



SERMON OF THE WEEK

First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu at Ko'olau

June 11, 2017

“GOD ON MUTE” (How to Pray Series)

The Rev. Dr. Dan Chun

Have you ever experienced a time when you felt that God was not answering your prayers no matter how desperate or urgent they were? A sense that God was on mute?

Recently, Pam and I had dinner with our dear friends Pete and his wife Samie Greig. They are heroes to me in so many ways. Pete is helping to lead the 24/7 Prayer movement around the world.

Pete is also the pastor of Emmaus Road Church in Guildford, England, which a number of our staff and Alpha leaders recently visited. And even more importantly he is coming to our church in November for our Life in the Spirit Conference with HIM to teach us about prayer and how to hear God's voice.

Pete wrote a book called “God On Mute,” which is about when God seems silent when we pray to Him. It's where I got my sermon title and a lot of wisdom for this sermon, so if you like this sermon, thank Pete and buy his book.

The genesis of Pete writing the book came from an incident that happened years ago.

One evening, while sleeping, Pete heard his wife gasp “Wake up! Something's wrong!” Near them was their seven-week old son Daniel. Their other young son Hudson was in another room.

“It's my leg,” Samie said. I can't feel it. It won't move.” She looked pale as she sat upright in bed clutching her thigh. Pete

was about to laugh and tell her that she was probably sleeping funny when suddenly the fingers of her right hand began to curl into a fist of an old lady. Her wrist then twisted to a 90-degree angle. She let out a yelp of pain as spasms began to go up and down her arm.

“What's happening to me?” she gasped. Then her elbow jabbed sideways and her hand, said Pete, became like “a cobra ready to strike.” Suddenly her chin was thrust down as if she was playing a violin.

Pete quickly called for an ambulance. He was terrified. He said, “I prayed like I'd never prayed before, helplessly convinced that I was watching my wife die. I begged God to make the convulsions stop so that she could at least draw breath.

“I prayed in the name of Jesus. I tried to have faith. This was not prayer for a parking space or a sunny day. This seemed to me to be a matter of life and death.

“Samie was turning blue, and bloodied spittle was blotting the pillow. The ambulance was taking forever. My prayers weren't working.”

At the hospital, after some tests a doctor came to see Pete. A physician reported coldly but factually – “Bad news. The CAT scan shows a growth in your wife's brain. It's very large, I'm afraid...the size of an orange...it might have been growing very slowly over a protracted

period, or it might be fast-growing and aggressive.” And then he ended with, “Shall we go tell your wife?”

Pete said no. He wanted to tell her himself. And when he did, Samie cried a loud “No!” Pete said it was “so loud and so long that the entire ward heard her grief.”

After several hours they got the news that the tumor was fortunately operable. As they waited for the operation, night after night Pete would bathe his two little boys and read them bedtime stories. Yet, Samie didn't want to be left alone as the seizures could hit at any moment.

In case something went wrong in the surgery, Samie wrote letters to each of her boys that they might know how much she loved them and how she wanted them to know that if she weren't around. And of course a letter to Pete, and she hid them in a place where Pete would find it later in her hospital bed.

Pete said, “Outwardly, I tried to give an impression of stoic endurance and there were times when I did feel very calm. But I was also scared that Samie might die if I didn't pray enough, or if I didn't have enough faith, or if I didn't fast enough, or if I didn't bind some disembodied principality or if I didn't repent of some root sin, or if I didn't strap her body on a stretcher bound for Lourdes, or if I didn't agree with Benny Hinn. Surely I thought God would not disqualify her on a technicality?”

Pete wrote, "I'm ashamed to admit that this was how my prayer life looked when it really counted. Samie's faith frequently amazed me, but I prayed at best like a child and at worst like a charlatan looking for snake oil..."

He wrote, "Sometimes we wonder why these prayers are not being answered, and well-meaning people tell us deep things about prayer not being a slot machine, or about the transforming inner power of contemplative prayer or about fasting spiritual warfare and the importance of gratitude.

"We nod and say, 'Aha, that's really helpful,' but our prayer lives continue to be a staccato succession of yells and groans like a man falling down stairs." In the end Samie's surgery was successful. The tumor was removed. But today she lives with epilepsy.

One of the reasons I love Pete and Samie is that they live authentic, transparent lives. Yes, they are followers of Christ. Yes, they lead an international prayer movement. And yes, they authentically know how hard it is to be faithful and pray when it seems at times God is silent.

