"BY THE RIVERS OF BABYLON"
A Sermon by the Rev. Don Gall
First Congregational United Church of Christ
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Our text for this morning is from the 137th Psalm. It reflects a time in the history of the Israelites after their country was invaded and occupied by the Babylonian army. Their holy city of Jerusalem had been reduced to smoldering ruins, and with it the Temple, wherein their God, Yahweh, was believed to dwell. In the end, the people themselves were driven into exile.

Then, far from home and living in a foreign land, their captors taunted them saying, “Sing us one of your songs of Zion.” But instead of “singing,” the people sat in sullen silence by the rivers of Babylon, more inclined to weep than to sing. The psalmist describes the scene thusly:

“By the rivers of Babylon—there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion. On the willows there we hung up our harps. For there our captors asked us for songs, and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying “Sing us one of the songs of Zion!” How could we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land? If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither! Let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth, if I do not remember you, if I do not set Jerusalem above my highest joy.” (Psalm 137:1-6)

Let us pray: Creator God, you have fashioned an impenetrable light that shines within each of us. Sometimes our light goes out only to be blown into a flame again by another human being. May we be the flame for one another in dark and troubling times, and thereby help to rekindle the light in a discouraged soul somewhere. Amen.

To describe the conditions under which the Israelites found themselves as “dark and troublesome” would be an understatement. Given their circumstances, it would take a lot for that “impenetrable light” to be blown into flame again. And so, understandably, they chose “silence” as preferable to singing.

But that is hardly surprising, given the fact that numerous others throughout history have also chosen silence over speaking, remaining silent rather than risk upsetting the status quo, or imperiling opportunity, or alienating friends or family. Who among us sitting here this morning does not occasionally long for a little peace and quiet, even under far less harsh and demanding circumstances?

The author of Ecclesiastes says, there is a season for everything, “a time to keep silence, and a time to speak” (Ecc. 3:1ff). That’s one of the reasons we observe a moment of silence before our prayers each Sunday, so that we can sit quietly in the presence of God and listen for what God has to say to us once in a while. A woman parishioner once confessed to me that she used that quiet time each Sunday to mentally prepare her weekly grocery list. I was tempted to ask if that translated into “divinely inspired” meals or not, but chose “silence” as a more prudent response.

There’s a TV commercial that has been showing recently of a young school teacher standing in the middle of a classroom in which elementary-aged students are running
amuck. Two boys are in a tussle in the corner, another is sitting in the fish tank, several
girls are scribbling all over the dry board, a few are beating on each other with plastic bats,
and another kid is talking on the teacher’s cell phone. It is absolute bedlam and the teacher
is standing there in the middle of the room, her hair disheveled, her blouse partially
untucked, with a look of total exhaustion on her face. Clearly, she is someone who is in
need of some quiet time.

Not everyone, thank goodness, is as desperate as that young teacher, but the
commercial makes its point. We all need occasional periods of silence. Most of us are able
to strike some kind of healthy balance between being fully engaged to the point of
exhaustion and being so withdrawn as to become utterly isolated. In other words, we don’t
need to run ourselves into the ground to be meaningfully engaged with life, and we also
don’t need to join a monastic order to find some peace and quiet. We can responsibly do
both.

The key word here is responsibly. To be responsible, one must be able to “respond”
in a way that is answerable and accountable. It’s different than reacting, which is like
throwing a ball against a wall and having it bounce back to you in a reverse motion, leaving
everything else unchanged. “Responding,” on the other hand, takes into account both cause
and effect and seeks to be guided by a sense of what is right and wrong, of what is just and
unjust, and in seeking a resolution to a situation.

So, we may shut out the noise of the world temporarily, but we must never become
deaf and indifferent to the cries of others who are suffering and in need of our help. For if
we do, than our silence may become the undoing of that which is good and just and
honorable. Neglect may have serious consequences.

In Leviticus 5:1, we find one of the sacred laws of Judaism which says that whenever
we are faced with a public obligation to testify as a witness to something we have seen or
heard, and do not declare what we know, we commit a wrong and must bear the
responsibility.

It’s the kind of testimony the intelligence committees of congress are seeking to
extract from the people they are question-ing at their various hearings. Unfortunately,
little in the way of factual testimony seems to be forthcoming from many of them, despite
having sworn “to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth—so help them
God!

It is also the kind of solemn charge given to each of us in our role as Christ’s
witnesses for truth and justice in a world beset with social injustice, economic inequality,
and religious perversity. Remaining silent under such conditions renders us complicit. And
sometimes remaining silent in the face of wrong can be as offensive as committing the
wrong, itself. Perhaps, it is even worse.

The Rev. Dr. William J. Barber II, who is said to be the presumed successor to Dr.
Martin Luther King, Jr., says of the current economic and political situation in America,
“When we see signs of a rising fascism, we know that we cannot be silent . . . This is not a right
versus left movement. This is about the moral center. This is about our humanity.”

