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Sermon: March 12, 2017
Beverly E.C.C., Chicago, IL

“SILENT PRESENCE, SILENT ACTION”
Book of Esther

Twice in my life, God has spoken directly to me.

The first time, I was teetering on the edge of suicide. I cried out, “God, if you don’t save me, I’m a dead man!”

To my surprise, he answered: “I love you. You will not die by your own hand.”

His voice was not physically audible, but I heard it. His tone was distinctive, more real than any other sound.

My depression lingered for a while, but the impulse to end my life was instantly gone. The Lord rescued me.

The second time was during Holy Communion, when I promised to do whatever God wanted. To my shock, he answered “Do a short-term mission.”

Just a few days earlier I confidently told a friend that foreign missions were not for me. The Lord would never have me do that!

Again, his words were not physically audible. Nevertheless, the voice was unmistakably the Lord’s.

He spoke, and I served in Japan from 1988 to 1990. The experience changed me in profound ways.

Best of all, my life’s timeline was altered so that I could marry Beth. Had I gone straight to seminary, we never would have met.

God has spoken directly to me no more than two times. Each time it made all the difference.

There have been other instances, too many to count, when God has communicated through people or by illuminating my thoughts or stirring my soul.

E.g., late in 2000 I started to get the sense that it was time to move on from Iowa. The doors flew open and nine months later I became your pastor.

However, the Lord did not speak directly to me. He conveyed his message via intuition, and confirmed it by means of circumstance.

This can have a significant impact. Then again, it is a subjective experience, open to interpretation and misinterpretation.

Quite often, I don’t get *that* much. I hear no voice, I feel no movement. God is silent.

? Can you identify with me? Is your experience at all similar to mine?

{II Tim 3:16} Of course we have his written Word, which **“is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness.”** Even so, that is more like listening in on someone else’s conversation. It is not the same as hearing from him firsthand.

? Is God present in the silence?

? If God is present, is he doing anything?

Please turn with me to the Book of Esther.

Chapter One: Xerxes, King of Persia, orders Queen Vashti to appear before a crowd of drunken men so they can feast their eyes on her. She refuses, and the outraged king deposes her.

Chapter Two: Xerxes feels lonely, so his attendants advise him to choose a new queen. They

assemble the most beautiful young women, each of whom spends one night with the king.

In the end, he chooses Esther. The new queen conceals the fact that she is Jewish, and that her cousin Mordecai is a low-level bureaucrat at the palace.

Meanwhile, Mordecai saves King Xerxes from an assassination plot. This is recorded in the royal chronicles.

Chapter Three: Xerxes promotes Haman to second in command. Wherever he goes everyone bows and scrapes – everyone, that is, except Mordecai.

Haman is enraged. He scorns the idea of killing Mordecai alone. When he discovers that his nemesis is a Jew he decides **“to destroy all ... the Jews, throughout the whole kingdom,”** from India to North Africa.

The king casually sanctions his murderous scheme. Royal dispatches are sent **“with the order to destroy, kill and annihilate all the Jews – young and old, women and children – on a single day.”**

Chapter Four: Mordecai persuades Esther to intervene with the king, even though it might cost her life.

Chapter Five: Esther gives a banquet for Xerxes and Haman, and invites them to return the next day. Afterwards, Haman sets up a sharpened stake, 75 feet tall, for Mordecai to be impaled upon.

Chapter Six: That night the king can't sleep, so the chronicles are read to him. When they get to the part about Mordecai saving his life, he asks what recognition was given. The answer is, None.

Just then, Haman comes looking for approval to impale Mordecai. Before he does Xerxes asks, **“What should be done for the man [I delight] to honor?”**

Haman assumes Xerxes is talking about him, and suggests a lavish public accolade. The king agrees, and orders him to do it for Mordecai.

Chapter Seven: Queen Esther hosts her second banquet, and Xerxes invites her to make her petition.

She pleads, **“grant me my life ... and spare my people ... For I and my people have been sold to be destroyed, killed and annihilated.”**

“Who is he?” the king asks. **“Where is ... the man who has dared to do such a thing?”**

Esther exclaims, **“An adversary and enemy! This vile Haman!”** Haman begs for his life, but he is impaled on the stake he had set up for Mordecai.

Chapters 8-9: The edict authorizing the genocide of Esther's people cannot be revoked, so Xerxes writes another one. With it he grants the Jews the right to assemble and protect themselves.

The government officials in every province help the Jews, who strike down their enemies. Purim, the Jewish commemoration of this victory, is established as an official feast day.

Chapter 10: Xerxes elevates Mordecai to the highest possible rank. He takes Haman's place as the king's second in command.

I have recounted the actions and reactions of many people. Whose deeds have I not narrated? God's.

I have quoted or alluded to the words of several key figures. Whose words have I not cited? God's.

Neither the author nor the actors ever refer to God by name or by title, directly or indirectly – not a

single time! They never quote YHWH or Scripture. They never attribute any action or outcome to the Almighty.

The Living God never speaks in his own voice, and he never gives any human being a message to repeat. The text never indicates communication via intuition or inspiration. Simply put, he is silent.

Silent while Xerxes coerces hundreds of young women into his bed. Silent while Haman organizes Mordecai's murder. Silent while Haman makes arrangements for the total annihilation of Israel.

In the moment, it appeared to the actors that the LORD was very far away, indeed.

✎ Yet, from our vantage point we can see that his silence in this book is not absence. God is present in the silence. He sees. He hears. He knows. He cares.

In the moment, it appeared to the actors that the LORD was entirely passive.

✎ Yet, from our vantage point we can see that his silence in this book is not inaction. God is active in the silence. He is working behind the scenes through circumstances, events, and people.

☑ In his book Paradoxology, Krish Kandiah notes,

Every good film needs a good director, the person who shapes every scene and controls every character. The place of each prop, the lining up of each camera angle and the positioning of all the incidental characters is deliberately and strategically worked out from start to finish by the director. It is the most important role, yet in (virtually) every film ... the

director remains silent and invisible throughout. For most of Esther's story it is hard to see how [there could be] a happy ending, but in ... the end we see how God weaves the plot elements together: a sleepless king, a huge gallows, a beauty pageant and several banquets come together into a storyline that not only sees God's people rescued, but brings him glory.

The director metaphor has its limits. Still, when God does not speak directly or illuminate our thoughts or stir our soul, it invites us to consider his silent presence and silent action.

God has spoken directly to me, and it was wonderful! But he has only done it twice.

The Lord frequently conveys a message to me indirectly, via intuition and circumstance. But that is a subjective experience, open to interpretation and misinterpretation.

Quite often, I don't get *that* much. I hear no voice, I feel no movement. God is silent.

‽ Can you identify with me? Have you walked in these shoes, too?

That is OK! We are in good company. Esther and Mordecai and Israel had the same experience. And not them alone!

{Ps 13:1} Consider the psalmist. **“How long, LORD? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?”**

{Mt 26:39; 27:46} Consider the Son himself. In the Garden, he beseeched his Father, “If it is possible, may this cup be taken from me” – but God was silent. On the cross, he cried out “**My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?**” – and got no answer.

I will close with a poem. Some Allied soldiers found it in the closing days of World War II, scrawled on the walls of a cellar in Cologne, Germany. It is thought that it was written by a Jew who was hiding from the murderous Nazis.

**I believe in the sun
even when it is not shining
I believe in love
even when there's no one there
I believe in God
even when he is silent**

The Book of Esther is the word of the Lord.