

GPS: God's persuasive silence Sand Point UMC Oct. 16, 2011

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This year our car has a new device—a Global Positioning System—a GPS. Its brand name is Tom Tom so now I have three Tom's in the car including my husband. We actually find this device quite helpful most of the time. If we are hungry and coming to a city, we can ask for restaurants in the area and Voila' it directs us to the one we choose.

One day as we were traveling the authoritative voice of Tom Tom said, "In 800 yards, get in the left lane. After 300 yards, turn left. Turn left."

I thought, I wish God's voice would come to me like that—So certain and present, and in my daily life reminding me of which turns to take. It is no doubt blasphemy to use the GPS as a metaphor for God, let alone preach about it, but that is part of what you will be hearing this morning.

The GPS repeats directions until we comply, or it says, "Turn around when possible". Do you look back on some times in your life when you wish God had said, "Turn around, change your route; you have taken a wrong turn!" I certainly do. But when I really consider my past decisions, I realize God was talking to me. I just didn't want to go the way God was leading me, or I wasn't silent long enough to hear God. Or God loved me through it while I wasn't paying attention. Most likely the later.

That is what is so compelling about the GPS—it is, as the young ones would say, "in your face". If you get off the track, it gets its bearings from that invisible satellite on high, and begins giving you directions again. If we decide to deliberately disobey the "voice" in the car, it goes silent—no pejorative words, just a steady quiet presence Oh, how like the God I know who is silent when I separate myself from God's care. God does not give up on you, or me, even when we know we are not going the way of God's love.

The GPS shows us information about the highway—what it looks like ahead, how it is curving, what the speed limit is, how fast we are going, and how long it will be until we get to where we are going. Tom's favorite feature is the beep it gives to warn us that the upcoming intersection has a camera monitoring the traffic. My favorite is when the voice says, "You have reached your destination". Don't you wish life were like that so you would know when there were curves, traps, and limits ahead of you? And oh how I wish there was enough peace in my heart, so I could say I have reached my destination or that God would say, "Berta, you are in the right place".

But life is not like that. It is an ongoing journey, and we recognize that God is not likely to be a voice from the sky giving us instructions. The folks of the Old Testament seemed to hear God's voice telling them what to do, but the Jesus whom we follow was not at all like that. Many of his sayings were so cryptic that no response was possible while others were so difficult that folks were speechless.

"Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. (Luke 6 27-28). Any questions??"

Jesus was a great story teller, but he left the problems in them, so his listeners could experience the silence for themselves. When people sought answers, he asked them questions. He turned them to look at the world around, the sibling rivalries, unjust labor practices, and mugged travelers—not to dodge his listeners search for meaning, but to engage them to speak, and especially, to act on their own. And that is true for us today.

Jesus experienced the great, profound silence of God as he went to his death. From the cross he pleaded for a word from the God he could no longer hear. We could never suggest that Jesus wasn't listening. In the silence surrounding his death, Jesus became the best possible companion for those whose prayers are not answered. I personally believe that besides teaching us how to live, Jesus teaches us how to die—never giving up our conversation with God even when our prayers go unanswered.

That ongoing conversation does not take away our longing for a deeper relationship to God. It is that longing for connection that brings us to church. Here we find others on the journey, and others looking for meaning, and on our best days, we find God. And you know why that is possible? We actually observe silent times in our worship services. This is one of the few places in our overly noisy world where silence is honored, used, and respected.

“Silence is as much a sign of God's presence as of God's absence. Divine silence is not a vacuum to be filled, but a mystery to be entered into, unarmed with words and undistracted by noise.” And church is one place where we can hope to connect with that holy mystery.

“Not with our fragile words or shallow hopes and dreams. God is too deep for that. When we run out of words, then and perhaps only then, can God be God.”

Barbara Brown Taylor “When God is Silent”

Funny thing for a preacher to say. I should sit down right now and say no more words, but we are not in a monastery where silence is observed at all hours. And indeed if we are to relate to the younger folks, and the world in general, we will need to use all the communication tools that they use. Can we ever hope to convince them or anyone else that silence is profound?

I do not have to be convinced. Turning off the TV after it has been on for awhile is enough to make me heave a sigh of relief. I can remember the blessed silence, after our young children were in their bedrooms, and I had a chance to collapse in a chair and read. Then there is the silence of the early morning calm lake before the boats are out. Silence is indeed a holy place where God is present.

In January every year Tom and I spend a month in the desert near Palm Springs. There we have discovered a labyrinth, formed by rocks. A labyrinth is like a maze set in the floor or on the ground with a path that leads to the center and back out to the entry place. They have historically been used both in group ritual, and for private meditation.

In 2010 I had a remarkable experience there. I was alone, but in the distance two mothers were pushing babies in strollers plus two four year olds were walking along side. They were the ones who spotted me and were given permission to join me. They asked, “What are you doing?” and I said, walking, singing, and praying. “Can we walk with you they asked?” Walking the labyrinth is usually a solitary activity, but I said, “Sure”, and soon I was feeling a bit like the Pied Piper.

I went back to humming “Sweet Hour of Prayer”, and one of the little ones began singing “Away in a Manger”. I joined her and when we had finished she took my hand. By now we were friends so she wanted to tell me about her cat who couldn't pee. I suggested we say a prayer for her cat as we were walking—no words were needed for this prayer. That is the great thing about walking in nature with a child holding your hand. Words are absolutely superfluous, to say nothing of the fact that I was too touched to speak.

I long for more experiences where I am struck silent by the profound persuasive presence of God. But true silence is hard to achieve. Even in the night there is the sound of the refrigerator, air conditioner or furnace depending on the season. There are dogs barking and the occasional siren. And that does not take into account the noise in our heads, the internal chatter that is sometimes called “monkey mind”.

I think we do all the talking because we are afraid God won't, or conversely that God will. Either way, staying preoccupied with our own words seems a safer bet than opening ourselves up to God's silence, or God's speech, both of which have the power to undo us.

“We have trouble listening to God. Our corporate prayers have phrases such as “Lord hear our prayer” as if the burden to listen were on God and not us. We name our concerns, giving God suggestions on what to do about them. What reversal of power might occur if we turned the process around, naming our concerns, and asking God to tell us what to do about them?” Barbara Brown Taylor

Reminds me once again of our GPS, Tom Tom. Sometimes it startles us with a beep, and the voice says, “A shorter route has been found.” Nothing like changing our plans to really shake us up. God has the power to do that to us, and it can be frightening. But it is what I long for. A voice from on high saying, “I'm still here watching out for your best interest.”

Silence may suggest tranquility and awe, but we like to hear ourselves talk. It is the way we reveal our identity. We who believe in Jesus as the Word made flesh are inheritors of that Word. Hearing it and speaking it are how we keep it alive. Jesus words do not disappear as long as we keep them active.

Which leads me to the last set of GPS words for this morning. Once we have followed the instruction, “after 300 yards turn left” Tom Tom sometimes says, “then, take the highway”. Like Jesus who said, “Go, Teach, Proclaim, Heal, Feed, Love. This is our mandate. In the end we know that God's silence was broken by Jesus. Jesus is the one who shows us the highway. When we speak in the name of the Word made flesh, God comes to earth all over again, and the silence is broken. May it be so. Amen