

The Sound of Silence

A Sermon by Rich Holmes on Matthew 1: 18-25

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About five years ago, I got a big shock. A couple of people who were siblings were doing research on their family tree. And they said they had discovered that they were related to my father's side of the family. I did not talk to them, but they were able to get in touch with my cousin Margaret and they sent her a picture of themselves along with a picture of their mother. Margaret then sent the pictures to me. Now, at first I wasn't sure about all this, but when I saw the older woman's picture, all my skepticism suddenly dissolved. I even gasped. In this woman's face, I instantly saw my paternal grandmother's face. She even had an expression on her face that my grandmother always had. It was Grandma Pink alright. She could have been her identical twin. There was only one difference. The woman in the picture was black.

There could be no mistake that this woman was somehow related to my grandmother, most likely I imagine as a half-sister. Now, Grandma Pink died about fifteen years before I ever saw this picture. But you see, my grandmother was alive and had all her mental faculties until I was in my early twenties. My dad had also been alive up until a few months before I saw this picture. And so what I wondered was, why had no one told me that this person was in our family? It's not as if my grandma and dad didn't have time to tell me. They had all the time in the world. Either they didn't know, or they didn't want to talk about it. It was one of those family secrets, in other words. It was either a secret that they kept or that somebody kept from them. I didn't know my family had secrets. But apparently my family is like every other family.

At some time you've probably heard the saying "Your name is Mudd." When I was growing up, I always thought the saying had something to do with mud as in M-U-D, that is to say "your

name is the stuff you get when you mix water and dirt.” But the saying is actually “Your name is M-U-D-D” as in the television journalist Roger Mudd if you remember him. Now Roger Mudd was never accused of doing anything seriously wrong, at least not as far as I know, but a couple of generations back in his family there was a man by the name of Samuel Mudd. If you remember your high school history you know that when John Wilkes Booth shot Lincoln he shot him in a place called Ford’s theater, and as Booth was trying to escape from the theater, he fell and broke his leg. Well, while he was a fugitive from justice, Booth went to Samuel Mudd’s home. Samuel Mudd was a doctor and he treated Booth for his broken leg. And for that, Mudd was tried and convicted of and even sent to prison for a time. You see, he was accused of being involved in the conspiracy to assassinate Lincoln. They said he was part of Booth’s plot. Was he? That is, was Mudd guilty was he part of the plot to assassinate Lincoln, or was he merely an innocent doctor doing what any doctor would do in treating a patient who was hurt? A patient he didn’t even recognize. The world will never know for sure. But guilty or not, his name has become a by word, and I imagine that to this day, the Mudd family doesn’t want to talk too much about Dr. Samuel Mudd.

There are things that families, maybe even all families want to shout out with a megaphone, and on the other hand, there are things that families want to keep quiet and won’t even talk about in a whisper. We love to talk about the people in our families who have had successful careers, we love to talk about the people we’re related to who are Presidents and Senators, doctors and lawyers, combat veterans, police officers, we love to put their pictures on the mantle, to brag about them at parties, to show them off by inviting friends over whenever they are in town. And then there are those people in our families we don’t want to talk about

who are involved in scandals, who have been convicted of serious crimes, those family members who are alcoholics or drug addicted. And in the Deep South white families do not talk about members of the family who are African American, even those white families who teach their children to be as tolerant and as colorblind as mine taught me to be.

In our gospel reading for today, we are told the familiar story of Mary and Joseph. We are told that when Mary was engaged to Joseph, she was found to be with child, and when Joseph learned about this, being a respectable and religious man, we are told he planned to dismiss her quietly, and not expose her to public disgrace. But of course we are also told that an angel then appeared to Joseph in a dream and told him not to be afraid to take Mary as his wife, because the child in her womb was not from another man, but from the Holy Spirit. He was to name the child Jesus and he would save the people from their sins. The angel then said this was to fulfill the word of the prophet Isaiah who said "Behold the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel which means "God is with us." Now, I am sure you know all this and you have heard it many times. But I love this part where it says Joseph planned to dismiss Mary quietly. And so Jesus before he was even born, he was going to have a story that families don't talk about, one of those scandals that stay buried in families for generation after generation and which never get spoken about.

