Fifth Sunday of Lent, A

OSP 2023

The last couple of weeks I have been having some trouble

with the calendar … or should I say calendars

on my phone.

Apparently I tapped the wrong app

or googled the wrong website

but somehow got the [national everything day calendar](https://nationaldaycalendar.com/)

unhappily integrated

into my daily schedule.

In the process of trying to remove it, which took some doing,

I learned that there are over 1500 national

or international day celebrations

that occur on some calendar in the U.S.

Some of these are familiar to us

like Groundhog day on February 2nd

or International Women’s day on March 8th

Besides these, however, there are a host of others

ranging from the utterly serious

like Memorial Day and Veterans day

to the completely wacky

like national public sleeping day on February 28th, or

national ask a stupid question day on September 28th

In that vein, I guess many of you are hoping

That this is not national preach a dumb sermon day.

One upcoming day, however, that did grab my attention

on the calendar for next Thursday April 6th

is [National plan your epitaph day](https://www.daysoftheyear.com/days/plan-your-epitaph-day/)

described as a perfect day to figure out

what you are going to have to say about yourself

before you’re gone that will linger after you’re gone.

There is actually a long tradition of self-designed epitaphs,

many published in print and online:

like that of Mathematician Paul Erdos, whose tomb reads

“I’ve finally stopped getting dumber”

or the Poet Robert Frost’s

“I’ve had a lover’s quarrel with the world”

or Sonny Bono’s

“and the beat goes on.”

Mel Blank, the man of 1000 voices including Bugs Bunny

requested “That’s all folk” on his tombstone,

poet Dorothy Parker wanted

“excuse my dust”

and then there’s Rodney Dangerfield’s

“There goes the neighborhood.”

As you can probably guess, it was the gospel

that triggered these musings, as I tried to imagine

what epitaph would have graced Lazarus’ tomb?

Some bloggers suggested that the first epitaph should have read

“Short death,” or

“Judgement delayed,” or

“I’m at my sister’s house.”

But then there would have been that 2nd epitaph

Maybe “I stinketh again,” or

“This time for good,” or

“Waiting for the Savior’s voice one more time.”

The raising of Lazarus is without doubt

one of the most dramatic stories in the gospels

but one that raises many persistent questions, such as

why did Jesus wait for 4 days to show up?

a question highlighted by Martha’s poignant statement

“If you had been here, my brother would not have died.”

It is a comment that reverberates across the centuries

sometimes rephrased as:

“if you had heard my prayer,

my child would not have overdosed,”

Or, “if I was a better person,

maybe God would have heard me”

Or, “how long Lord, before you answer my prayer?”

Common judicial wisdom is that

justice delayed is justice denied.

But for believers, is a divine response delayed

a divine response denied?

Ultimately, how do we understand or even cope with

the apparent silence of God.

In 1963, Simon and Garfunkel sang about The Sounds of Silence

a West African proverb states, "Silence is also speech"

the 6th century, Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu claimed that "Silence is a source of great strength.”

Nonetheless, it is generally agreed that

[Americans and Canadians are uncomfortable](ttps://www.rw-3.com/blog/cultural-implications-of-silence)

with more than a few seconds of silence in conversations.

While there are many cultures, notably Asian,

in which silence before a response

is a demonstration of thoughtfulness, even gravitas,

many in the West view silence as a void that must be filled

especially to fend off any appearance

of ignorance or indifference.

Recently a [colleague of mine](https://thedeaconsbench.com/) alerted me to a few studies

extolling the advantages of silence.

One [summary article](https://www.zansors.com/blog-posts/2020/1/16/the-science-of-silence-and-why-its-essential-for-true-mindfulness), for example, notes that dedicated silence

* a silence set aside for reflection and meditation -

has innumerable positive effects, for example,

* practicing silence boosts our creativity,
* allows us to inventory often ignored signals from our body,
* facilities the brain’s reorganization,
  + even giving it space to heal itself,
* and it encourages the processing of negative thoughts
  + that unaddressed can lead to destructive behavior.

These and other scientific assertions,

especially about the healing power of silence

empirically establish that silence need not be unproductive,

empty, or diminishing.

But what about the silence of God?

Apparently unheard prayer,

the delayed response to pressing need

whether in ancient Bethany or contemporary Chicago,

can be the source of deep anxiety and faith testing.

In the presence of such silence, there is even the real temptation

to reject the very existence of God.

Few experiences in human history

underscore the trauma such silence can inflict on belief

as the Holocaust of World War II, the *Shoah*,

the murder of 6 million people of the covenant,

the extermination of over 60% of all Jews living in Europe.

