

SPEECHLESS

Ezekiel 11:16-25

Romans 8:26-30

Lost for Words

When was the last time life rendered you speechless before God? Do you remember? Do you recall the last time that you knew prayer was called for – when you were confronted by the depth of your own brokenness or the corruption of the world and knew it was beyond your own capacity to heal – that only God’s swift and decisive intervention in our lives could restore hope – and yet.

And yet when you turned to God and sought to lay those fears and anxieties, these concerns and problems before him, there were no words. History had overwhelmed vocabulary. Faced with inexplicable horror and suffering – words failed you?

Do you remember? Maybe sitting next to your spouse in an examining room; or across the desk from your financial advisor; or at the grave of a child; or staring blankly at the television images of what used to be a federal office building now blown apart on one side. There is no end to the suffering. There is no end to the heartbreak and the helplessness. Do you **remember** being speechless? Do you remember powerlessness in the face of wounds too deep to heal?

It happens to me a lot. I find myself regularly overwhelmed by suffering, disgusted by sin, stunned by our inhumanity to one another. It happened to me again this week; on Wednesday. When the news of an earthquake striking Haiti first began to emerge, and the extent of the devastation became clear, I found myself knowing that prayer was called for, but paralyzed in the face of the tragedy. All I could think to say was, “Really?” Haiti? You’ve got to be kidding. Of all places. A devastating earthquake in Haiti. The only place on this side of the globe that comes pre-devastated. What’s up with that, Lord? Are we multiplying sorrows now? Are we not satisfied that these people had no hope to begin with that we are going magnify their despair even further? I don’t know what to say. How do you begin to pray for suffering Haitians?

Leonard Pitts expressed this frustration, this speechlessness, well in his column on Friday. Pitts wrote: “Bad enough, Haiti is wretchedly poor. Bad enough it has a history of political instability and colonialism, of being ignored by the major powers when it is not being exploited by them. Bad enough, all that, yet at the end of the day, those are disasters authored by human hands, by human greed, human corruption, human economic predation.

Now, though, you have to wonder if the planet itself is not conspiring against this humble little nation.”

Pitts is right. Bad enough this nation has suffered at the hands of its neighbors and nature – but even worse the prospect that now it suffers at the hands of an almighty God. Where do you start praying for a people that seem completely invulnerable to grace and hope?

A Spirit Not Our Own

The good news is that when we are speechless God is not. In fact our prayers are their most powerful and faithful when we are able to admit our powerlessness, confess our helplessness and hand the world over to the God who reigns over it in love. That is our promise in scripture. God can work through us when his spirit replaces our spirit, when his words fill our silence, when the work of his hands rouses us out of our idleness. Then God is most powerfully our God and we are most helpfully his people.

Silence in us any voice but your own. Those words are spoken among us frequently; they express our deep desire to have God's word drown out the noise of this world - to have God's voice pierce the din of distraction that would lead us astray and offer us lies and failed promises in place of humble service to his name and purpose. We pray these words - silence in us any voice but your own - as we prepare to hear God's word read and proclaimed in worship because we know that the voices competing with God's are compelling and persuasive and our ears have difficulty discerning the promises of God that never fail amid the confusing voices of our generation. We know that we must hear God speak clearly before we can live for him or follow him or receive his blessing.

But it is equally important for us to have God not only silence those voices in our world that compete with his, but silence our own voices as well. We need God to quiet our hearts and voices so that we can listen; attend to what God is doing around us; perceive the Holy Spirit as it moves through our world and our lives.

When we are still; when we keep silence and wait on God; our helplessness is met by God's power. Our heart of stone is replaced by a heart that moves with a compassion and mercy that is not of our own making. When we are still, when we are quiet and let God speak, God has a chance to show us what he needs done; God has the opportunity to teach us, to claim us and direct us according to his vision for our future.

The crisis in Haiti has produced a staggering quantity of words this week. Analysis, assessments, culpability and credit abound. Some of the most insightful I have read so far were offered by David Brooks, who wrote in the Times on Thursday:

"This is not a natural disaster story. This is a poverty story. It's a story about poorly constructed buildings, bad infrastructure and terrible public services..." The truth is, "we don't know how to use aid to reduce poverty... More than 10,000 organizations perform missions of some sort in Haiti. By some estimates, Haiti has more nongovernmental organizations per capita than any other place on earth. They are doing the Lord's work, especially these days, but even a blizzard of these efforts does not seem to add up to comprehensive change."

We don't know what to do. Hopeless and helpless, Brooks suggests, we are right to be speechless, at a loss for words and policies in the face of such overwhelming suffering and tragic loss.

