

Isaiah 61:10-62:3

Christmas 1B Midweek + January 3, 2017
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church + Boise, Idaho
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A God Who Will Not Be Silent

The Word of the Lord from Isaiah 62:1: "For Zion's sake I will not keep silent, and for Jerusalem's sake I will not be quiet, until her righteousness goes forth as brightness, and her salvation as a burning torch." This is the Word of the Lord.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Most people don't believe me when I tell them this, but I test a ways up the introvert scale. It's not that I'm shy or dislike people. I think I function well in big groups of people, and I think I even do okay when it comes to public speaking. The measure is this: extroverts draw energy from social events, parties, concerts and other things that involve a lot of people, activity and sound. Introverts re-energize by peace, quiet and solitude.

That makes me an introvert: large-group situations tend to tire me out. I love Sunday morning worship with this congregation belting out hymns at the top of their lungs: at the same time, on Sundays I burn the fewest calories of the week but I still take the longest nap in the afternoon. When it comes to rest and re-energizing, I love peace and quiet.

Introvert or extrovert, I think we all enjoy peace and quiet now and then. It's also true, however, that there's a silence that you don't enjoy at all. It's the silence when you're waiting for an answer.

It's the silence when you've really messed up, you've made your apology, and now you wait. You wait for the one you've hurt to respond.

It's the silence when you're sick, you've gone through all the tests, and now you're waiting for the results.

It's the silence when you've watched a loved one drive away, and you're waiting for word that they've made it safely to their destination.

That's when silence isn't a friend. It's torment, because you're waiting for words. Not just any words: you're waiting for specific words that may or may not come. When you've made your apology, you're hoping to hear words of forgiveness – but when the response comes, it may be unforgiving. When you wait for the test results, you want to hear words like "remission," but you know that the news might be bad. When you wait to hear from the traveler, there's always that possibility that the phone call is from a hospital or a state trooper instead.

So maybe it's not the silence after all. Silence doesn't last forever: words will finally come. The problem is the uncertainty: you don't know what those words will be when you finally hear them.

There is nothing worse than a silent God.

There is nothing worse than being alone with your sin, and no one is more alone than a miserable sinner. There is nothing worse than despairing of yourself, confessing your sin before the Lord, and hearing nothing. The silence torments as you wait, because God will speak: but until He does, you don't know if He will speak words of forgiveness and life, or words of condemnation and death.

There is nothing worse than a God who is silent while you endure suffering. If you are sick or injured or grieved, it is only a matter of time until you start to wonder why this is happening to you – and it's natural for your sinful nature to wonder if God is punishing you, and why. At such times, silence is no friend at all; and if God isn't speaking, then you're going to conclude either that He's angry, He's tired of you, or He's forgotten you.

There is nothing worse than a silent God. If God is silent, you've got to get vital answers from other sources: like from how life is going, or from the latest groupthink of society. I'll give you a hint: the answers from other sources aren't going to be good. They're not going to be about deliverance or life.

There is nothing worse than a silent God, but take heart: your God isn't silent. Don't take my word for it. Listen to Him: "For Zion's sake I will not keep silent, and for Jerusalem's sake I will not be quiet."

God is not silent. The problem is with sinners' ears. The problem is that either we're listening in the wrong places so that we think He isn't speaking, or else we just don't like what He has to say.

God speaks both His law and His gospel. First off, remember what His law is always saying: "thou shalt, thou shalt not, and if thou does sin, the wages of sin is death." It's an important message, but it's not a pleasant one. You'll find His law, of course, in His Word. You'll also find it in the world, where you see the law constantly proving that things go badly when you disobey how God has put things in order; and which also teaches that everything is falling apart and dying. In other words: all of creation teaches that the curse of disobeying the law. God has also written His law upon your heart: that's why, when you do something bad, you experience guilt without anyone telling you to feel guilty, because God's law is speaking to your conscience.