So, while silence can be golden under certain circumstances, it can also be cop-out
and a retreat from moral responsibility. Dr. King, himself, once said that “In the end, it is
not the words of our enemies that hurt us the most; it is the silence of our friends.” That
also may be when the “sound” of silence becomes the “sin” of silence."
In Rolf Hotchhuth’s book, *The Deputy*, first published in 1963, the central question raised is how Pope Pius XII, Christ’s Deputy on earth, could have failed to speak out against the mass murder of six million Jews during World War II and by his silence fail to give voice to Christianity’s most fundamental principles. Critics of the book maintained that it was a caustic indictment of Pius XII, and that it was, therefore, anti-Catholic. But whether true or false, the book was much more than that, for it touched the raw nerve of Christian conscience in a way that scores of other books and plays on the same subject had failed to do.

The anguished cry of “Am I my brother's or sister's keeper?” infuses *The Deputy* with a moral passion that cannot fail to stir the thoughtful reader or theater-goer. It is one man’s judgment on the leader of several hundred million Roman Catholics in the world, a man whose power Hitler feared and respected more than any other power on earth, but who refused to speak out against the butchery of fellow human beings for fear of endangering his potential role as the mediator between Hitler and the Allies at the end of the war.

But *The Deputy* is not only a judgment on the sin of silence during WWII; it is equally poignant in its application to our present time and circumstance.

- It is a judgement on any society that would rather step over the bodies of homeless people consigned to its streets than address the underlying causes of homelessness.
- It is a judgment on the mass and disproportionate incarceration of people of color in America’s prisons today and on the continued use of capital punishment as a means to execute people.
- It is a judgment on the random arrest and deportation of even law-abiding immigrants, tearing apart families with dependent children and separating them by thousands of miles.
- It is a judgment on a Congress more intent on reducing taxes for the wealthy than on providing the needed health insurance for the poor and the elderly.
- It is a judgment on any Executive Order to ban desperate refugees because of their religious affiliation and the inability of their own war-ravaged nations to properly vet them to our satisfaction.
- It is a judgment on the continued pollution of our air and water and the overheating of our planet for the sake of corporate gains for an industry based on fossil fuels.

Today, there are hundreds of millions of people in American and all around the world whose tongues are not stuck to the roof of their mouths as they sit quietly by the “rivers of Babylon,” but who are taking to the streets to protest policies and practices deemed injurious to the health and wellbeing of humanity. From high school and college-aged students, to mothers and fathers taking time off from work, to “raging grannies” in their seventies, eighties and even nineties—all hitting the pavement and raising their signs of protest and advocacy into the air.

The sound of silence is being drowned out by the roar of determined voices that will not take “no” for an answer and who are prepared to press for needed reforms and programs that address people’s deepest needs. People aroused are people on the move,
and people on the move will not be silenced, nor will they tolerate the sin of silence in their day and time.

This cacophony of concerned voices now includes the ultra-conservative Southern Baptist Convention, which just this past week adopted a resolution decrying "every form of racism, including alt-right white supremacy, as antithetical to the Gospel of Jesus Christ." The resolution received a standing ovation when approved. We may wonder why it took so long for a national church body, which includes millions of Christians, to finally get around to denouncing racism and affirming the brother- and sisterhood of all people. But, hey, let's not knock it; let's rejoice and commend them for their bold and positive step forward into the twenty-first century!

Many of you in this congregation have also been standing up, speaking out, and taking action on behalf of justice and equality and a better life for all. You have educated yourselves about some of the things that can and must be done—and you have committed yourselves to action on behalf of others.

You are people who have heard and taken seriously the charge in Leviticus that says we are to give testimony to what we have seen and heard. And among other things, you have seen and heard the good news of God's love for "the least of these," our sisters and brothers, and we know that we are called to bear witness to that love through our words and our deeds.

So says an ancient law of Israel, and so says the one whom we follow and proclaim as the Way, the Truth, and the Life. For Jesus not only instructed his followers to proclaim the good news of God's love for all, but said we are also to love our neighbor as ourselves. Then he showed us how to witness to that love by treating every person with love and respect, and by giving voice to the voiceless and power to the powerless.

It is not easy to sing the songs of Zion when your heart is burdened with the sins of the world. And God knows there is much to grieve about today. But when people band together and join their voices as one, grief gives way to courage, resolution, and positive action—and that impenetrable light within the breast of humanity is blown into flame once again.

Forty years ago, on my final Sunday as one of the ministers of this church, there was a banner that stood in the narthex for all to see as we departed. On it was inscribed this message:

\[\text{He came singing love; he lived singing love; he died singing love. when he rose, he rose in silence. If the song is to continue, we must do the singing.}\]

And sing, you have . . .

From the halls of city government to the Federal Building square; from the top of every mountain to the valley floor with care.
You have gone and given witness, to what you've seen and heard;
You have spoken truth to power and become the living word.
You have stood for peace and justice, and for equal rights for all;
You are the church of Jesus, ‘cause you’ve heard the Master's call.
So go forth from here rejoicing in the one who leads you on,
And sings your songs of Zion, by all the rivers of Babylon!

AMEN