

The Silent Word

A sermon preached at Niles Discovery Church, Fremont, California,
on Sunday, December 7, 2025, by the Rev. Jeffrey Spencer.

Scriptures: [Luke 1:5-25](#) and [Luke 1:57-64](#)

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In the third episode of the first season of the TV series *The West Wing*, an Air Force transport is shot down. President Bartlet wrestles with what the appropriate response should be. As he contemplates what he should do, he gives us a 30 second history lesson. He reminds us (or teaches us) about a time known as the *Pax Romana*, the “Roman Peace.”

[watch https://youtu.be/Xqx_vVbvkck from about 0:12 to about 0:44]

When I first saw this episode 26 years ago, I thought to myself, “Great for a Roman citizen, but not so great for the vast majority in the Roman Empire who weren’t citizens.”

Historians argue when the *Pax Romana* began and ended. From what I can tell, they agree that it had certainly begun by the time the Roman Republic (when the Senate ruled) became the Roman Empire (when the emperor ruled) – in other words, by 27 BCE. It lasted until somewhere around 180 CE, so at least 200 years.

I have a vague memory of learning about the *Pax Romana* in high school. It was characterized as a golden age of a growing empire, of prosperous stability, and of relative peace and order. That was fairly accurate, though it is an incomplete picture. The *Pax Romana* was also a time of increased and sustained Roman imperialism and hegemonic power. And there were, in fact, internal revolts and external wars, including the Roman-Persian wars, during this time period.¹

Jesus was born during the *Pax Romana*, during this time of “sustained Roman imperialism and hegemonic power.” Christianity was founded during the *Pax Romana*. Paul wrote his letters and the gospels were written during the *Pax Romana*. It may have been a great time to be a *Civis Romanus*, but if you were a citizen of a vassal or occupied country, if you were enslaved, if you were a woman or a child ... it wasn’t such a great time.

It is into this world that Jesus is born. It is into a world of inequality, injustice, and social and economic oppression that Jesus is born. And one way of understanding Jesus’ mission and message is as it being God’s critique of *Pax Romana*. Jesus offers the hope of and the way to a different kind of peace.

For me, one of the most important articulations of the difference between these two types of peace was made by the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in his “Letter from Birmingham Jail.” His letter was his response to a public statement of concern and caution issued by white religious leaders of the South. In the letter, he wrote, “... over the past few years I have been gravely disappointed with the white moderate. I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro’s great stumbling block in his stride toward freedom is not the White Citizen’s Councillor or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate, who is

¹ “*Pax Romana*,” Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pax_Romana (accessed 6 December 2025).

more devoted to 'order' than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice;..."²

The thing that made *Pax Romana* a time of peace was the absence (relatively speaking and only for some people) of violence, not the presence of justice. And Jesus preached that true peace must always include justice. But I'm getting ahead of myself. Our scripture comes from before Jesus is even conceived.

Luke is a good storyteller. He establishes his characters quickly. Zechariah is a priest and his wife, Elizabeth, is a descendant of Aaron (the brother of Moses), the patriarch of the priestly clan. Though this incident takes place at the Temple in Jerusalem, serving at the Temple wasn't Zechariah's fulltime job. He was in Jerusalem because it was one of the weeks during the year when his division of priests came from wherever they lived to serve at the Temple. So, while Zechariah had cultural respect, he didn't have the religious or political clout that the High Priests or the members of the Sanhedrin had.

You heard what happened when he went into the sanctuary of God to offer incense to God. An angel came and told him that he and Elizabeth, despite their advanced years, were going to have a child. Zechariah questioned the angel. The angel, who we learn is named Gabriel, says that Zechariah will be mute until his child is born. And, sure enough, when he comes out of the sanctuary, he is unable to speak aloud.

This mutism sounds like a punishment: "But because you have not trusted my words, you'll be mute ..." ³ I wonder if it was, actually a needed gift. Not a desire gift, but a needed gift. What if the angel was saying, essentially, "You heard the words I said, but you didn't believe me or them. You need to talk less and listen more. Listen to the truths that the people around you have. I'm going to help you. You're not going to talk for a while."

