

## ***The Sound of Silence***

A Message for Sunday Morning Worship  
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT  
October 27, 2019  
Text: Lamentations 3:22-36

*Hello darkness, my old friend  
I've come to talk with you again  
Because a vision softly creeping  
Left its seeds while I was sleeping  
And the vision that was planted in my brain  
Still remains  
Within the sound of silence...*

So begins the mega folk-rock hit of 1965 written and performed by the duo known as Simon & Garfunkel. It was the kind of song that when you heard it on the radio, you just had to stop and listen to it. The words and haunting melody stopped you in your tracks almost every time it came on the radio. I don't recall any other song, before or since, that had quite the same effect on people as this one had. Even my mom and dad, the Mozart aficionado and the jazz patron, who always turned up their noses at the music my brother and I listened to, never complained when this came on the radio. There was just something about it ... and there still is.

I hadn't thought about this song in a long time until I came across the reference in today's text from Lamentations to the need to "sit alone in silence" as one considers the painful moments inevitably a part of human existence. I need to stop here and

clarify that I had been planning on preaching on a very different text this Sunday – the dry bones vision from Ezekiel as a matter of fact. But when I sat down to plan worship and re-read the text it just left me flat. And, I figured if it left me uninspired, it would be pretty difficult to be inspiring in my preaching on it for you. So, the hunt was on for a new text, but it didn't take long. I've recently become captivated by Lamentations, a part of what is known to Christians as "wisdom literature" and to our Jewish brothers and sisters as the *Ketuvim* or "Writings." It is a short book, only 5 chapters long, with each chapter essentially a stand-alone poem. Lamentations is essentially a book about grief. It was composed in the aftermath of the destruction of Jerusalem and the carrying into captivity of the leadership of the Jewish people to Babylon. Their lives were in ruins after this ignominious defeat. They could not process that God had allowed this to happen to them. They felt lost and alone, bereft and in total despair. The book is called "Lamentations" because it is a collection of "laments" or poems about pain, anguish and loss. This is undoubtedly why it is one of those books in the bible that sort of gets lost in the shuffle and it shouldn't because its words are powerfully evocative of the human experience you and I live every day. The poet who wrote Lamentations knows what it is to feel like you've lost everything, to wonder if God even cares. And

yet ultimately, the poet finds reason to hope for a better future with God at the center of it.

The text we read this morning is the point at which Lamentations turns from despair to hope. It begins in Chapter 3, verse 21 – “But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, God’s mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning.” This turning from despair to hope is, to me, one of the most powerful testimonies of God’s steadfast love for each and every one of us in the entire bible. The poet has just written line after line about how life is unbearable and God is no where to be found in anything and yet, and yet... How many of us can identify with this? How many of us know what it is to feel completely lost and bereft, not knowing what to do or where to turn? All of us, at one time or another, I’m quite sure, which is why this text is such a powerful witness and testimony for each of us to consider carefully, to ponder deeply. This poet who lived thousands of years ago is describing experiences, moments of anguish and despair, that have come to all of us. Painful as they are, we must remember these are universal human truths. Sometimes life is just unbearably painful and difficult. Sometimes we feel like we don’t know what to do or what comes next. Sometimes we feel like everyone has forgotten us, even God. Sometimes we just hit rock bottom left to wonder, “now what?”

The poet of Lamentations somehow, some way, digs deep down inside and decides to focus not on pain and loss but instead on the steadfast love of God. “Great is your faithfulness” the poet testifies to himself and his readers. “Great is your faithfulness” we still sing today in the beloved hymn of the same name. But the truth is, there are times when that is almost impossible to believe. There are moments in life when God seems anything but faithful in God’s love and compassion expressed toward us. The loss of a loved one, the loss of a job or a friendship or anything precious to us can hit us hard, taking our breath away and making God seem very far removed from what ever is going on. So, as we ponder these words from the poet, we are left to wonder how do we get from despair back to hope as the poet does? What do we do to move beyond the pain and emptiness?