Yet, this is a God who handles our fears and doubts for as the Bible says, "Cast all your anxiety on Him because He cares for you." (1 Peter 5:7)

Let's go deeper into this question of – is God silent when we pray? Does He really care? Is God on mute when we cry out to Him? Why even turn to God when we are in pain? Why don't we just turn to psychology self-help books or just give up to the numerical odds of our health or sickness. Why God?

One morning, Samie was back in the hospital after a particularly vicious epileptic attack. Pete asked Samie if she ever doubted God's existence or His power to intervene. It was really more of a confession on his part than a question of her. But without hesitation, Samie replied, "No! I never doubt God these

days, Pete. How can I doubt God? God is all I've got."

While she prepared for surgery she never doubted God's existence, love and power. In fact, her belief grew stronger in spite of profound disappointment and unanswered prayer.

The reality is even when we have strong faith and pray a lot sometimes things get even worse. Soon after Samie's tumor was diagnosed, their baby Daniel got chicken pox. Is God a cosmic sadist? Is He causing all of this pain? Why doesn't He answer our prayers the way we want?

Here is a hard truth: God is not in the business of answering our prayers the way we want. Ouch! God is not in the business of removing all of our pain. (Wow, another ouch!) But He does lessen or remove pain at times as He did for Silvana who shared earlier. After all, we are having a healing service today and there is a lot of healing that happens miraculous healing but it's not because God owes it to us – it is His grace and mercy and often He uses suffering and healing as an arrow pointing to the wonder of God.

It is true, God does love us, and He does offer His presence but we may not understand it initially in a way and a time we always understand. When Pete and Samie's young son Daniel was suffering from chicken pox, all Pete could do was give him tepid baths and put on him Calamine lotion. But the relief didn't last long. So Daniel continued to cry. All Pete could do was hold him and wait it out often pacing the floor back and for cuddling little Danny.

Pete said, this is a metaphor of what our Heavenly Father does for us, holding us, maybe even crying with us, pouring out His love, but not taking away our pain as fast as we would want, but like little baby Danny, there will come a time we can fall asleep in our father's arms knowing somehow He loves us and is always wanting our best.

And if you know anything about chicken pox – for the child it is better to get it young than much later as an adult when getting it would be more severe. It builds antibodies so you don't get it later. 20 years later Danny will be glad he had chicken pox as a baby. God does allow pain in our lives that our infant-like minds can't comprehend.

When God seems mute, can we have the faith that He has the long, loving view? He is not interested in microwave faith or microwave results, but more like crock-pot faith and crock-pot results that often take a long time to cook and marinate, and then later taste and see.

Being Chinese, I have always been grateful for a missionary named Hudson Taylor, who brought the gospel to China in the late 1800's and early 1900's. But one day in 1900, Hudson Taylor suffered a nervous breakdown. Yes, the great missionary - Hudson Taylor.

One day he was on stage speaking in Boston when he began to repeat the same two phrases over and over again: "You may trust the Lord too little but you can never trust him too much." "If we believe not, yet He abideth faithful; He cannot deny himself." (2 Timothy 2:13)

Taylor kept saying these two sentences over and over again until finally someone ran up on stage and escorted him down. He went back to London and then to Switzerland in a state of complete mental and physical exhaustion.

Then to make matters worse, while there he received the news that 58 of his fellow missionaries and 21 children had been massacred in the infamous Boxer Rebellion started by the Chinese Empress Dowager to kill foreigners and Christians.

His response was heartbreaking, authentic, real but hopeful. He said to his wife, "I cannot read; I cannot think; I cannot pray, but I can trust." – Hudson Taylor

Amazingly his trust was well founded. Due to the blood of those martyrs, the foundation of the Chinese church of today was established. The faith those missionaries brought into China never left even after the terrible Cultural Revolution in 1966 to 1976 when Chairman Mao Ze Dong killed and imprisoned and tortured Christians and closed down churches.

Incredibly, China has one of the fastest growing evangelism explosions today. The Telegraph newspaper out of the UK reported that by 2025 there would be 165 million Christians more Christians than any other country in the world, and to think in 1948 they just had one million Christians.

If you want a microwave faith that always sees fast results – I can't promise that, the Bible doesn't promise that. God doesn't promise that. But He does promise He will be with you in the toughest of times and trusting Him is the best thing you can do in life. As Samie would say, "You must trust God. He's all we got!"

You can say but all those years of Hudson Taylor's prayers of intercession and prayers for protections seemed to end up for nothing. But Hudson Taylor trusted God that his work would not be in vain and His work and love could not be stopped, and Taylor was right.

