

Story and Meditation: Keep Silent

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2 Kings 2:1-12

Mark 9:2-9

by *Eric Anderson*

The myna was certain that the kolea couldn't talk.

Initially, of course, that had to do with the myna himself. It's hard to demonstrate that you can talk if the bird talking to you won't stop talking. That's what happened, of course. The myna settled onto the grass next to the kolea and began talking about the weather and the foraging and the food and the feathers and the weather and the predators and the annoying things the other mynas were doing and the weather and the flavor of that last seed and how cold it's been over the last couple weeks and...

There's a really important thing to remember about listening. If you want to listen attentively, the first thing to do is to stop talking.

For this myna, I regret to say, it took a while.

Along the way he started to wonder if the kolea could speak. Another myna would have chimed in with a response somewhere along the way. A finch would have offered at least a chirp or two. Doves would stay pretty quiet, but they might offer a "coo" or two along the way, as in:

"How cold has it been, do you think?"

"Coo!"

The kolea, however, didn't offer even this much. When the myna finally stopped talking – in order to fill his mouth with a particularly tasty seed, by the way – the kolea had no reply. The myna decided it must have been because of the topic, and launched into another lengthy monologue, this time reviewing the different kinds of seeds, bugs, worms, and so on to be found in this particular expanse of grass. The kolea listened attentively enough, spearing an example or two of the described foods from time to time, but offered nothing in return.

"Don't you talk?" asked the myna finally.

The kolea cocked its head, a bit like a shrug, and said nothing. Suddenly the kolea's gaze focused on something behind the myna.

"Cat!" he cried with a piercing sound. Both birds took to their wings and fluttered to a nearby branch out of reach. The cat pretended it hadn't been hunting them and went somewhere else.

The myna looked at the kolea. "I thought you couldn't talk," he said.

The kolea met his gaze and replied, "I didn't have anything to say."

In a meeting recently I was asked to comment on some ideas that had just been introduced by one of the other participants. "I know you're not afraid to talk," said the person who'd invited me.

Well, that's true. I'm not afraid to talk. What is also true is that I learn more if I remain silent.

Our two Scripture passages today advise silence in several ways. They duplicate the phrase "keep silent," which is interesting, but also use variations like "be silent" and "listen."

In Second Kings, we hear about the last day that the prophets Elijah and Elisha shared together. Elijah, the older prophet, had previously appointed Elisha to succeed him. This wasn't an entirely generous act on Elijah's part. For one thing, God had directed him to do it. For another, Elijah had lived a life of near-constant friction and occasionally outright conflict with the monarchs of Israel. Just to give you a taste, the last conversation First Kings records between Elijah and King Ahab opens with the king saying, "Have you found me, O my enemy?"

I'd call that a sign of a... troubled relationship.

Elisha, therefore had a number of reasons to regret the departure of Elijah. The older prophet had been a mentor, a guide, and clearly a friend. His support had brought the younger prophet to a relationship with God such that it is clear he didn't need to be told by anyone that the day of their separation had arrived. And, of course, he would be taking up the responsibilities of a prophet, pronouncing God's judgement to monarchs and persons of power, up to and including instigating the overthrow of the King of Israel, and yes, that's an uncomfortable reference to make in these days.

"Keep silent," Elisha told the prophets who warned him of the imminent departure of his teacher and friend. "Yes, I know, be silent."

Be silent, because I am sad and frightened and shortly I will be alone to do dangerous work and I have come to love this man who will soon be gone.

We've all been there. Sometimes the best support anyone can be for us in the midst of grief is to sit with us in silence.

Eight hundred eighty years later, Jesus, Peter, James, and John took a walk up a mountain. Six days earlier they'd had something of an argument. Jesus had begun to talk about how his ministry would end: with rejection by the religious authorities, arrest, crucifixion, and resurrection. Peter, however, had not been inspired by that message. He'd taken Jesus aside to

chastise him for even saying such a thing. To give it words: “Keep silent.” Jesus had replied, “Get behind me, Satan!” which is a pretty harsh way for someone to say, “Keep silent.”

Michael J. Chan writes at Working Preacher, “For the past six days, Jesus’ painful and disturbing words have been ringing in their ears and taking root in their hearts: that the Son of Man must suffer and die, that he will rise out of death, and that his followers will walk a similar path (Mark 8:31-38).

“The way of Jesus is the way of the cross: ‘For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it’ (Mark 8:35). It’s a path in which victory looks like defeat, in which restoration looks like loss, and in which life looks like death. It’s a calling that grates against our longing for prestige, attacks our addiction to ‘likes,’ and disregards our deep need to be validated by the world.”

“Keep silent about what I fear, Jesus,” said Peter. “Keep silent about changing the sacrificial nature of Messiahship,” said Jesus.

Atop the mountain, in the radiance of Jesus’ transfiguration, Moses and our friend Elijah – the one taken up in the whirlwind – appeared. They were talking with Jesus, and who knows what they said because Peter interrupted. It was a faithful interruption – there’s a connection with Scripture – but Peter’s intervention was another manifestation of “Keep silent.” “Don’t talk, Jesus, or Moses, or Elijah. We’ve got this.” I can’t really admire Peter’s good sense, but talk about sheer gall.

The heavenly voice, however, did not seem to approve. After repeating the words Jesus heard at his baptism “This is my son, the beloved,” God had something more to say, clearly directed to the disciples. “Listen to him!”

How to start listening? Well, there’s always: Keep silent.

There is one more repetition of “Keep silent” here: Jesus’ instructions to the bedazzled Peter, James, and John to keep silent about their experience until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead. Jesus was determined to follow the course that led, pretty much inevitably, to a Roman cross. Proclaiming him as the companion of Moses and Elijah, proclaiming him as someone who could shine like the sun, proclaiming him as someone whom heaven had pronounced “my beloved son:” that could change that course. It might accelerate it, of course. Jesus would be widely accused of blasphemy, and the council in Jerusalem would charge him with it before handing him to the Roman governor, Pilate, for trial as a rebel. Or the proclamation of Jesus in this way might have raised a supporting army determined to carry him into the citadels of Jerusalem as a conquering hero – which was not part of Jesus’ plan at all.

No. Best to keep silent until a better time.

In these texts, including the argument six days before the Transfiguration, there are hurtful silences and blessed silences. Peter's rejection of Jesus' course – and Jesus' own harsh reply – strike me as among the hurtful silences. "I don't want to hear it," just isn't helpful. It wasn't then. It isn't now. On the other hand, "Be quiet about things you can't understand," probably didn't help Peter's understanding any more than it would if you or I said it to someone we loved.

There are some blessed silences here. There is the silence of shared sorrow and loving comfort that, one hopes, the groups of prophets offered to Elisha. There is the silence of listening and learning that the voice of God advised – rather emphatically – to Peter, James, and John. And there is the last silence Jesus imposed on them: a silence that waits for a better time to speak.

And there's also the silence that's implied, but never described here in Mark. As Matt Skinner writes at Working Preacher: "The transfigured Jesus isn't supposed to be figured out. He's supposed to be appreciated."

Appreciated. In silence.

Keep silent, friends. You have comfort to offer in shared silence. Keep silent, friends. In silence, you just might learn something. Keep silent, friends, to appreciate the glory of God. Keep silent, my friends, to find the appropriate time to speak. Keep silent.

And also know: that the time to speak also comes, and when it does, keep silent no longer.

Amen.