

One of my favorite quotes comes from Abraham Lincoln who said, “Better to remain silent and be thought a fool than to open your mouth and remove all doubt.” And indeed, the Old Testament book of wisdom literature called Ecclesiastes tells us, “There is a time for silence and a time to speak.” Knowing when to speak and when to be silent is a difficult art.

A prophet of God named Amos was sent to the northern Kingdom of Israel which was hopelessly corrupt. Oddly enough, he speaks about silence. He observes two things about silence. First, “Therefore, he who is prudent will keep silent in such a time, for it is an evil time.” And second, he observes, “They hate him who reproves in the gate, and they abhor him who speaks the truth.” Silence might keep you personally safe in evil times, Amos says. But through the prophet, God is teaching us that in the face of evil, one cannot remain silent, even if he must endure hatred, because in the face of evil, silence must be broken, or it is deadly.

Silence is deadly when the people of God are led to false worship under the guise of cultural relevance. Israel tried it in places like Bethel, Gilgal, and Beersheba. Silence meant consent until God spoke through Amos and called Israel to “seek me and live.” If we remain silent about truth, we must hear this same call to repentance. And having returned to God and His redemption, we take up His truth: You shall have no other gods before me. I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me. To break the silence is offer life.

Silence is deadly when those who have no power are oppressed by those who do. In Israel, the city gates were a kind of small claims court, where the poor and disenfranchised could come to seek justice. But there they found none. “Therefore, because you trample on the poor and exact taxes of grain from him, you have built houses of hewn stone, but you shall not dwell in them; You have planted pleasant vineyards, but you shall not drink their wine. For I know how many are your transgressions and how great are your sins, you who afflict the righteous, who take a bribe, and turn aside the needy in the gate.” Our silence is deadly when we do not speak for those who have no voice: the unborn, the elderly, the child, those who suffer here and around the world for the name of Jesus. Every age will produce a majority of people who see evil, know it is wrong, but fear man more than God. Silence in the face of evil may seem prudent from the perspective of personal safety, but by the law of God, the silent are found guilty. Now is not the time for silence but for repentance. And with repentance leading to forgiveness, we can take up His truth: “Whatsoever you do to the least of these brothers of mine, that you do unto Me.” To break the silence for them is to offer life.

Thanks be to God, he broke the silence through his prophets. Amos was just one of many. The united voice of the prophets speaks to all generations and it is a voice that calls us to repentance and to mourn our silence in the face of evil. But there was a time where it seemed as though the voice of the prophets had been forever stilled. For about 400 years, the silence was deafening. And then, there came the voice of one crying in the wilderness, who spoke clearly and directly, “You brood of Vipers! Who warned you to flee the wrath to come?” Here was one who

was not prudent or silent and yet it was the same man, John, who pointed to Jesus and said, “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” If a prophet will not speak the law, how can he speak the gospel?

There is a bad news/good news dynamic to God’s message that flows through the prophets, leading up to the Son of God Himself. Jesus broke the silence in unforgettable ways. We see Him in the Gospels flipping tables in the temple courts, and challenging the pretensions of the religious establishment, in other words, breaking the silence with truth. And we see him advocating for the oppressed, bringing wholeness to those who were broken and rejected, breaking the silence for those on the margins. Jesus was no silent observer of an evil time.

Oh, He could be silent. He chose those moments very deliberately. Before his accusers, He was like a sheep before its shearer, silent. He was like the lamb in Isaiah’s prophecy, which made no sound as it was led to slaughter. But you see, that was precisely why Jesus had come—to fulfill Isaiah and every other prophet who had spoken of a Savior who would become a sacrifice. He came to give His life for ours.

He came to redeem all those who trade the truth for safety. He came to be hated, wounded, nailed, lifted high on a cross. He came to break the silence of that awful day by saying “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do,” and, so crucially, “It is finished.” The action of paying the price for your sins is finished. Done. Complete. Then came another silence, a dark three-day span in which Jesus’ lips did not move to speak a word. No breath filled His lungs in the tomb. But on that Sunday morning the quiet was shattered by an angel’s proclamation: “He is not here—He is risen!” To break the silence is to proclaim the victory of life over death—the victory achieved and shared by Jesus the King.

Listen for the voice that breaks the silence of your life. Hear Jesus in the words once spoken over you, “I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” Hear Jesus in the words of absolution, “I forgive you all your sins.” Hear Jesus as you kneel and receive him in the Supper, “broken for you... shed for you.” He speaks to you and tells you his perfection is your perfection; his peace is your peace; His life is your life. No more deadly silence. Jesus is the song of our hearts and the substance of our praise.