I love what Cardinal John Henry Newman once wrote: "Therefore I will trust Him. Whatever, wherever I am. I can never be thrown away. If I am in sickness, my sickness may serve Him; in perplexity, my perplexity may serve Him; in sorrow, my sorrow may serve Him. – Cardinal John Henry Newman

As my late friend Brennan Manning said, who died four years ago, "To be grateful for an unanswered prayer, to give thanks in a state of interior desolation, to trust in the love of God in the face of the marvels, cruel circumstances, obscenities, and

commonplaces of life is to whisper a doxology in the darkness."

Can we sing even in darkness? "Praise God for Whom all blessings flow, Praise Him all creatures here below."

There is a best-selling book that was very popular many years ago called *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* – written by a Jewish Rabbi. The thesis of the book, with which I strongly disagree, is that the only way to make sense of undeserved suffering is to lower our expectations of what God is able to do. God is not as powerful as we think. We should not expect miracles because God WON'T do them, but it is because He CAN'T do them. He is not that powerful.

I think it is wrong to downgrade our belief in the supernatural that God is not that powerful. The supernatural, the miraculous is the basis of our faith.

Often times the Holocaust is the example often cited of God being unable to help even His own people. Thousands of Jewish people were imprisoned tortured and then killed by the Nazi's. The Holocaust is often cited as the clear example of not only man's inhumanity to man but also of God's nonexistence because if there were a loving God, He would have intervened. Hence, this is a God on mute, if there is a God.

But the facts show something remarkably different. The people who were in the Holocaust, who were in the cauldron of pain and suffering and the recipient of man's inhumanity to man, for the most part they TURNED to God and FOUND A FAITH IN GOD who helped, sustained and empowered them in the concentration camps.

An American rabbi, Dr. Reeve Robert Brenner, surveyed hundreds of Holocaust survivors. He wanted to know how their experiences had affected their belief about God. His findings might be surprising to you:

A. Half of the survivors said the Holocaust had no impact on their faith.

This is stunning. Five million people were systematically tortured and exterminated. And even though the survivors saw their family and friends killed, and they suffered in a concentration camp, they didn't lose their faith.

One survivor said, "It never occurred to me to question God's doing while I was an inmate of Auschwitz, although of course I understand that others did. If someone believes God is responsible for the death of six million because He didn't somehow do something to save them, he's got his thinking reversed. We owe God our lives for the few or many years we live, and we have the duty to worship Him."

B. 11% of Holocaust survivors did lose their faith.

Though one might argue they still had a faith because many of these 11% were quoted as saying they were angry at God.

C. 5% abandoned atheism and began to believe in God as a result of the brutal treatment at the hands of the Nazi's.

One could extrapolate that if 5% of the Jews actually turned to God instead of atheism, then if you take the three and a half million Jews who survived that 5% figure would mean that 177,000 survivors came to faith through the concentration camps.

Pete Greig wonders if in a crazy way, one might argue that was one of the most fruitful revivals in any one people in the last 70 years. It is even more remarkable when one sees this in the context of the Holocaust, which is often used as PRIMARY evidence against a loving God who reaches out to us in pain.

When you think God is on mute, don't give up. That's the main thing. Don't give up. Be patient enough and aware enough to see God's presence.

This again is like the Daily Examen I taught you a few weeks ago. Always look for the presence of God in your life, especially when it seems the darkest. Remember it is always the darkest just before the dawn.

Alexander Solzhenitsyn was imprisoned in Russia by Stalin. He was placed in a Siberian gulag where in living in sub-zero temperatures, the guards would beat a prisoner, sometimes unto death if he didn't do his assigned work.

One day Solzhenitsyn had reached the end of his rope. He couldn't take it any more. He threw down his shovel and sat down on a bench and waited for a guard to come and see him there and then beat him to death. He didn't care. He had seen it happen to others and so he just waited for the blows that would bring a welcome death.

But then suddenly an emaciated prisoner came up to him. *Without saying a word*, the prisoner scratched the sign of the cross in the mud and then walked away.

Solzhenitsyn stared at the cross. He later wrote, "In that moment, he knew that there was something greater than the Soviet Union. He knew that the hope of all mankind was represented in that simple cross. And through the power of the cross, anything was possible."

And so he picked up his shovel and began to work again. Later he would be freed and be able to write his famous book *The Gulag Archipelago* for which he won a Nobel Prize about being in prison in a Russian prison camp in 1945. He wrote that in prison Christians "knew very well *for what* they were serving time, and they were unwavering in their convictions! They were the only ones, perhaps, to whom the camp philosophy did not stick." Solzhenitsyn reportedly became Christian after prison and was miraculously healed of cancer.

You never know when God will show up.

As you know our church is facing some challenges right now. And as a result I can feel a bit overwhelmed and feel down. Recently I was in Watford England for a worship conference, which I knew would begin with a 30-minute series of songs.

