**“The Sound of Silence”**

**2 Kings 25:1, 4-12**

**Jeremiah 31:31-36**

**Luke 1:67-79**

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Amen

By the seventh century BC the Assyrians Empire that had devastated the Northern Kingdom of Israel in 722 and exiled its people fell from power. The Babylonians became the dominant world power capturing the Assyrian capital of Nineveh in 612.

Meanwhile the Pharaoh Nero of Egypt had killed good King Josiah of Judah on the plains of Megiddo. Josiah’s eldest son Jehoahaz became king but reigned just three months before Pharaoh replaced him with his younger brother Eliakim whom he renamed Jehoiakim.

King Jehoiakim and all of Judah were bowed down with the burden of tribute to Egypt and entered into an alliance with Babylonia; becoming a servant state of King Nebuchadnezzar in 608 BC. Towards the end of his eleven year reign he rebelled against Babylon and rekindled a relationship with Egypt. He died shortly thereafter and his son Jehoiachin became King of Judah in 597.

The Babylonian response to his betrayal was swift and harsh: King Nebuchadnezzar marched into Jerusalem. Thus began the siege of Jerusalem in January of 587BC. King Jehoiakim who had reigned for three months, surrendered and was exiled to Babylon along with officials, warriors, artisans and members of the upper class: captives all. King Nebuchadnezzar appointed Mahaniah, Jehoiachin’s uncle, king and changed his name to Zedekiah. He made Judah a vassal of Babylonia.

The siege continued as Zedekiah too betrayed the Babylonian empire. In all it would last eighteen months and included three devastating Chaldean assaults the last of which you heard about this morning.By August of 586 the walls of Jerusalem fell King Zedekiah fled, the army scattered and on the plains of Jericho, the site of Israel’s first military victory in the new land (Joshua 6), Judah was soundly defeated, its king captured and his heirs killed before his eyes.Within weeks the temple was plundered and all the sacred treasures carted off to Babylon along with the man who would be king. As the smoke lifted and the rubble cooled all that was left was a remnant of farmers and vinedressers left behind to till the soil.

*Silence*

Only silence could hold the devastation. In the silence and through the pain of loss - of land, city, temple, identity and future kings the captives heard one voice – the voice of a prophet named Jeremiah. He had warned them for years about a day of reckoning for their idolatry.

Jeremiah, like Isaiah before him and Ezekiel after him, preached to the people of Judah. He prophesied for forty years much of that time predicting the downfall of Judah unless king and people repented. He saw the initial destruction of Judah at the end of his career and remained in Judah during the Babylonian exile. His sorrow over the fall of Jerusalem is captured in the Book of Lamentations.

It is said that Isaiah wrote the most compelling poetry of the Bible and Jeremiah the most poignant life story. The only autobiographical book of prophecy, Jeremiah tells us all about his life and his struggles with God and the times but in the excerpt today we hear something else.

This scripture is part of what is called The *Books of Consolation - c*hapters thirty and thirty-one of the Book of Jeremiah. What one author called *the divine reversal*, Jeremiah describes the time when God promised to write upon the hearts of his people the words he had heretofore scripted on tablets of stone.

The oracles of hope include the only reference to a new covenant in the Old Testament.

It echoes the giving of the Law at Mount Sinai in Exodus 20 and the promises made to Noah after the flood. At that time God promised to never gain destroy the earth by flood saying, *I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth* (Genesis 9:13).

In this new covenant God who created and orders the earth, sun and moon, day and night, sea and waves, who gave his people his Holy Law, shall also give his people one more thing: his signature. He shall write his law upon their hearts: an overture to spark a relationship.

Augustine captured the impact of this new covenant when he wrote *Lord, you have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you (Confessions of Saint Augustine).*

*The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people…for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more* (Jeremiah 31:31-34). This is the passage that inspired the second century philosopher and theologian Origen of Alexandria to name the last 27 books of the bible *The New Testament*. The passage appears in nine books of the New Testament. The Book of Hebrews has the most extensive Old Testament quotations: all from Jeremiah.

Cyrus King of Persia defeated the Babylonian Empire in 539 BC and released the people of Judah from captivity in 538: many returned to Jerusalem. More prophets arose and the temple was rebuilt. The last prophets of Judah were Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi. With their last words around 500 BC prophecy ceased.

*Silence*

As we conclude our summer with the kings of Israel and Judah and the great prophets Elijah of the Northern Kingdom and Jeremiah of the Southern Kingdom we honor their memory and remember that while prophets fell were silent but God did not.

Rabbi Angel of New York City observes that this time coincided with the rise of Alexander the Great and the age of reason: the time when Jews perpetuated prophecy through their prayers and relationship with God.

For us another prophet came through the silence 500 years later to share his prayer with us. I think of him as the unsung hero of Advent: Zachariah. He is Levite (priest) and his wife Elizabeth is a descendant of the first High Priest Aaron, the brother of Moses. He was serving in the temple within the Holy of Holies when the angel Gabriel told him that his wife, unable to conceive a child, would in fact bear a son and he was to be named John.

Impatient with his disbelief Gabriel’s renders him mute. But in that silence he has time to read God’s inscription on his heart. When his son is born and presented in the temple on the eighth day he does not just speak: he sings this song of praise to God filled with hope for his son who shall prepare ye the way for the Messiah (*Benedictus*).

This interim time is a time of silence when we pause to reflect on the past and prepare for a future. This new season is about us as much as whomever the congregation calls as pastor. We resist silence when we are anxious. Yet I wonder if it might be good to slip into the silence.

At *The Gathering* at Vanderbilt last Thursday the morning ended with communion and it was in the silence of receiving the bread and the cup that sensed our shared surrender to Jesus the Christ who has promised to be with us and asks us to go and make disciples even when we are worried about the size of our congregation, our budget and our success.

The Hope mission statement is: *A Christ-centered Community of faith, led by the Holy Spirit to share God’s love with others.* On September 19 your elders, deacons and PNC shall gather for a retreat day to seek the Spirit.

One of the texts for the day is a book by the Rev. Joan Gray, *The Sail Boat Church*. She observes that most churches row hard – we have been rowing hard for many years – relying upon the strength of our membership, our programs and our budgets - doing all that we can do. She suggest that to move forward into a world that has been forever changed by technology and culture we need to step out of the boat, put down our oars and step into a sailboat, hoist the sails and let the Holy Spirit lead us forth.

Zechariah sang a song of redemptive love that trumps fear and doubt and makes us want to prepare the way of the Lord and experience forgiveness and the presence of our Savior. To hear Good News we need times of silence; to live Good News we need God and each other.

We know without a doubt that God has written his word on our hearts. He beckons us to be still and know that he is God. ``We give thanks for judges and kings, prophets and priests of old who have brought us into the faith. May we inherit their legacy of faith and perseverance and learn the sound of silence to the glory of God. Amen

The Rev. Elizabeth Kuehl

Hope United Presbyterian Church

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