

Speaking for the Silent  
Deuteronomy 18:15-20; Mark 1:21-28  
January 28, 2018  
Daniel Crump

The situation from this morning's Old Testament passage in Deuteronomy, chapter 18, might be a familiar one. Earlier, in Deuteronomy, chapter 4, we read that God tells Moses to assemble the people so that they may hear for themselves the words of God out of a mountain of fire blazing up to the heavens. Here, in chapter 18, we learn that the people have said "enough" with the voice of God and the great fire. The people have asked that God stop speaking to them directly. "If we hear and see any more," they say, "we will die."

And God says to Moses, "They are right," as if the next thing God was inclined to say would strike them all dead. So, in an act of what I can only read as divine compassion, we learn that God has chosen to be the silent ventriloquist who will raise up a prophet like Moses, slow of speech and slow of tongue, to be the mumbling dummy. I suggest this situation may be familiar, not because of this mumbling dummy before you today, but because we are often confronted by the silence of God and the necessary, but all-too-human effort to speak for God. Perhaps, now, as much as at any time in history, the people of God long for God to step up to the mike and straighten things out once and for all.

So here I find myself, slow of speech and slow of typing fingers, raised up to speak in Pastor Laurie's place and speak for this compassionate and committed congregation both of whom are far more capable than I to speak their own truth. Am I also raised up to speak for God? And will you who hear my voice be held accountable? If so, maybe you'd better grab that tiny pencil in front of you and take some notes. This might be on the test. More importantly, to me anyway, if I say anything here that God has not commanded me to say, am I going to die? Kind of puts the fear of public speaking in perspective, doesn't it?

This text has me wondering about the stakes involved in speaking for the one who, by choice or by station, is silent. Can we as Christians legitimately speak for a silent God in support of or in opposition against a particular political party or ideology as so many faith leaders seem willing to do? Without incurring the most dire of consequences, that is?

There were several religious groups ready and willing to unite under the Nazi flag in Germany on behalf of nationalism, military heroism, and racial purity. In response, the so-called Confessional Church arose out of the German Protestant Church to adopt a declaration written by German Reformed Theologian, Karl Barth called the Theological Declaration of Barmen. It appears in our Presbyterian Book of Confessions as the Barmen Declaration. It expressly states that Jesus Christ is the one Word of God that is to be heard, trusted, and obeyed. I quote, “Through him befalls us a joyful deliverance from the godless fetters of this world for a free, grateful service to his creatures.” The Barmen Declaration suggests that claiming to speak for God through political channels is a dicey proposition at best.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer took this declaration a step further. In his book, Letters and Papers from Prison, he wrote,

“There remains an experience of incomparable value. We have for once learnt to see the great events of world history from below, from the perspective of the outcast, the suspects, the maltreated, the powerless, the oppressed, the reviled – in short, from the perspective of those who suffer.”

Bonhoeffer seems to say that not only is the revelation of God not found in systems of political or economic power, it very well may be found in the absence of that power from the perspective of those who suffer in the shadows of those systems. If the life and death and resurrection of Jesus holds any meaning at all, it is that God enters history in the flesh as the outcast, the suspect, the maltreated, the powerless, the oppressed, the reviled, in short, as the ones who suffer.

Our passage in Deuteronomy warns that if anyone presumes to speak for a now silent God, the stakes could not be higher, for both the speaker and the listener. Our very existence as Christians who would claim to speak God’s truth in this world is totally dependent upon our capacity to hear it, to locate its source, to speak from its perspective, not our own, ultimately to empower it to speak and be heard itself.

I have come to believe that to speak for God in this world, and that is what we as Christians are called to do, is not to speak in the stead of the ones who have no voice. That would only serve to silence them further. After all, who truly has no voice? It is not that some have no

voice, but that some voices have no audience. Our call, rather, is to listen, to be an audience for those voices, and then to speak so that those voices will themselves be heard.

One way to respond to that call is to seek out the voices that society refuses to hear. On April 6-8, our church will participate in the Urban Immersion retreat in Minneapolis. All are invited to join us on this road trip to see some of what a life of poverty looks like from the inside and to engage directly in efforts to ease the burden of those less fortunate than ourselves. Please join us if you can.

