



Advent 1, November 28, 2010
Pastor Mark Toone
Chapel Hill Presbyterian Church

It's About Time God Spoke Up Malachi 4; Mark 1:1-4

This morning begins the season of Advent, the four Sundays leading up to Christmas. "Advent" means "coming." It is a season of anticipation, remembering the longing of the world for the coming of a savior. And our Advent theme this year is kind of "cheeky," as they say in Scotland. Our theme is, "**It's about time!**" Have you ever said that? As you stood in line at Macy's on Black Friday to buy your Cuisanart and the line was huge and the woman at the register had one million questions...did you think to yourself as she finally walked away, "It's **about** time!" Anyone? Or maybe you were parked in traffic on I-5 Monday night, taking five hours to get home from Renton. Anyone? When you finally pulled into your driveway: "It's **about** time!"

It is an expression of frustration. And there was certainly a sense of frustration on the part of those who were waiting for God to save the world. **He promised he would.** When he called Abram, he **promised** to use his descendants to bless the world. When he called Moses he **promised** to lead them to a new land. When he spoke through his prophets he **promised** he would send a messiah. For thousands of years...God **promised** he would show up. God's people waited. They suffered. And ultimately they cried out, "It's **about** time you did something, God!"

Have you ever felt that way toward God? "It's **about** time you sent me a friend. About time you sent me a spouse. It's about time you healed me. It's about time you got me a job...took away my depression...answered my prayers. It's **about** time, God." Of course you have. Some of you feel that way right now. "**It's about time you stepped up to it, Lord!**" So this Advent, that will be our theme. It's about time.

This morning: **It's about time God spoke up.** Has anyone ever given you the silent treatment? Hands up. Have you ever given anyone the silent treatment? Hands up. In some of my more "mature moments," I tried that with Cyndi. Occasionally over the years, I have tried pouting silently hoping that she would notice I was upset and plead with me to tell her what was wrong. It never worked very well and I ended up having to act like an adult and actually **tell** my wife when I was upset. What fun is that?

But I couldn't remember if Cyndi ever gave me the silent treatment. Wednesday night at 1:43 a.m. I woke up thinking about my sermon. (I know... how sick is that?) I noticed that Cyndi was stirring, so I shook her, "Honey...I'm thinking about my sermon for Sunday. I'm trying to remember: have you ever given me the silent treatment?" "Yes," she mumbled. "Right now." So much for a meaningful theological dialogue.

Most of the time...the silent treatment is childish and petty. But sometimes **it is exactly what we need.** It allows us to stew in our juices for a while and consider the seriousness of

our behavior. Like when God gave the people of Israel the silent treatment. Turn to the last chapter of the last book in the Old Testament. Malachi.

[Read 4. Keep your Bible turned to that page!]

Malachi is not only the last book in the Old Testament, it is the last book chronologically, too. Malachi prophesies about what he calls the Day of the Lord. A day coming when the arrogant and the evildoer will be chopped down like stubble and burned in judgment fire. But it will also be a day when the righteous will be set free and healed. All those who have limped under the oppression of tyranny will be free and will leap and frolic like a calf in a pasture. That day is coming, Malachi says. A day when all the wrongs of the world will be set right.

Doesn't that sound great? Look at all the wrongs of this world! North Korea, bombing an island to provoke a war. Or the brutal dictators of Burma continuing to crush protestors. Or closer to home, during Monday's storm, one our EMTs responded to an axe murder and a shooting, all in one day. We LONG for justice; for things to be made right; for evildoers to be punished and for the righteous to live in freedom and hope and joy... don't we?

That was Malachi's promise...a promise to a rebellious people who, again and again, forgot the kindness of God and returned to their evil ways. The Jews **grew deaf** to God's words through his prophets. And finally...**God had had enough.**

I asked you to keep your Bibles opened to Malachi. Now...turn one page and put your finger there. Where is it? Right between the Old and New Testament, right? Another page or two and you come to Matthew...the story of Christmas. But we aren't going there, yet. Keep your finger in that place. Do you know what that finger represents? **Silence!** 400 years of silence! I know...it doesn't seem that way. The Old Testament stops. The New Testament starts. Things just keep going, right? **Not right.** Malachi...God's prophet...spoke about the Day of the Lord when all things would be made right. What an exciting promise! And everyone waited.