Many Jewish intellectuals pondered the silence of God

during this unthinkable genocide.

In one of the most gut-wrenching scenes in *Night*

(Elie Wiesel’s poignant memoire-novel

of his own survival of the Nazi death)

the teenage Wiesel and thousands of others

were forced to watch the execution of a child

all through it a voice behind him asked,

“where is God? Where is he?”[[1]](#endnote-1)

Some, maybe even Wiesel at that moment,

came to believe that in those dark days,

evil won out

and that in the Holocaust God died.

The Jewish philosopher Martin Buber

was one leading figure who had to rethink this divine silence.

In his classic 1923 work *I and Thou*

he argued in pre-War days that God speaks constantly

but after the Holocaust he returned to

an [ancient biblical teaching](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Deuteronomy+31%3A18&version=ESV)

about the Hiding of God’s face

acknowledging that an eclipse of God

is possible at any time.

He further suggests that whoever knows God must also know

God’s remoteness and the ensuing agony of divine drought

Upon a frightened heart.[[2]](#endnote-2)

Did not Jesus cry out on the cross

[My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Matthew%2027%3A46&version=ESV)

Buber maintained his belief in a faithful God

But pointed to a fresh understanding of that presence

When he ponders God’s revelation to Moses

“[I am who I am](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Exodus%203%3A14&version=ESV)”

And translates it into German as

“I am there as whoever I am there.”[[3]](#endnote-3)

In a similar vein, theologian Melissa Raphael[[4]](#endnote-4) ponders God’s silence

particularly at the death camp of Auschwitz.

She admits that it is difficult to separate

God’s non-intervention in the Shoah from God’s non-existence.

Yet she offers an amazing image of hope

when she changes the question from

“*where* was God in Auschwitz?” to

“*who* was God in Auschwitz?”[[5]](#endnote-5)

She answers that question through the testimonies

of women imprisoned in these death camps

who mothered, nurtured, and comforted others

and interprets their extraordinary tenderness

as a revelation of God’s presence

in a place whose very existence would seem to reject it.

God’s face was revealed in these gracious women

and posited holiness in the midst of inexplicable evil.

At the end of World War II, much of Europe was in ruins

including London, where over a million houses were damaged, one in six Londoners were homeless,

and many orphaned children wandered the streets.

One morning an American soldier was driving his jeep through these war-torn streets when he spied a little boy, dressed in rags. The boy stood with his nose pressed against the steamed window of a pastry shop. Inside, the cook was working a large lump of dough for a fresh batch of doughnuts.

The soldier stopped, walked into the little shop, and bought a dozen doughnuts. Then he left the store and offered the bag of fresh doughnuts to the boy. “Here,” he said. “I bought these for you.”

The boy looked at the soldier with wide eyes and took the bag. But as the soldier started to return to his jeep, he felt a tug on his coat. He turned back and faced the boy.

“Mister,” the boy asked, his eyes still wide, “are you God?”

None of us will ever call a Lazarus back to life

nor will most of us ever touch the barbarism of a death camp

where shattered souls begin to doubt their own humanity.

But we can emulate our Christ,

upholding life and refuting God’s alleged silence

by remembering the women of Auschwitz

and in much more modest ways

acknowledging those around us

in family, neighborhood, work or even in this place;

those who feel entombed,

even abandoned by the God we profess

and are no longer to perceive the presence of the Holy One.

Our announcement of that presence

our call to life may not be “Lazarus, come forth”

But to the marginalized child, it could be:

“Son, come home”

To the estranged sibling:

“We’d like you to celebrate Easter with us.”  
To the alienated friend:

“I thought I’d surprise you with a phone call”

Or to the isolated co-worker:

“let’s grab a beer after work.”

So many folks in our own ambit

are languishing in the darkness of some tomb

hoping God or one of God’s people

might speak or act in such a way

that they hear the resounding invitation

to come forth, leave the darkness behind,

be unbound, and step into the light.

When simple human kindness shatters deathlike silences

the divine presence is revealed once more,

the eternal voice is again heard

now newly amplified through attentive disciples

who mirror holy care

and enable resurrection to abound once more,

through Christ our Lord.

1. Eli Wiesel, *Night,* trans. Marion Wiesel (New York: Hill and Wang, 2013), p. 64. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Martin Buber, *I and Thou* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1970), p. 147. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Ibid., p. 160. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Melissa Raphael, *The Female Face of God in Auschwitz: A Jewish Feminist Theory of the Holocaust* (London-New York: Routledge, 2003). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid., p. 54. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)