Another way is to use the voices we have in forums in which others are truly voiceless. Children have no way to support themselves in our economy. There is no way to blame a child for the simple misfortune of being born into poverty and being born into poverty is the strongest indicator that a person will live their entire life poor. Children, also, being too young to vote, have no say in the government that claims, in the words of Lincoln, to be of, by, and for them. Therefore, Wisconsin Council of Churches has teamed up with the WISDOM Network to collect ten thousand signatures demanding that the Wisconsin legislature make three commitments: cutting child poverty in half in the next ten years, cutting racial disparity in child poverty in half over the same time period and, finally, establishing a mechanism to annually assess progress toward these goals. This exciting program bears the endorsement of our own Winnebago Presbytery which voted to support it in their most recent meeting.

Now, I am sure you are all still holding that tiny pencil, right? Here is the test part. Take your bulletin. Find a clear space with no printing and write this: [www.endchildpovertywi.org](http://www.endchildpovertywi.org) When you get home today, go to your computer, type in this website, and add your name in support of this important initiative. There are links there to provide plenty of background information if you have questions. Or ask me later. I will try to get you an answer. This is one of those rare opportunities to authentically speak for those who have no voice. This is a test. I hope you get an A.

The New Testament passage in the gospel of Mark from this week also addresses the stakes of speaking for others. Jesus encounters a man possessed by an unclean spirit. Normally, when the conversation turns to talk of demonic powers, we tend to fall in either with a psychological diagnosis or an acceptance of the existence of supernatural entities. But both miss the

point, I think. The important point is that the man Jesus encounters is possessed or owned by an external agent who prevents him from speaking or acting for himself. What Jesus does is to silence and eventually cast out the one who presumes to speak for, to speak as, someone else. “Be silent,” Jesus tells the noisy spirit.

Also, notice that the spirit refers to itself in the plural, “What do you have to do with us? Have you come to destroy us?” In another exorcism story later in this gospel, the spirit calls itself, “Legion, for we are many.” Dr. Alex Gee from the Fountain of Life Covenant Church in Madison thinks of this demon, not as a supernatural being, but as the legion of institutional forces — legal, political, economic, national — that assign labels and categories to individuals: the poor, the felon, the immigrant, the racially inferior, the not normal. These are the forces that take away the unique birthright of each of God’s children and enslave them to one identity or another. The spirit cries out to Jesus, “I know who you are!” as if the full nature of who Jesus, or anyone else, is could be fully known by another. This is precisely what theologian Paul Tillich defined as demonic, the finite laying claim to unconditioned finality for itself.

Our country is currently awash in what is often called “identity politics.” The only “lives” that matter are the ones that fit into one category or another. It is important to note that such identities play an essential part in naming and dismantling otherwise invisible oppressions, but it is equally important to recognize that identity as a tool of liberation is just another prison in disguise. We seem to have forgotten that the word ‘identity’ shares a root with the word ‘identical.’ It means “the same.”

University of Michigan English professor, Philip Christman, has written a brilliant essay titled, “On Being Midwestern: The Burden of Normality.” Christman speaks of the difficulty of characterizing life in the so-called American Midwest. I have lived here all my life, as perhaps you have, so his essay really resonates with me. The Midwest’s characterization is made difficult by a deliberate and finely-honed absence of character. Every place tries its hardest to be like every other place. This is where sameness lives.

He suggests that the rest of the country treats the Midwest as its colony. It is America’s breadbasket. It was America’s foundry, until it was abandoned for cheaper labor found elsewhere. In a sense, the very character of the Midwest is that it is available to others to extract

whatever they will. Perhaps the chiefest of its extractions is, according to Christman “an unqualified normality.” It is the model of the American Dream where no one is defined by place, or station, or any particularity; where no one is defined at all. Christman speaks of “the promise of flatness, the freedom of anonymity, of being anywhere and nowhere at once.”

It is a promise, perhaps, for those who do not live here, but we live inside this very definition of normality. We see, in the mirror every day, one who is not and can never be normal. We hear Legion cry out, “I know who you are, and who you are not!” For us, the promise is, as Christman says, “a lie all the way through.”

I believe this is the demon Jesus would cast out today. I believe that “Legion” is none other than the constant stream of voices telling us we need this, we lack that. We are too tall, too short, too large, too small, too medium. Legion is all the lives that matter telling us that ours is the life that does not. Legion is the one who prevents us from hearing the voice of the apparently voiceless, because Legion shouts over the song each of us is born to sing. The voiceless one we do not speak for, the voiceless one we do not hear — listen — is the one inside.

Will you pray with me?

Gracious God, you are in all things. Cast out the voices that seek to drown you out. Grant that we can your voice not only in the voices of the powerless, the oppressed, and the reviled, but in the still, small voice within each of us that waits patiently to be heard. In the name of Jesus, your Son. Amen.