And then...the finger! Nothing! Silence. For 400 years!!!!

Four hundred years ago was 1610. Galileo announced the discovery of moons rotating around Jupiter. Henry Hudson sailed into the bay that would receive his name. The Dutch landed on an island off the coast of America. What do we call that island today? Manhattan. 400 years was a long time ago. It was a long time back then, too!

Now imagine this. You are a Jew who worships a God who has revealed himself. For hundreds of years, God has spoken to your people. In his temple. Through his prophets. You may not have liked what the Almighty said but at least you knew he was there. You knew that you mattered to him. Even if he was angry, at least God still spoke. **But then...suddenly...silence.** God stopped talking. No prophets. No revelations. Nothing. [Indicate the space where your finger is placed.]

What would you think? Is God dead? Has God given up on you? Maybe God is so fed up that he wants nothing more to do with you. And he's giving you...the silent treatment. Not just for days or weeks or months or years. **But for four centuries.** Soon, everyone who had ever heard a word from God was dead. Soon, everyone who had ever known someone who had heard a word from God was dead. Century after century, the memory of an engaging, speaking God, became dimmer and less believable. Century after century, the Jews became

more and more hopeless that God would ever speak again. They were stuck right here...**right where my finger is**...in silence.

On October 13, the last of 33 Chilean miners was hauled to the surface of the earth from the cavern in which they had been living for 69 days. 69 days trapped **half a mile** below ground! Of course, they were sustained during that time with words of hope from above. Messages from loved ones. Promises of rescue. Progress reports. And when Luis Urzua, the last man to be raised to the surface, came out of the capsule, the whole world celebrated one of the greatest rescue operations of all time.

But think of this: **for 17 days, there was complete silence!** 17 days and not a word from the top. It took that long for them to bore the first tiny hole into their cavern. What was it like for those 17 days? Not a word...not a peep...no indication at all of the frantic efforts taking place topside. Just silence. Black, deep silence.

Sometimes, that's our experience with God. Even Jesus knew God's silence. Do you remember the words he quoted from Psalm 22 as he hung from the cross? "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" He didn't have the strength to say more, but if he had, this is how that psalm continues: **"Why are you so far from saving me, so far from the words of my groaning. O my God, I cry out by day, but you do not answer...."**

Even Jesus felt God's silence. How about you? Your world is falling in on top of you. You feel trapped in a cave of despair with no hope of rescue? Your marriage is falling apart; the vows you took seem like a joke. You have been without work for 18 months, you finally have a promising interview...and you don't get the job. Your beloved suddenly, unexpectedly draws his last breath. **And you cry out to God.** For help. For answers. For explanations. For comfort. And all you hear back is... silence.

What do you do? **How do you deal with the silence of God?** Well...first...you could read the rest of the Psalm. That Psalm that Jesus quoted on the cross? That psalm of despair and desolation? It doesn't stop there. Listen to what comes after his cry of desolation: **"Yet you are enthroned as the Holy One; you are the praise of Israel. In you our fathers put their trust; they trusted and you delivered them. They cried to you and were saved; in you they trusted and were not disappointed."**

When Jesus cried out in despair at the silence of God, it was also a prayer of faith. "I don't hear you right now, Father. But I remember! I remember my fathers and mothers who trusted you. I remember how they felt lost and hopeless; how they felt trapped and forgotten...and yet, you had not forgotten them. You remembered them and delivered. You saved them! They trusted you...even when you were silent...and they were not disappointed."

You are not the first person to experience God's silence. You are not the first person to feel like your prayers are going unanswered. So...**be careful now**...maybe you should stop praying. Stop praying your prayers for a while. Stop repeating your same prayers over and over again. **And try praying the prayers of others...like the psalms.**

In one of the darkest times of my life when I felt most out of touch with God, I didn't have another word to pray. Not another word. And I didn't believe he would answer even if I did pray. So...I just started praying the psalms. They were perfect for me. They were raw and honest and confused and they had no easy answers. I prayed the ancient prayers of those who had gone before me...who had been through hard times of God-silence...and come through it. For weeks, I went to a little chapel every morning, knelt before God, **and I didn't**

ask him for a thing. Instead, I prayed the psalms and I said thank you. That's all. Prayed the psalms and I said "Thank you" for every good thing I could remember. And I kept doing that until I started hearing God's voice again.

