

“The Silence of Jesus”
Matthew 27:11-14
Christ the King Sunday

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Westminster, Greenville
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As some of you know, I grew up the son of teachers.

My mother taught ESL at Lansing Community College in Lansing, Michigan. My father was a professor at Michigan St. University. In fact, my dad taught at a small, liberal arts college within the university, a college called James Madison.

When I was 8 or 9 years old, James Madison College was threatened with being shut down. One of the high-up administrators at MSU didn't think the liberal arts were a high contribution to the university, so he saw an opportunity to save some money, flex his muscles...he decided to close James Madison College.

There's a story my dad tells about the administrator's wife. When she was asked about her husband's intentions, would he consider changing his mind...she said, “No, he won't change. My husband is a stubborn Dutchman, the most stubborn man I know.”

I'll never forget the look on my father's face, when he told that story when I was a child.

He was angry.
He and his colleagues at the college were upset.
What was happening was not right.

I recall my father looking for other jobs at the time, but I also remember the buttons that came out:

“Mad About Madison!”

Professors wore the buttons, students wore the buttons, most everyone associated with James Madison College fought the administration at Michigan State.

They appealed to the most powerful people at the University...and eventually—I think it was the President who was finally swayed by their arguments to keep the college, and the school was saved.

That kind of fight was the sort of thing any one of us might do in the face of something we felt was unjust, right?

We would stand against it.
We would SPEAK OUT.

All of which makes Jesus' behavior in our text this morning somewhat strange.

Today, it appears that there is NO FIGHT left in Jesus.
In the face of injustice, with false accusations staring him in the face... Jesus is SILENT.

“But when he was accused by the chief priests and elders, he did not answer. Then Pilate said to him, ‘Do you not hear how many accusations they make against you?’

But he gave him no answer, not even to a single charge...”

Why is that?

What's the meaning behind this mysterious silence from our Savior when his life is on the line?

- It could be that he was tired. The end is near, Jesus knows it. He's preached his final sermon, no more teachings from the mountaintop. It's time to be silent.
- It could be he was hurt. One disciple has betrayed him, another has denied him, all flee from him. And so he says nothing. Lost in his own internal anguish. Maybe that's it.
- Or maybe he was ANGRY. Maybe his silence is the silence of judgment. Did any of you ever get "the look" from one of your parents growing up? Maybe Jesus has "the look" on his face that day...

Just you wait, Pilate.
I know what will happen next.

All are possibilities, but may I submit to you a different possibility today?

Maybe Jesus is silent because Jesus DID NOT KNOW what was going to happen next.

Now...I realize that sounds like an odd suggestion.
The very Son of God *did not know* what God would do next??!!

I'm sure you remember what Jesus said to his disciples.
Three times in the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus says that the Son of Man must suffer, be killed, and on the third day be raised.

Just like he knows how it all will play out...
But that's not ALL Jesus does.

The farther you get into the Passion, the more doubt seems to creep into Jesus' faith. Do you remember his words in the garden, on the last night of his life?

“My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me...”

Do you remember his last words from the cross:

“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

So let me entertain with you the possibility that when Jesus is silent, perhaps Jesus

- a) Had doubts about what God would do
- b) Jesus DID NOT KNOW exactly what God would do
- c) Some part of Jesus was hoping that suffering and dying at the hands of the Romans was NOT something he had to do.

So Jesus is silent, because he did not want to say more than he really knew.

Have you ever done that before?

Have you ever tried to say more than you really knew?

After my wife and I were married, we went to Paris for our honeymoon. We had a wonderful time, but neither of us knew any French. I mean, I guess I knew a word or two. And one morning, I stood in line at the little coffee shop down the street from our hotel.

The woman behind the counter asked me something in French. For some reason, I decided to pretend that I knew more than I really knew.

“Oui,” I answered the woman, smiling and confident.

She got a puzzled look on her face, and asked me something else in French.

“Oui,” I said, nodding my head more vigorously.

Then she smiled and replied to me in perfect English:

“You don’t speak French, do you?”

It’s a little embarrassing to pretend to know something that you don’t really know. But sometimes, it’s not just embarrassing. Sometimes it’s dangerous.

Just look at what happens during the last week of Jesus’ life.

When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the crowds were adoring Jesus. But by the time Pilate asks them who they want released, the crowds have turned on Jesus!

Why?

Because they thought they knew.
They thought they knew what God would do for them.
Lead a revolt, overthrow the Romans...and it did not happen.

Jesus was not the kind of Savior, not the kind of King, whom they hoped Jesus would be!

And it’s not just the crowds who felt disappointed in Jesus.
Do you remember what happened with John the Baptist?

John the Baptist is the one who paved the way for Jesus, the one who baptized Jesus.

John said Jesus would bring fire and judgment!
John was ready for Jesus to bring the wicked to their knees!

But one of my favorite scenes in Matthew’s Gospel goes like this:

“When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, ‘Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?’”

In other words, even John the Baptist was confused by Jesus.
Uncertain about Jesus.

Have you ever felt that way?
Confused by God, dumbfounded by God,
hoping that God would act one way—
and instead God acts another way?

The late preacher Fred Craddock once wrote about his sister dying. He went to help her prepare for her funeral, and it was a hard thing to do. After that, she asked him to pray.

So this is what he did.
“I located myself straight in front of the throne,” he writes.

“Before I closed my eyes, I wanted to make sure I was in front of the throne, because what I wanted was God the throne, God the power, God the almighty. All things are possible with God.”