And this got me thinking about who get silenced because people just don't listen to them. The list is easy to make. In our society, the people who are silenced, the people whose truths are generally ignored, are people who don't have power: women, people of color, queer people, people who live with few economic means, people who are temporarily or permanently disabled, religious minorities, people who are very old or very young.

Maybe by being silenced, Zechariah had the space listen.

I imagine it would be frustrating to suddenly not be able to speak. As an elder and a man, Zechariah was used to saying whatever was on his mind. And suddenly he couldn't. This silencing took more than nine months. It took Elizabeth a while to get pregnant, and then there was nine months of gestation. I wonder if he was ever got used to not speaking and so was able to quiet down his own thoughts and create even more space for listening.

Luke does a great job of setting up various juxtapositions in this story. One of them has Zechariah being muted while his son, John, ends up being "a voice crying out in the wilderness." And it seems to me that when silence is forced by the powers that be, when the powers that be mute opposition and criticism, they are creating a negative peace, not a

² Martin Luther King, Jr., "Letter from Birmingham Jail," <https://www.csuchico.edu/iege/assets/documents/susi-letter-from-birmingham-jail.pdf> (accessed 6 December 2025).

³ Luke 1:20, *The Inclusive Bible*.

positive peace. Going from where we are to a positive peace (a key element of the kingdom of God) needs voices crying out in the wilderness and in the cities, in frog costumes and in clergy collars. Going from where we are to a positive peace requires people standing up and speaking out, especially people who the powers think are easy to silence. And sometimes this might mean that those of us who tend to get heard need to be quiet.

I stumbled across a snippet of a sermon preached recently by the Rev. Marci Glass.⁴ In her sermon, she pointed to two female reporters who recently had the courage to ask President Trump some challenging questions. One was ABC reporter Mary Bruce who asked Trump and the Saudi Crown Prince about the murder of fellow journalist Jamal Khashoggi – a murder to which U.S. intelligence has tied the Crown Prince. The other was Bloomberg reporter Catherine Lucey who asked Trump why he had not yet released the Epstein files. In both cases, Trump's response was to crudely and meanly belittle, insult, and dehumanize the reporters.

Rev. Glass points out that Trump's attempt to silence these reporters worked because of the questions that followed that were asked by other reporters.

In her sermon she said, "[T]he only question that should have been asked of [Trump after these insults] was, 'What in the world did you just say to our colleague? We will return to the questions after you apologize to her.' That's it. That's the only question that he should have been asked. By their silence, he was given the message that it is okay to demean women who dare to ask him questions."⁵ Rev. Glass is absolutely right.



Here's a picture that Bill McKibben described as "a circle of white people gathered around the president, listening to him rant about Somali-Americans."⁶ McKibben goes on: "The day before [this gathering, Trump] had called [Somali-Americans] 'garbage,' and he was taking up the theme again, with vigor. Somalis had 'destroyed Minnesota' and

⁴ Marci Glass (Pastor & Head of Staff at Calvary Presbyterian Church in San Francisco, CA) <https://www.facebook.com/reel/815377821393625> (accessed 4 December 2025).

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Bill McKibben, "Pouring Literal Gasoline on the Flames of Hate," *The Crucial Years*, <https://billmckibben.substack.com/p/pouring-literal-gasoline-on-the-flames> (posted and accessed 4 December 2025).

‘destroyed our country.’ The ‘Somalians should be out of here,’ [Trump] said. I have tried to go back and at least as far as Woodrow Wilson and I don’t think any president has said anything as clearly racist while in office ...”⁷

The group of people standing around Trump in the Oval Office are automobile executives. They weren’t there to listen to his racist rant. They joined him to hear him announce that he was gutting fuel economy standards. As I read Bill’s description, all I could think about was how none of the auto industry executives walked out when Trump launched into his deeply racist attack on Somali immigrants and Somali-Americans.

Imagine what would have happened if just one auto executive simply walked out from behind Trump and left the Oval Office. Imagine the news frenzy that would have ensued as reporters asked the Auto Exec about walking out. But they stood there silently, squandering their power.

The poet wrote that Jesus is “the silent Word” pleading for sinners. And knowing that Jesus is silently pleading on behalf of us sinners may bring us some spiritual peace. Still, I think that in these days of *Pax Americana* we need voices crying out working for a positive peace. Jesus needs our voices and our action.

Amen.

⁷ *Ibid.*