I don't want to gloss over the silence of God. It can be very painful. Jesus certainly found it painful. But it can also be very useful. It is in silence...when the answers do not easily or quickly come...that God teaches us most about what it means to trust him. To believe in him. To wait upon him. To trust him as the saints before us trusted him and found him to be trustworthy. **Silence teaches us to trust.**

But silence does something else. **It is silence that tunes our ears**-- so distracted by the noise and clutter of the world--to listen more carefully to God. I remember a teacher when I was a boy. When the kids started getting noisy, she didn't shout them down. She would speak softer and softer and softer...until she was almost whispering. And we found ourselves straining to hear what she had to say.

My family knows something about this. As a child, my wife Cyndi didn't speak much. She was nicknamed "Sigh" because, when someone asked her a question, that's all she would do. And as a youngster, our Cooper was diagnosed as possibly autistic. He never spoke a single word to his pre-school teacher. So...because he was silent...when Cooper did speak... he was like E.F. Hutton. Remember that old stockbroker ad campaign? "When E.F. Hutton talks...people listen." Cooper was our E.F. Hutton. Every word from him was precious...and we strained to hear what he had to say. (By the way, we don't have to strain so much anymore!)

When God appeared to the prophet Elijah on Mt. Horeb he didn't speak to him in the whirlwind ...or in the earthquake. How did God speak? In a "still, small voice." The Hebrew word, literally, means "silent whisper." Sometimes God's silence is really a whisper...a whisper that invites us to strain to listen for him. If God seems silent to you, how hard...really...are you listening for him?

This last weekend I was with my LifeGroup on a retreat. We were staying in a beautiful, desolate place. One night, we stood on the deck together in cold silence. We joked around as we always do. But soon, the darkness and the silence of that place led us to conversations that really mattered. Conversations about our marriages and about our children and about our fears and hopes for them and about trying to figure out what God was doing in some very painful situations. Later, one man told me, "This was the best weekend of my life." With our cell phones turned off and our business brains turned off, God's whispers began to come through.

Silence teaches us to **trust**. Silence teaches us to **strain**. And silence teaches us something else: **to endure**. If you are crying out to God and he seems silent...hang in there. Don't give up. When nothing makes sense and God is mum on the topics that matter most to you, sometimes the best thing you can do is endure. This is where LifeGroups are essential; a group of people who can speak to you even when God seems silent. In fact, they might be the voice of God speaking into your life.

So be tough. Hang in there. **And consider your options.** What else will you do? Where will you turn? One time late in Jesus' ministry when everyone was abandoning him, he turned to his disciples and asked, "What about you? Will you leave me, too?" And Peter answered, **"Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life!"** Even when we can't hear them, only Jesus has the words that can save us. So...hang in there.

In 2003 I fell on my head on an ice rink and nearly died. Many of you remember that. My recovery has been great. But there is one residual effect of my fall. My left ear rings. All the time. I never have silence any more. I would love just one hour of silence. I didn't know precious silence could be until I lost it. So...if you are experiencing silence right now...live into it. It can be precious.

Of course, Christmas is the story of how God broke the silence after 400 years. We'll get there soon enough. But not yet. This morning ...live in the silence. And be assured that when **he** is ready, God will speak. And they will be words of life. What words do you long to hear from God? Will you trust Him in the silence? Will you strain to hear His silent whisper? Will you hang in there until He speaks?

SERMON DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- **Read** the passage out loud.

- **Reflect & Apply Individually:** Each person take 5-7 minutes to circle words or phrases that jumped out at them; jot down your reflections; check the notes in your Study Bible for insight or help. Grapple with what the Spirit is saying to you, your group, the church—write down some applications.

- **Reflect & Apply Together:** Share your thoughts. Don't teach! Listen and reflect on God's word together; grapple with what God is calling us to do and be through this passage.

- **Pray together:** tell the Lord one thing you are thankful for and lay one concern before the Lord.

- **Dig deeper**
 1. How long was God silent toward the people of Israel? Why, do you think? How might this help us to understand the condition of things when Jesus came on the scene?

 2. Describe the time of deepest spiritual silence in your own life. How did you endure it? As you look back, why did it seem God was silent?