



**Good Shepherd Lutheran Church & School**

1611 E Main St., Watertown, WI 53094

(920)261-2570

A Stephen Ministry Congregation

[www.goodshepherdwi.org](http://www.goodshepherdwi.org)

---

**Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost**

**August 20, 2017**

---

**“When God is Silent”**

*(Matthew 15:22-23a)*

Rev. David K. Groth

*“And behold, a Canaanite woman from that region came out and was crying, ‘Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David; my daughter is severely oppressed by a demon.’ But he did not answer her a word” (Mt. 15:22-23a).*

**Every day, everywhere, by everyone...  
sharing the grace of the Good Shepherd.**

**Collect:** Almighty and everlasting Father, You give Your children many blessings even though we are undeserving. In every trial and temptation grant us steadfast confidence in Your loving-kindness and mercy; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen.**

---

“Jesus went away from there and withdrew to the district of Tyre and Sidon” (v. 21). He’s venturing into Gentile territory, but he’s not going there on a mission. He’s going there for anonymity. He needs a breather from the constant and nagging opposition of the Pharisees and the growing demands of the crowds. He needs a quiet and restorative rest.

But here comes a Canaanite woman. She runs up from behind, crying out, begging, making a great big fuss. What do we know about her? First, she’s a Canaanite, which means she’s a descendent of those persistent and insidious enemies of Israel. She’s also desperate. She has a very sick little girl at home, whom, she says, “is severely oppressed by a demon.” We also know she has heard of Jesus. Someone has told her of his reputation for healing, and also of the messianic expectations on him. So, she cries out to him, “Lord, Son of David, have mercy!”

Jesus hears her shouting but does not respond. He does not acknowledge her. Verse 23, “He did not answer her a word.”

That’s curious, isn’t it? It’s so out of character. In fact, for most of this passage, Jesus surprises us. He comes off insensitive, unfriendly, grumpy, and rude. But it all starts with silence. “He did not answer her a word.”

That doesn’t happen often in Scripture. Usually when people ask Jesus a question, he answers. When they beg for healing, he heals. Even when they lay out a trap for him, he never ignores them and walks away. No, he takes

them on, and sends them on their way foiled and frustrated. But here, “He did not answer her a word.” She’s afraid. She’s desperate. She doesn’t know where else to turn. And he has nothing for her.

Have you ever felt like Jesus was giving you the silent treatment? Have you ever prayed and prayed and prayed, and felt like you were yelling into a black hole? No response, no answers, no comfort . . . just black nothingness? The psalmist gives voice to our complaint: “Oh my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer, and by night, but I find no rest” (Ps. 22:2).

I think Job could also identify. Remember how, though he was a good and righteous man, he lost everything . . . his wealth, his family, his health: it’s all taken away? For 37 chapters Job cries out to God for answers, and for 37 chapters, the only thing he hears in return is stone cold silence.

“Jesus did not answer her a word.” It’s rare, but it happens. Of course, there was that time when Jesus received word that Lazarus had become deathly ill. Lazarus was a friend, as were his sisters Martha and Mary. Multiple times he stayed at their house. We expect Jesus will do at least as much for his friends as he will for strangers. But John 11 says, “When he heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.” By the time Jesus saunters into Bethany, Lazarus has been in the tomb already for four days. Can you imagine the disappointment of Martha and Mary? They kept expecting to see Jesus come marching into town with purpose in his steps, but he never did, not until all nature was crying out “Too late!”

The only other time I can think of where Jesus refused to speak was near the end. He had been arrested. The chief priests and elders were charging him with many things, but Jesus simply clams up. He doesn’t say a word. Pilate noticed. “Don’t you hear how many things they are saying against you? Why don’t you defend yourself?” Quote, “But he gave him no answer, not even to a single charge, to the great amazement of the governor” (Mt.

27:12ff).

Notice, in all these cases God always has a plan in mind. That is, there's a purpose behind his silence. With the chief priests and Pilate, he's silent because he doesn't want to wiggle out of being crucified. It was for this reason he came.

In the case of Job, we as readers know that Job is being put to the test. Can a person still have faith even when everything is taken away? And indeed, Job never gave up the faith!

And finally, in the case of Lazarus, Jesus tells his disciples why they're not going to double time it to his sickbed. "This sickness will not end in death. No, it is for God's glory" (Jn. 11:4). Not until they heard him say, "Lazarus, come out!" did they really understand.