So maybe before go running in with more words, more wisdom, more aid programs and policies, we should keep silent before the Lord. Maybe our speechlessness will allow the Lord room to work, to speak for us, to us and through us. Maybe this is bigger than we can heal. Bigger than an earthquake. Bigger than physical

destruction. Bigger than one nation's suffering; one people's devastation.

When I sat in stunned silence this week and pondered the images, watched the news reports, and read the commentary, my heart and mind kept returning, being lead perhaps, back to the words of Jesus. To the parable that Jesus tells his disciples in Luke 16. With the Pharisees listening in, Jesus tells the story of the poor beggar Lazarus who lay in the gate of a rich man day after day, crying out for food, begging for a crumb from the rich man's table to sustain his life. The rich man ignored the pleas of his poor neighbor and when they both died it was the beggar who received the rich reward from God's hand while the rich man was sent away, banished into torment.

The poor living at the feet of the rich. The poorest nation on this side of the globe at the doorstep of the richest most powerful nation in human history. This is how God tests the heart of the prosperous. This is how God reveals the compassion and mercy of his people. The widow, the orphan, the sojourner - these were the measuring stick up against which God held Israel that he might know their devotion to his covenant. Maybe the crisis in Haiti is not about the Haitians at all. Maybe it's not about what they have or have not done, the opportunities that they have squandered; the misfortune that has befallen them. Maybe this is about the beggar lying at our doorstep and God's stubborn refusal to forget about him. When you keep silence before the Lord, sometimes God whispers, and sometimes God shouts.

Maybe God has been talking to us about the beggar at our doorstep for a long time. 500 Haitians are dead after Hurricane Georges swept over the island in the early hours of Tuesday morning. Tropical storm Jeanne drenched Haiti overnight causing landslides; 2,000 are feared dead and many thousands more have lost their homes. Hurricane Dennis visited its fury on Haiti killing 25 and leaving much of the Island without power. Hurricane Wilma... Hurricane Faye. Hurricane Gustav. The people of Haiti are suffering. They have lost. They have died. They are hungry. God whispers.

The orphans, they need underwear. God whispers. Sometimes we hear. Most of the time we are distracted. We turn away. We blame the victim.

So God shouts and we cannot turn away. There is a beggar at your doorstep. I can see him lying there. I have noticed. I will not forget. Perhaps you should notice too. Perhaps you could try to do something.

It is hard. Helping Haiti will not be easy. We don't know what to do. We have tried and failed countless times. But that is no excuse for doing nothing, that is no reason to continue to heap up judgment against ourselves at their expense. It will not be easy - it will involve things like self denial and sacrifice and patience and steadfast love - things that we learn from Jesus, things that God's people can bring, when we are still and let God speak through us.

Even Better News

That's the good news that Paul's word to the Romans this morning writes on our hearts. Even when we are rendered speechless by the magnitude of human suffering around us, even when we are overwhelmed by the task that God has placed before us - God is faithful to fill our silences with words of hope and peace and healing. Even when we cannot express our gratitude, our shame, our deep need, our profound

unworthiness, God meets us in prayer and **his** spirit compensates for the failings **our** spirit. God makes possible prayer that we could not offer on our own.

The even better news for us this morning, however, is that we don't have to be speechless for God to speak through us. In fact, Paul is certain that even when we are filled with words, even when our prayer list is nearly endless, even when we are eager to get on our knees and hold forth to God on the state of the world – even when we are at our most verbose – still we don't know how to pray as we ought. Even when we are most certain that we know exactly what God needs to hear, we are merely tilting at the wind, thrusting in the dark. Unable to see the world as God sees, to know its needs as God knows them, to love our enemies as God loves them. Even and especially when we think we have just the right words for prayer, the truth is we don't know how to pray as we ought. Left to ourselves we would surely pray disaster upon our own lives and the whole world.

The good news is that God rescues us from that – saves us from ourselves. Whenever we accept God's invitation to join him in prayer, to re-establish the relationship that he has made possible for us in Christ, to share in his life and work, he has promised us his spirit – we will not walk in prayer alone - he has promised to silence in us any voice but his, even our own – to give us the words, to give us the heart, to give us the ears we need to be his people in the world.

We bring ourselves to prayer in hopes that at prayer we will be changed, we will arise different people, new people, with a new vision and new heart, we will be given that Spirit, that desire, that will, to be useful to God's work among us. When we pray that God will change us, and through us change the world, then no suffering is beyond relief, no brokenness beyond healing, no weakness beyond restoration, no despair beyond hope. **Because** God is with us in prayer, our speechlessness turns into proclamation of God's enduring love and care and compassion for all the earth. Only because God is **with us** in prayer... can we pray as we ought.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.