“When I had positioned myself straight in front of the throne, I bowed my head and prayed for her relief and for healing as intensely and sincerely as I could, and I closed with Amen. I lifted my head, opened my eyes...and I was in front of the bleeding lamb.”¹

I suspect we’ve all known moments like that.

¹ Fred B. Craddock, *Craddock Stories*, edited by Mike Graves and Richard F. Ward, St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2001.

When we want God to do SOMETHING, say something,
and instead, God is the one who is silent...

The silence of Jesus, the possibility that Jesus did not know how God would respond...it sounds like discouraging news.

But the more I think about it, I believe NOT KNOWING—in other words, a particular amount of uncertainty in our lives of faith...it's not the enemy of the gospel.

It goes hand in hand with the gospel.
In fact, it tells us something about God.

It means that God's mind is not like our mind.
It means that our ways are not like God's ways.
It means that our love is not like God's love.
It means that my imagination is not as big, as broad, as deep, as high...as the indescribable imagination of God.

Back when Will Willimon was a Methodist Bishop in Alabama, he wrote:

"I can show you lots of churches that are slowly sliding into morbidity," Willimon wrote.

"On one of my worst days,
a grueling 8-hour marathon of appointments,
I was about ready to go home when I was informed
I had one more appointment.

Two older women walked into my office.

"We've come to Birmingham to tell you about our ministry," one said.

“Gladys’s grandson was busted, DUI.

We went over to the youth prison camp to visit him.

Sad to say, we had never been there before.

We were appalled by the conditions,

those young men packed in there like animals.

“We got to know them.

Are you aware that only 10 percent of them can read?

An illiterate 19-year-old, and we wonder why he’s in prison!”

“Well, we began reading classes,” the other one said.

That led to a Bible study group in the evening.

We’re up to three Bible study groups a week.

Two of our friends who can’t get out bake cookies for the boys.

“Some of them said those cookies are the first gift they ever received.”

Willimon looked at them skeptically.

“And you want the conference to take responsibility for this ministry?”

“No...”

“You need me to come up with some money for you?”

“We don’t need any money...”

“Then why have you come down here to tell me about this?”

“Well, we know that being a bishop must be one of the most depressing jobs in the church—too many things that we are NOT doing that Jesus expects us to do.

“So Gladys thought it would be nice if we came down here to tell you to take heart. Something’s going right...”²

I forget who it was who said that the Church is NOT where you find more MORAL people.

The Church is where you find more HOPEFUL people.

And that hope does not rest in our abilities,
or our wisdom,
or our imagination.

It’s hope that springs from the mind and imagination of God.

My friend and colleague from Texas, Karl Travis, was put on hospice care about a month after the pandemic started.

In a recent article in *The Christian Century*, he writes:

“For me, entering hospice care meant disconnecting from my fancy drugs and preparing to die. My doctor gave me a range of 30 minutes to 30 days.

Then, stunningly, I dropped 30 pounds in three weeks, stopped taking morphine altogether, and got out of bed. I haven’t felt this good in two years.”

He compares his experience to something that one of his nurses shared with him.

² I am indebted to the Rev. Mark Ramsey for sharing this Willimon story with me a number of years ago.

“Some years ago, shaken by the pain, stress, and grief of getting close to patients only to watch them die one after another, she bought a horse: Holly.

But Holly did not want to be ridden. Each time my nurse tried, Holly, sensing her passenger’s anxieties, became restless and rowdy. Finally, my nurse recognized the relationship between Holly’s belligerence and her own inner turmoil.

She consciously chose to relax and release.
She held the reins more lightly.
She let Holly take control, and a beautiful, trusting friendship developed.

Holly was no mere horse.
She became a partner, an emotional mirror, an equine therapist.

Then Holly pulled the meniscus in her knee. The vet confined her to her stall for a couple of months, which is truly horrible for a horse and can even be deadly. My nurse was stuck between two options: continue to confine Holly or put her down.

Now think about that, Karl writes.

A career hospice nurse, philosophically committed to a comfortable and natural process of dying, faced with ending her horse’s life unnaturally, the very horse who taught her to deal with her own grief.

The nurse decided to put Holly down.
Then the vet called with good news.

While Holly could never be ridden again, she could be released from her stall and allowed to wander the pasture.

My nurse still visits Holly.

They walk the fields, and sometimes she brings Holly to a picnic table, where she sits and talks to her while the mare grazes nearby.³

They don't know how much time they have together...so Karl's nurse takes each day with Holly as God's gift.

May I suggest that sometimes, uncertainty is God's strange gift, because it keeps us OPEN to what God is going to do next, and how God will give us God's love.

You see, I suspect that many of you will be spending time with loved ones this holiday season. And for some, there just might be some uncertainty in the mix:

- Maybe you're worried about a loved one's health.
- Or maybe there's a broken relationship, and you can't see the way forward.
- Maybe there will be an empty chair at the table this holiday season. And you don't know what you'll do with your grief.

What do you think would happen if you took that grief, or that brokenness, or that worry, and said God—

I've gone as far as I can go.

I don't have the answer.

I'm relaxing and releasing the reins.

I'm turning all this over to you...

I don't know what will happen.

³ Karl Travis, "My hospice nurse's horse," *The Christian Century*, August 17, 2021, found at [My hospice nurse's horse | The Christian Century](#).

But this much I do know.

The imagination of God is much deeper and richer and more magnificent than anything any of us can comprehend.

That's what the silence of Jesus means to me.
The imagination of God is where Jesus placed his trust long ago.

And I hope—this holiday season—
the same will be true for me and for you.

Amen.