So what do *you* do when God is silent? Well first, there are things you don't do: You don't give up hope. You don't assume God must have it in for you. No, he loves you. You don't turn your back on God and start turning toward other gods, like the bottle or the syringe or the mystic. You don't lose your faith. You hang in there and keep trusting in God even when it seems he's as silent as a stone.

That's what that Canaanite woman did, right? She didn't give up just because Jesus gave her no answer. She didn't even give up when Jesus tested and stretched her faith by being rude and dismissive. She kept coming back. She had a hearty trust in his ultimate goodness and grace and would not be ignored.

So also, we keep praying through the silence. Isn't that the point from the parable of the persistent widow? If an unjust judge who neither fears God nor cares about men sees to it that a persistent widow gets justice, how much more so will God bring about "justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night?" (Lk. 18:6).

What else? When God seems silent, it never hurts to repent. That's what Daniel did. There he was in Babylon, one of the thousands of captives. God's presence in the Temple of Jerusalem was so far away, and God seemed so

silent. So what does Daniel do? He leads the people into repentance. He puts on sackcloth and sat in ashes, and says, “We have sinned and done wrong and acted wickedly and rebelled, turning aside from your commandments and rules” (Dan. 9:5). So also we do well to repent, particularly when God seems distant and silent, because there’s always something to repent of, right, and it’s good to submit that sin to his grace and forgiveness.

Realize also, that when God is silent, that does not mean he’s inactive. Remember how Joseph was sold into slavery by his brothers, and ultimately found himself in jail because of his obedience to the Lord’s commands? Joseph could not have known what God was up to, how he was knitting together circumstances in the background, so that at just the right time and at the right place, Joseph is in position to save thousands from starvation. It teaches you and me that even when God seems silent, he’s working out some kind of plan for us or others. We don’t need to know everything God is doing. It’s enough to trust that he’s up to something good.

Moreover, remember a teacher is always quiet during the test. Maybe when God is silent he’s wanting to see what you’ll do, what you’ll say, to whom you will flee, and thereby stretch our faith as he did the faith of the Canaanite woman, and teach persistence.

God’s silence can also be intimate, a sign of God’s trust. Could it be that when we cannot hear God, it means he trusts us enough that we will not deny him or turn our backs on him? After all, when you’re completely comfortable with a person, it is possible to sit in a room together and not utter a word.

Moreover, and this is most important of all, when God seems silent that’s precisely the time we need to listen more carefully. That’s the time to search the Scriptures, because that’s where God promises to speak to us.

Especially at funerals, it seems people have all their antennas out and are looking for some external sign that all is well. But Jesus never had a lot of patience for people who

were searching for signs, because it means the assurance of his Word is not enough. When we seek signs, we betray a lack of confidence in his Word. “They have Moses and the Prophets. Let them listen to them.” Complaining about God being silent while your Bible is closed, is like complaining about not getting any answers to your text messages when your phone is turned off.

Finally, there was one other time when God was silent. Remember? From the cross, Jesus cried out, “Why God? Why have you forsaken me?” And the Father answered him not a word. When Jesus was baptized, and again at the transfiguration, the thunderous voice of the Father was unmistakable: “This is my beloved Son!” But while his beloved Son dies on the cross, the Father watches silently. He doesn’t say a word. For us and for our salvation the Father remains silent until every last bit of punitive justice was carried out on his beloved Son.

Again, this is why Jesus became incarnate. This is why he was silent before his accusers. This is why he clammed up before Pilate. This was the incredible, mysterious plan of salvation for us put in place before the foundations of the world were built. Isaiah said it would happen this way: “He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth” (Is. 53:7). And “By his wounds we are healed.”

Therefore, sometimes silence can *our* best recourse, even when things are not going well for us. Lamentations 3, “It is good that one should wait quietly for the salvation of the LORD” (v. 26). And Exodus 14, “The Lord will fight for you. You have only to be silent” (v. 14). And Psalm 46, “Be still, and know that I am God” (v. 10). Sometimes faithful and trusting silence can be our best response to those times when God seems silent.

God's silence is not a license for us to check out on him. It's an invitation for us to lean in, seek him in his Word, listen, pray and trust in him even more diligently. Amen

