses, like all good leaders, did not take credit but praises God for providing life-giving water.

I have a second point I want to make today, beyond the explanation of Praying *in* and *into* Silence I shared previously.

The most important part of the Bible is *not* what is written on the pages, passed down to us for thousands of years. The most important part of the Bible is NOT stories like God providing water through Moses or a hundred other stories in the Bible. Let me repeat, the most important part of the Bible are not the stories passed first by word of mouth and then written down. The stories we read are NOT the core of our faith.

Stories like these are like the Hawaiian Islands, that pop their heads above the waves above the seabed far below. Like Hawaii, the stories we read in the Bible are lush, beautiful, and full of life and meaning.

But the real journeys of God's faithful people are not in what we read. They are in the months and years, perhaps decades or lifetimes of years of silence BETWEEN the stories. True faith is a broken heart pouring out tears into the empty void. True faith IS wandering in the deserts of Sinai, Manzanar, and Tule Lake; and the discomfort of New Beginnings, and having the courage to ask "are you there, God?" "Do you care about our lives?"

True faith is not the stories we read about. It is in the time between the stories. True faith is like the rivers of lava and columns of land rising with agonizing slowness after a journey of thousands of feet from deep beneath the ocean to the surface where life came spring forth.

God IS in the silence. God IS listening. Do we dare to be quiet long enough to find out? As we move through Lent, my prayer for each of you and myself, is that we have the courage to pray into the void, not just with words of appeal, but with our naked souls. It is in silence that the journey to new life and hope is formed.

When we truly pray into silence, I believe we may even notice something. This is not a promise, it is a statement of my beliefs and hopes. I believe that if we are able to be silent enough, it is just possible that in the silence, we may that God prays in silence, too, right back to and into us. May it be so. Amen.

Exodus 17:1-7

Water from a rock

The whole Israelite community broke camp and set out from the Sin desert to continue their journey, as the Lord commanded. They set up their camp at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink. The people argued with Moses and said, "Give us water to drink."

Moses said to them, "Why are you arguing with me? Why are you testing the Lord?"

But the people were very thirsty for water there, and they complained to Moses, "Why did you bring us out of Egypt to kill us, our children, and our livestock with thirst?"

So Moses cried out to the Lord, "What should I do with this people? They are getting ready to stone me."

The Lord said to Moses, "Go on ahead of the people, and take some of Israel's elders with you. Take in your hand the shepherd's rod that you used to strike the Nile River, and go. I'll be standing there in front of you on the rock at Horeb. Hit the rock. Water will come out of it, and the people will be able to drink." Moses did so while Israel's elders watched. He called the place Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites argued with and tested the Lord, asking, "Is the Lord really with us or not?"

May God add new understanding to our reading and hearing of sacred stories of our ancestors in faith.