# Silence

Kalamazoo Mennonite Fellowship

Will Fitzgerald

October 11, 2015

Job 23:109, 16-17; Psalm 22:1-15; Hebrews 4:12-16; Mark 10:17-31

*Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer.*

## Introduction

I want to start with a bit of a warning: some of what I’m going to say today is pretty grim, and not for children.

I’ve started reading the novel *Silence* by the Japanese writer Shūsaku Endō. It’s historical fiction, the story of a Jesuit priest, Sebastião Rodrigues, who secretly enters Japan in the 17th century to support the persecuted Christian church. In many ways, it’s a pretty grim read. I’ve just reached the part where samurai have come into the small village which has been protecing Rodrigues, and taken three village men as hostages. These are the poorest of the poor, farmers who cannot even afford to eat rice. One recants his faith, and the other two, trying to pretend to recant, are found out by their captors. They are taken to the sea, and placed on crosses. At high tide, the cold sea reaches up to their necks. After three days of horrible pain, they die. Rodrigues witnesses this from his hiding place. Rodrigues had hoped for a glorious martyrdom, but sees only brutal cruelty.

Why is God silent?

This is a shocking story, and we could all tell shocking stories for hours. We could tell of the abuse of children by priests, of women and children in our own Mennonite communties. We could tell of Christians being killed for their faith, as part of our own Anabaptist history, and we could tell of Christians taking up arms to kill Jews; again, sadly part of our own Anabaptist history. We could tell of deluded people deluding others to think the world would end, with a “strong likelihood” last week. We could tell of Anabaptists declaring the city of Münster was the New Jerusalem, and begin to practice polygamy and kill those they judged non-believers.

Why is God silent?

I don’t know if I have an answer. But …

If you read some parts of the Bible, you’d get the idea that there is a simple rule: do good, and good things will happen to you; Do bad, and bad things will happen to you.

## Job

But there are other parts of the Bible which push back against this unnuance view. And two of our readings this morning push back pretty hard.

Last week, we read that Job was a righteous man who underwent terrible agonies and the loss of his family and his wealth. Is it any wonder that he would cry out, “Today my complaint is bitter; God’s hand is heavy despite my groaning.”

All Job desires is a chance to lay his case before God. He knows he cannot compete with God in all of God’s power, but he is confident that his innocence will be enough for him to win a fair hearing.

But he can’t find God anywhere: he can’t see God to the left, or the right; ahead of him, or behind him.

And this silence is just another way that Job feels woeful. His heart is faint, and he accuses God of terrorizing him. Job would just as soon be dead.

## Psalm 22

We get a similar complaint in Psalm 22. In fact, it’s easy to imagine that Job could be saying some of these words: “Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning? O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer; and by night, but find no rest.”

The psalmist remembers their history: in the old days, their ancestors cried out for deliverance from God, and God delivered them from their shame. But he feels nothing but shame: worm-like, and inhuman, and despicable, surrounded by people who mock and torture him.

But of course we remember that first verse of Psalm 22: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” is quoted by Jesus as he dies on the cross:

And when the sixth hour had come, there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour. And at the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, "E'lo-i, E'lo-i, la'ma sabach-tha'ni?" which means, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" (Mark 15:33)

The psalm as a whole frankly describes the agony Jesus undergoes on the cross, and it is perfectly natural that he would call it to mind.

Jesus himself becomes part of that “push back” that declares, with sadness, that bad things do happen to good people, that sometimes we know that others despise us; sometimes we feel literally godforsaken.

## Hebrews 4:14-15

And listen to some verses from our epistle reading:

We have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast to our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin.

We believe and declare that Christ is God.

We believe and declare that Jesus was human.

We believe and declare that Jesus Christ is our great high priest, the very Son of God, who went through the worst parts of the human condition: betrayal, torture, agonizing death.

And so Jesus sits with us in our silence. Christ sits at the right hand of God, interceding for us in the silence.

## Mark 10:17-31

I think even our gospel reading has something to teach us here. This is “the upside-down kingdom” in a bit of a nutshell. The rich and pious man goes away, sad and shocked. And Jesus reminds his disciples that it is impossible to enter God’s kingdom with God. Your piety and your wealth are not enough, for sure. But Jesus promises good things to those who are left without any good things. In fact, what he promises is mostly a family: “brothers and sisters, mothers and children” to those who leave things behind for him. And a reminder that in the age to come, many who are first now with be at the end of the line, and many who are waiting for what they need will be at the head of the line.

Thinking of those Japanese men—who, by the way, are based on real people—I wonder if this would be comfort for them. They had been treated so inhumanely by their lords and the samurai warriors, without rights, heavily taxed; they could be killed at any time. And these Roman Catholic Christian missionaries had come, telling them they were of infinite worth to God. When the pushback came from their rulers, and their new religion was outlawed, they sought to worship Christ in secret. And, as I said, there was brutal repression that nearly wiped out the church (and, it is sadly necessary to say, that some of this oppression was due to the Dutch and English who feared Catholic influence in Japan).

When they cried out to God asking God why they had been forsaken, did the memory of the godforsaken Christ comfort them? Did the memory of what they gained as Christians together bolster them? Did the promise of being first in the age to come encourage them? It’s not unlikely that the cruel and brutal pain they went through squeezed out any such comfort. But I believe that Christ still prayed for them in their agony.

May God keep us from the time of trial. And should the time of trial come, may God comfort us and keep us faithful. And, should we be faithless, may God remain faithful, for he cannot deny himself.