After we sang just one song, the host of the conference stopped the worship and said, "There is someone here who has a certain need and needs prayer. Who is that person?"

Someone raised her hand, and I thought, "Good, we would start singing again."

But then the host said, "No, there is one other person who is feeling so down right now that he can't even worship. And he listed some other things of how hard it is going for that person." And I thought, please someone raise their hands. No one did. But there must be someone here who he is really talking about.

And as the host described more details about this person who needed prayer, I realized he was talking about ME! So I raised my hand. And people came to me and prayed for me. Some young teenagers behind me, still with braces on their teeth, prayed for me and some young adult knelt down in the aisle to pray for me and placed a hand on my shoulder. And the entire conference prayed at that moment for me and one other person.

And I remember thinking that day, "I am in such a deep dark hole of burden that this prayer would not work. I am in such a deep dark hole." But at the end of the prayer my entire burden had miraculously lifted. And I thought, wow, I came all the way to Watford and these people in the audience don't even know me, and God reached out to me thousands of miles away from home to help me. Amazing.

So at times the Lord can seem distant, but then He shows up whether with some guy drawing a cross in the mud or

a sick wife saying, "Don't doubt God, God is all we got," or in a prophetic public prayer thousands of miles away from home where a whole church whom you've never met start praying for you.

Here are four things to remember when you feel God is on mute:

1) Know that God does hear your prayers.

Keep crying out to the Lord. He does hear. In Psalm 107, which I am going to be talking about in the Healing Service at 2:00 pm, you see this pattern of how when people are in trouble, they think they are going to die.

But the key is that they all cry out to the Lord. Keep *crying out* to the Lord – whether you are in a hospital room, a Holocaust or in a Gulag Archipelago of a prison, keep crying out and He will help you as He did for others. He does hear your cry.

2) Know that He always answers, but it might take time.

God is on a different timeline than we. But His timing is always good. For Samie, God is with her. She still has epilepsy. But in God's timing, she still feels His presence and she grows in strength and wisdom. Be patient.

3) Know that God answers in a way you might not understand, but it is for your good.

As you all know for 40 years Moses led the Israelites in the wilderness. Not once did the people praise him or thank him. They whined continually that they didn't have enough water or food.

Even when God gave them the miracle of manna or birds to eat or water from the rocks to drink or the protection from the Egyptian army, they whined as if God and Moses did nothing for them. The only time they praised and thanked Moses was when he died and they wrote the song of Moses for him.

He always wanted to go to the Promise Land but he did on a mountain before the Jordan River and he never got to cross it to get to the Promised Land.

We may think wow, Moses got a bad deal. But you have to ask, who had the bad deal? Moses who got to go to heaven and be with God? Or Joshua who had to continually fight 35 kings and their armies in the Promised Land?

And in the end Moses showed up in the gospel of Mark chapter 9 with Jesus and the prophet Elijah at the famous Transfiguration in the Promised Land – in Israel – when Jesus was with some of His disciples. So he got there.

4) “Be still, and know that I am God” (Psa. 46:10)

The irony is that when God seems He is on mute and it is silent. Use that silence to have a centering prayer to think about God. Slow down. Slow down. Stop the frenetic pace. Slow down and be still and listen and look for the presence of God.

Maybe use a time of silence and do the Daily Examen, as I taught you in my sermon a few weeks ago that talked about five things to do daily in silence with God:

- Give thanks
- Review
- Apologize
- Forgive
- Turn to God

If we can just be still, then God will speak, and you will eventually hear Him in a healing or in a presence or in a word or in a prayer – just as He did for me in Watford England, just as He did in a Holocaust camp, just as He did in a Russian camp of the Archipelago for Alexander Solzhenitsyn, or in a hospital room for Pete and Samie Greig.

Christ died on a cross to let us know firmly and strongly that even in the silence, He loved us so much that He gave

His life for us so that no sin of the present or past or future may separate us from the love of God.

In the silence, be still and know that God is there. In the silence, listen for the beautiful streams of God and the Holy Spirit and the Lord Jesus come flowing trickling into our souls and hearts. Listen and feel the presence of God in the stillness.

The worship team and I want to teach you a song that I learned in England last year, which is appropriate for today. It’s called Waves, and it is about God talking to us in the quiet who says, “Be still and know I am.”

Let’s pray.

Lord, may we learn that when we think you are too quiet...that in the quiet we may be still and know you are God. You are the great I am who I am, the great Lord who talks to us in thunder and lightning and in the quiet harbors of our life. Lord, we sing this song to you. In Christ’s name, Amen.