Now, I say that this is what was going to happen, but now I am going to say something that doesn't appear in the gospel, and you are free to disagree with me if you like, but before you do, at least think about this, won't you? I do not think that just because an angel came to Joseph in a dream that all of these doubts in Joseph's mind about Mary was somehow all cleared up. Maybe the dream that Joseph had when the angel appeared to him was quite a

dream, maybe it was the most vivid dream he ever had. But it was still just a dream, and how much trust would you place in something that you had only learned in a dream. So I don't know about you but I tend to doubt that during all those years when Jesus was growing up, Joseph couldn't wait to shout from the rooftops telling people that before they were married his wife became pregnant with a fetus that was supposedly from the Holy Spirit. Wouldn't people always look at him differently? Wouldn't people always look at her differently? Wouldn't they always whisper and snicker whenever they came around. No, I suspect that during all the time he was growing up, the circumstances of our Lord's birth became one of those family secrets. Again, that's just suspicion on my part. We aren't told that that is the case. But we also aren't told that's not the case.

If you listen carefully to the message that we proclaim each Advent, a big part of that message demands silence on the part of God's people. Let all mortal flesh keep silence we proclaim. And we proclaim that the night on which our Lord was born, the night which we await was a silent night. Now unless I am really misunderstanding things, I don't think the kind of silence that is such an essential part of the season of Advent has anything to do with the silence of family secrets. That would be a strange way to understand things. Rather, in the same breath in which we say it was a silent night, we also say it was a holy night. And the kind of silence we believe it is appropriate to have before the presence of God is the kind of silence we have because we know that no words can describe what it is like to be in the presence of God. When you are standing in the very presence of God after all, what can you say? What could words do to possibly add to the experience, what could words do except get in the way? What could

words possibly do that could tell someone else what the experience was like, for is there anything else like being in the presence of God?

So, to say that the holy silence we keep during Advent has anything to do with the silence that goes along with family secrets is to clearly misunderstand things. But isn't also remarkable, isn't it also remarkable that the God whom we keep holy silence before is also the God who has come among us in this other kind of silence? At least, that is, if I am right in what I am saying about Jesus today.

Folks, I have studied philosophy and theology for many, many years. I have dozens of books on all kinds of subjects in theology and philosophy. But nothing I have ever read or learned has made it possible for me to hold together in my mind the thought that the God who is present in the silence of holiness is also just as present in the silence of our shame. I can't hold together in my head the idea that the God who is up in heaven can be a God who is at the same time down in the grime and dirt of our lives.

But while I do not understand this, here is my prayer. If you have ever been hurt by the bad kind of silence, if you have ever been harmed by the silence of family shame, then my prayer is that this gospel message will bring you healing. My prayer is that you will remember that the God who dwells in holy silence also came down into the silence of our shame.

I know that some of you may also not buy this. You may say to yourselves that in whatever way Jesus took on the shame of our lives, it couldn't have been in the same way that we do. He may have gone through the motions of our shame but since he knew he was always divine he never really got fully into our shame. What can Jesus possibly know about the shame my family

feels about me? But I think it is a mistake to see things that way. Jesus' being fully divine didn't somehow prevent him from being fully human, and if that isn't clear to put this another way, Jesus' human life was no act. The church is a place full of drama. During this time of year you may go somewhere to see nativity plays where people put on first century costumes and they pretend to be Mary and Joseph and wise men and a few months from now you may go to another play for Easter. The gospels are full of wonderful narratives that lend themselves to great acting but as soon as those dramas are over we get out of those costumes and we stop saying our lines. As realistic as the dramas may appear on stage, it is all pretend. But our Lord's human life was not pretend, and don't let these wonderful dramas confuse you into thinking that it was.

The silence of holiness, the silence of shame. I do not wish to say anything today to confuse these silences. But may the God we already know to be worthy of the first kind of silence, also be made real to us in the second kind. In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, Amen.