That’s where the sound of silence comes in and, let’s face it, we may love the song but very few of us really like the sound of silence. Many people find it very, very difficult to hold silence for any length of time. Many of us need to be surrounded by noise all the time, and I think we often don’t even realize it. We get in the car and turn on the radio. We go for a walk or a run and use the ear plugs for our cell phones to listen to music or news for the duration. Noise is endemic in our society. Most medical offices now have television sets either blasting you with their own kind of “wellness” programming or the news or never-ending game

shows. We get home after a long day and turn on the TV “ in the background” just to have the comfort of mind-numbing conversation forcing out all the day’s craziness from our brains. But just sitting or walking or driving in silence? Oh, my goodness NO! I can’t do it. I don’t want to do it! I can’t turn my brain off and I’m not sure I’d like what would pop into my thoughts if I tried! Is any of this sounding familiar? I’m thinking it does.

That’s precisely why the poet’s recommendation for how to move from despair to hope is so unnerving. The poet encourages us to do all those things we don’t like to do, we’re afraid to try. We need to wait for God, he urges. And as we wait, we’re to encourage our soul – our very being – to reach out and seek God through the mists of despair. We are to wait quietly, to bear the yoke (the effort it takes) especially refining this skill when we are young. We are to sit alone in the silence when that seems to be God’s will. Sit alone in silence. Waiting for God to enter our hearts and reveal to us the path that will lead from despair to hope.

We’re also to be ready to do more. We need to “put our mouths to the dust” which means we are to accept whatever situation has pushed us to despair. We’re not to remain angry or hurt over whatever happened to us. We’re to accept insults from the people who are mean to us because in the end they are nothing. We are to do all this because we know beyond any doubt that God will not let us stay in the pit of despair forever. God sets

the wheels of life in motion and as we live the life God blesses us with, bad things happening are just part of life. But we can't allow ourselves to get stuck in feeling sorry for ourselves about those bad things over which we have no control. We are to hold on to the truth that God never wants pain and anguish and despair to be the sum total of our lives. God wants so much more for us. God intends so much more for us and sometimes all we can do in the midst of suffering and pain is pause in the silence to hold on to that one truth and that one truth, as it seeps in and permeates our heart and soul and mind and body, will guide us forward out of despair and toward the warm, reassuring glow of hope.

Is this easy to do? Of course not. But we can do it, if we can receive the gift of insight and perspective that God is able to provide when we make room for God's thoughts to become our thoughts. This is where that sound of silence comes in. The silence is where we make space for our souls to reconnect with God. The silence is where we literally turn off the stuff of the world that ties us in knots so that we can turn our hearts and minds to what God wants for us, intends for us. And we are able to do this because we can be assured that even when things are the bleakest – when human needs are being disregarded by the people in power, when human rights are tossed aside like so much garbage – we can know beyond doubt that God sees what is happening and God will act in God's own time, in God's own way.

In the meantime, we are called by God to live in hope, trusting that somehow, all will be well. Sometimes, often times, this makes no sense – at least when compared to the ways of the world. Sit in silence and wait for God? Are you kidding me? How can I possibly do that?

That at least is easy. Start small. And we do the first small step every Sunday during the moment of silence during the prayers. Take those moments of silence as a gift to reach toward God with specific words or just the reaching of your heart. Breathe deeply and wait for God. You might be surprised at just how fast that moment of silence will fly by. And the rest of the week? Try NOT turning on the radio as soon as you get in the car. If you're running a short errand or a longer drive, give yourself a specific amount of time to drive in silence – maybe 10 minutes. Be attentive to the sounds of the world all around you that you can still hear from the closed-up car. You'll be amazed. Try NOT turning on the television as soon as you walk in the house. Listen to the sounds of your home instead. What are they? How do they make you feel? What have you been missing by avoiding these sounds of silence? Again, I think you'll be surprised. Now, I get that some people thrive on sound and even need sound, especially music, to stay focused. That's a real thing and I get that. But, the sound of silence does not mean there is no sound at all. It means that silence has its own sound that requires effort and

attentiveness to hear. This sound of silence is truly a deep well of connectedness to oneself, one's life and to God. It's certainly worth a little of your time and effort to experience what it offers.

What do you have to lose?

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And the vision that was planted in my brain  
Still remains  
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May the vision God plants in your brain be one of hope and peace and a powerful reminder of how much God loves you, that you are never left alone. Amen.