Glen Ridge Congregational Church

The Rev. John Sampson, Pastor

A person posing for a picture

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Title: God Really Is Still Speaking

Scripture: Luke 10:38 – 42

July 20, 2025

Will you pray with me?

God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you, our rock and our redeemer.

Amen.

Silence.

I think one of the distinguishing factors of modernity, of modern history, is silence. This may seem strange because it seems like our time is a really loud and noisy time in the world, but I'm talking about a special kind of silence. The silence of God. A silence that can seem almost like absence.

The 19th century German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche went even further and radically proposed that the silence and the absence we may feel in God's presence is actually a symptom of God's death.

We look out into the world, and we can understand how people can think that God is being silent, that God is absent. Two world wars, not one day without a conflict somewhere, an environmental catastrophe unfolding all around us. A time when it doesn't matter to be truthful anymore. And to quote Pilate, we even ask, "What is truth?" And that's just the outside world. I know all of you have your own challenges in your lives. And for some of you, you might think, why is God silent? Is God absent? And for some of us, in the deepest parts of our heart, there might grow and live a thought that we would never say to anyone else. And perhaps we find it difficult to even admit to ourselves. Maybe we too feel that God has possibly passed away.

To have faith is to have trust. To believe that things are not just as they appear, but that underneath or behind what presents itself to us and our lives and the life of the world actually is also informed by something deeper, something more eternal. It is with the eyes of faith that I think we are asked to question whether God really is silent, whether God really is absent, whether God has in fact passed away, contrary to all of the evidence that is put on the table before us of our own lives and the life of the world.

And so that's what I think is so wonderful about the story we hear today because it speaks of silence. It picks up where we left off last week. Jesus and his disciples are continuing down that road to Jerusalem. They've been on the road for many weeks now. And along the way, Jesus stops at a house, the house of Martha and her sister Mary. And they welcome him in. They give him shelter and they start preparing this meal for him. It's so unlike that town we heard of just a couple of weeks ago where Jesus and the disciples show up. Nobody will give them a place to stay. No one will give them any food to eat. And in a moment of pique, the disciples pray that God will rain down fire and brimstone on that town only to be re rebuked by Jesus.

So here it is. Jesus has shown up at this house and Martha and Mary seem to have learned a different lesson, a different sense of etiquette. They welcome him in. Here, stranger, because before this we never hear that they have met. So, stranger, come into our house. Have a seat. Here's some water. Let us prepare you a meal. And everything seems to be going swimmingly until it all goes off the rails.

Because when you invite Jesus into your house and into your heart, it goes off the rails. Because Jesus will test all of our assumptions, all of our beliefs of how God works in the world, who we are, what we hold most dear. And it happens again here.

Martha is there in the kitchen. She's working away. She's preparing this wonderful meal. And at some point she realizes, "Hey, where is my sister? I could use a little help here." And she turns around and maybe it's not very far that she has to look. Maybe she just has to turn to the kitchen table. And there she sees Mary deep in conversation with Jesus. Couldn't give a care in the world that the bread is burning, that the stew is overflowing, that the table hasn't been set, that there are still dirty dishes in the sink. And she goes bananas.

She doesn't go to her sister. She goes to Jesus and she says, "Tell her to help me!” And then something unexpected happens. Instead of siding with Martha, Jesus sides with Mary and says to Martha, "Actually, your sister has chosen better than you and she has received something that can never be taken away from her.” It's unexpected. But I think the more unexpected thing about this story is we never hear what that better portion is. We never hear what the thing of the greatest value is, the thing that could never be taken away. It is as if a cone of silence sits over that kitchen table. And it's not just Martha who can't hear. We can't hear. There is a certain kind of silence that pervades that story and it shelters us from the life-giving words that Jesus has shared with one of the sisters.

Now, I want to say this very clearly and upfront. Often the way that this story is told is there's good Mary, bad Martha. There is the world of activity, the world we all participate in, which is a world in which we cook the food, we wash the dishes, we put a roof over our heads, we raise our children, we follow our careers, we read the books we like. And there is another world that we also participate in of spiritual exploration and religious devotion. And these two things are not separate. Mary and Martha are sisters. They are related. So I don't want us to go into this spiral where you hear this story and you think, "Oh, should I have chosen a different path in my life? Should I give up the responsibilities? Is that what Jesus is telling me?" I don't think so. I don't think so at all.

I think what Jesus is saying to us is when the guest shows up and the guest doesn't come that often. But when the guest shows up, make time and space to be with your guest. Listen to your guest. Listen when God speaks to you. And I think the tell here is that what Jesus says to Martha is not you shouldn't be working. Shouldn't be making that meal. You shouldn't be treating me like a guest. He says you're too distracted.

I think there is a way in which we can do all of the blessed things that God gives us to do in our lives and still have the space to welcome that holy guest when he or she arrives at our doorstep. It is in that moment that perhaps our priorities get reshuffled. not forever but for that moment. And it is a precious thing that we should hold on to while we have it.

If I ended my sermon there, I think I would have done you a wrong thing because I would have simply said to you, "Hey guys, don't be distracted. Get on board with the plan." I think it's up to me to show you ways to not be distracted.

One of them we have already done today. And you might have noticed that since I've shown up when I do the welcome to worship, I always end it with a moment of centering. I ask you to look into your own minds and hearts and bodies and where you find busyness and distraction to let those things go to give yourself permission to let them go. Not forever. You’ve got to pick up your kids. You’ve got to go visit your mom. You’ve got to go to the grocery store. But for this moment to put those things down and open yourself to the guest we are inviting into our presence, which is God's spirit. That's the beginning.

I'll give you an example and a suggestion for the end. And I shared this with the book group, not this week, but maybe the last time I was with them. I started a practice. I didn't really grow up in the church, so I didn't really have this prayer life, but I started this practice when I became a person of faith where at the end of the day, I do a prayerful review of my day. It only takes about five minutes. And I go through my whole day and I look for the places where God is blessing me, where God is speaking to me through God's blessing and presence. I was astonished by how many moments there are in a day where God blesses me. Big big big big things, things you can't miss. Little little little little things that I almost forgot. The thing that moved me most about this practice is to see how God is so intimately connected to my life. God isn't silent. God is not absent. And God certainly has not passed away.

But we might need to take that time, give ourselves that intentional space, put down the distractions and the busyness of our lives to give ourselves that moment, that precious moment where we can see God active and vital in our lives.

The church tradition has many disciplines that do the same thing. Bring us closer to God. Open our spiritual eyes to God's presence in our lives. These are just two. You may have others. I invite you if you do not have a spiritual practice to do so because as wonderful as Sunday morning is, I don't think it's really enough for most of us. That drip drip drip of checking in with God throughout the week is as important as gathering here together. And I hope whether you take me up on my offer of an end of the day review or you choose another kind of discipline if you're not already following some kind of spiritual discipline that you too will see that God truly is still speaking, in your life, and in the life of the world.

Amen.