A lot of time, when you think that God is silent, you're hearing a lot of Him: between sufferings from without and conscience within, you're hearing His law loud and clear. You tend to consider this to be silence, because it's not a pretty message that sin brings trouble and death. In reality, it's not silence. It's just news that isn't pleasant to hear.

So once again, silence isn't the problem. It's not that you're waiting for God to speak, because God is speaking His law in His Word, in creation and in your heart. What you're actually waiting for is for God to speak better words: words of forgiveness, remission, deliverance and life.

You're waiting for Him to speak gospel. So let's push on in Isaiah 62: "For Zion's sake I will not keep silent, and for Jerusalem's sake I will not be quiet," says the Lord, "until her righteousness goes forth as brightness, and her salvation as a burning torch."

In this passage, God isn't speaking of sin and death. He's speaking of life and light and righteousness. He's speaking of salvation. God speaks His gospel to save; and it is no coincidence that it is the *Word* who becomes flesh and dwells among us. Jesus lives a holy life to credit you with His holy living, and He dies your death that your sin has earned so that you might be raised up to eternal life. Jesus, the Light of the World, is the brightness and righteousness of His people. He is their salvation.

He is your brightness, your righteousness. He is your salvation. Listen to Simeon's prophecy in the gospel lesson: Jesus is a light of salvation to the Gentiles, and the glory of His people Israel. You'll sing that yourself tonight before this service is done.

God is not silent. He speaks and speaks salvation through Christ. He won't shut up about it. Every absolution is, "For Jesus' sake, I forgive you for *all* of your sins." Every baptism is, "I clothe you with the garments of salvation, because you are robed in the righteousness of Jesus. I put My name – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – on you, and I call you by a new name and write it in the Book of Life."

Every Lord's Supper is, "Because Jesus wore that crown of thorns, I declare you a crown of beauty – forgiven, strengthened and preserved in the one true faith until life everlasting – because I will raise you up fully restored so that the nations see your righteousness in Christ.

So if you are one who wonders if you can be forgiven for your sin, God speaks! The fact that you are so aware of your sin and know how unrighteous you are means that you have heard the law of God loud and clear. To the question, "Can even *I* be forgiven for *my* sins?," God is not silent. He speaks and says, "Yes! My Son has died for them all, and His grace and righteousness are more than enough!" That's what He speaks with every absolution, with every sacrament. There are no asterisks, exceptions or caveats for the penitent people of God. No matter your sin, Christ has died for it. No matter your sin, you are forgiven. You're free from it, and the Lord promises grace and strength so that you need not fall prey to it again.

If you are one who suffers affliction or grief and waits for the Lord to speak, the Lord is speaking. You have a keener understanding of His law than many, because you haven't just heard of the curse of sin, but you're experiencing it poignantly in your body. To you, in your affliction, the Lord speaks words of grace and life in His Word. He may not answer the question "why?" that you dearly seek, because He hasn't promised that He will. But He does promise that, along with your sins, Christ has borne your infirmities and sorrows to the cross. On this side of the Resurrection, you will still know those troubles, even as Jesus did. But at the Resurrection, they will be no more: but you, for Jesus' sake, will live forever.

The Lord speaks! Devil, world and your own flesh try to drown out His Word of salvation with all sorts of lies, assumptions and other messages, to keep you from hearing so that you think that God has gone silent. He has not, and so He says:

For your sake, I will not keep silent. Because My Son has died for you, for your sake I will not be quiet. I will speak forgiveness to you until the Last Day, when your righteousness shines forth as brightness, and your salvation as a burning torch. Even the nations shall see your righteousness, and all the kings your glory, because in Christ you are far more precious to Me than nations and kings; and you shall be called by a new name that the mouth of the LORD will give. You shall be a crown of beauty in the hand of the LORD, and a royal diadem in the hand of your God.

The Lord Most High promises this to you, all for Jesus' sake. He will not be silent, but declares to you, "I forgive you all of your sins."

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen