

*Kathy Khang*

WHY WE STAY  
SILENT AND  
HOW TO  
*SPEAK UP*

RAISE  
YOUR  
VOICE

“PROFOUND, COURAGEOUS, AND IMPORTANT.” —JEN HATMAKER

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## Chapter 1

# SEEN BUT NOT HEARD

Children should be seen and not heard.

ENGLISH PROVERB

The nail that sticks out gets hammered down.

JAPANESE PROVERB

Even fools are thought wise if they keep silent,  
and discerning if they hold their tongues.

PROVERBS 17:28

*W*hen I walked into the ballroom, the main session of the conference was already well underway. I was a bit frazzled from my five-hour drive but not too discombobulated to realize immediately that something was wrong. I sat next to a colleague, made eye contact with her, and smiled. Then, uncharacteristically for our relationship, we instinctively reached out for each other's hands. We sat for a few moments holding hands when suddenly I had the urge to cry and found myself holding back emotions and tears I didn't understand. My colleague squeezed my hand to let me know that she knew I was distressed, but I still didn't know why I was feeling what I was experiencing.

After the session ended, my colleague asked me if I was okay and if I had had time to process what had happened at the earlier sessions. I had absolutely no idea what was going on and asked her to explain. There had been a leadership crisis developing behind the scenes between several beloved, respected senior leaders. The relational conflict included racial, gender, and cultural dynamics. My colleague assumed I had seen all of this unfold when she noticed I was getting emotional. We both realized that my emotions and spirit were registering something I hadn't experienced firsthand. She and I both sensed God was giving me a starting point to wrestle with difficult emotions and build up courage. Honestly, it felt weird. I tucked that intense moment into my mental filing system.

On the last night of the conference, our team crowded into a meeting room meant for a group half our size. It was late in the evening, but it was our only chance to hear from a senior leader who knew what had happened and what was still happening. We all listened while carefully shooting nervous glances across the room. I found myself wringing my hands, questions welling up in my mind about what had transpired and why.

When the floor was finally opened for questions, a few people made polite statements thanking the senior leader for coming and filling us in. I kept waiting for someone to ask the questions I was sure more than half of us were wondering: Why had we not met earlier in the week, been updated, and given a chance to respond? Why were we left in the dark until the night before we all were leaving, if not to keep us silent?

I felt my emotions and tears from the beginning of the conference well up. Seriously? No one was going to ask? Fine.

I waited for what I thought was an appropriate time, raised my hand, waited to be acknowledged, took a deep breath to keep my tears at bay, and steadied my voice. I don't remember the exact wording of my multipart question, but it didn't matter. Before I could finish, out of the corner of my eye I saw something move across my face. The person sitting next to me, a friend, was listening to my question and heard the direction it was going—and then physically covered my mouth with her hand.

I had been silenced. Literally, physically stopped from speaking up.

I felt embarrassed and deeply ashamed. I was angry and confused, violated and sick to my stomach. I didn't understand how powerful my words and my voice could be until someone made sure I wouldn't be heard.

## **IF YOU SPEAK, WILL ANYONE HEAR YOU?**

The world is a noisy place. Smart phones. Smart watches. Alerts. Notifications. Social media. Satellite radio. Streaming video. News 24/7. On any given Sunday morning in church, don't be surprised if you hear a guitar or keyboard playing softly in the background during the announcements or prayer. Culturally, it's almost as if we are uncomfortable with silence.

Yet when people rise up and collectively make some noise, public displays of personal opinions are often closely monitored and critiqued. I was raised to believe public protests were dangerous, disrespectful, disruptive, and, therefore, inappropriate.

Those adjectives have been used frequently to describe recent protests against white supremacy and for immigration reform.

I first learned that public protests were considered inappropriate after finding myself accidentally attending and then willingly participating in protests against increasing US military presence in South Korea while on a trip there, my homeland. I had left South Korea as an eight-month-old and returned as a college student on a church missions/cultural enrichment trip. I developed friendships with Korean college students who were active in the student protest movements. They spoke about feeling voiceless but also about finding power and common purpose as they protested together and leaned on one another for courage. I learned about liberation theology and *minjung* theology, an indigenous theology born out of Korea's post-war struggle and emergence. I honestly didn't know what to do with it all, especially the theology that tapped into a cultural value of community and harmony that didn't exist in the individualistic theology of the West. At first I listened to the history of the student protest movements, safely observing from the sidelines. But within the first month of our trip, most of our group was participating—we learned the chants, carried bandanas to protect ourselves from the tear gas, and were well-versed in making Molotov cocktails.

It turns out that government monitoring of public protests doesn't happen just in the United States. My uncle, who worked for the South Korean government, showed up completely unannounced one random afternoon at the office where we were meeting. He came carrying pizzas, but his presence was an indirect warning to make sure his niece stayed

out of trouble, stayed safe, and stayed silent. I wouldn't take part in a public protest for another twenty years.

I tell that story because I still feel new to exercising my right to peaceably assemble. It's not something I have always been drawn to. Using my voice has mostly been through speaking and writing, not using my body in protest. But as my convictions have deepened and life experiences have changed me, I've chosen to march in support of #BlackLivesMatter and against the Dakota Access Pipeline, the Muslim travel ban, and a recent president. Bethany and I also marched together with three Asian American friends at the Women's March on Washington in January 2017 because we wanted to make sure our voices were both seen and heard as Christian women of color. I find the news coverage, police presence, and public commentary around those events fascinating. Different voices—such as women, people of color, LGBTQIA—are critiqued, praised, dismissed, ignored, or judged on who should or should not participate. Why can't someone participate if they want to?

Public protest and free speech are protected under the law, but that doesn't mean there aren't consequences. There are days when it feels like you can't win. If you stay silent, you might find yourself on the wrong side of history. Or you might be seen and heard, and then wish you hadn't. Demonstrations from Charlottesville to Venezuela have proved deadly and dangerous for protesters. You might find yourself completely misunderstood after speaking up. Even worse, instead of believing your accounts of experiences with racism or injustice, people may question your perspective or accuse you of



exaggerating, lying, or playing the race card. They reframe your story and change it to make it appear that you were actually the aggressor. After being attacked for sharing, you might even begin to question your memory of the experience. But then you'll realize the truth—you *were* the victim of a racist or unjust incident and now have been gaslighted by those who don't want to believe you.

It's no wonder people are opting out of social media, trading in their smartphones, and deciding it's better to stay out of the public and even private square. It's become a common Lenten practice for some to give up social media or temporarily deactivate their social media accounts. I have one friend who has gone back to using a basic flip phone to keep him from engaging in the public sphere when he's away from a computer.

At some point in our lives, we learn to communicate, whether verbally or non-verbally. But most of us are also taught to silence ourselves or to stay out of the conversation for self-preservation. We are taught to avoid conflict, keep the peace, and keep our personal opinions to ourselves because we're told that speaking out doesn't actually affect change. However, self-preservation takes on a different sense of urgency and meaning as the national and global political landscape continues to shift. The North American church is again engaging in conversations around race and justice, but because of its past failures and current blind spots, the conversation often resorts to simplified binaries such as white and black, men and women, privileged and lack of privilege, citizen and undocumented—and the refusal to dig deeper into racist and unjust systems can widen the chasm.



I believe that Christians desire and can handle more complexity. Race and reconciliation can no longer be framed solely as a justice issue but rather as core to the gospel, theologically grounded in the *imago Dei* (the image of God). As Christians, if we truly believe we are all created in God's image, and that God the Creator had a hand in developing, creating, and shaping not just our embodied souls but also the places and spaces we steward and have dominion over, then reconciliation with one another is not merely an option—it's part of God's mandate. It requires us to speak up and speak out.

In order to do so, we need to address personal development, which happens within the context of community. In some communities, certain voices are erased and suppressed while others are amplified and elevated. The concept of "voice" isn't only what is said or written but also includes how identity is expressed in words and deed. Voice is not limited to what comes out of my mouth but out of my being.

The Latin word *vox*, meaning "voice," and the related word *vocāre*, meaning "to call," give us the root **voc** or **vok**. Words from the Latin *vox* or *vocāre* have something to do with the voice or with calling. Anything **vocal** is produced by the voice. A **vocation** is the work that someone is called to do as a job. To **evoke** is to call forth. To **invoke** is to call on for aid or protection. To **provoke** is to call forth another's anger. The word **voice** also has *vox* as its root.<sup>1</sup>

The challenge to raise your voice is about doing the good work of the good news. It's about calling forth others: an

invocation for all and a provocation to some. Our lives should affect the world around us if we are bearers of God's image as well as an embodiment of good news. Living as a Korean American Christian woman, there is something critical about speaking from a place of wholeness and uniqueness that makes my voice part of a community but also uniquely mine. It fills in the blanks left in others' stories. When more of us from different intersections and margins raise our voices, we live a fuller picture of the good news.

## **THE STORIES WE TELL**

I had the honor of watching my friend, author and artist Amena Brown, raise her voice at Soul City Church in Chicago. Amena told us a story about her grandmother and the care she put into packing food for family members who were traveling. Her grandmother would carefully wrap a slice of cake in waxed paper and put fried chicken in a paper towel and foil. These lovingly packed meals were important to African Americans in the time before the passage of the Civil Rights Act, when black travelers didn't know if they would be able to find a restaurant that would serve them.

As I recall Amena's performance, mannerisms, and imitation of her grandmother's speech and cadence, I can see how the warm memories of food dovetailed into a story of racial injustice. Amena can tell this story because of who she is and who her people are. And while I can share her story here, I can't possibly embody the story because it's not in my bones or blood.

But I can share the story of how my grandmother, who was a child in Korea during Japanese rule, was widowed

before she turned forty while raising five children and how she never remarried. I can tell you how she refused to tell me her Japanese name, but did tell me about why she choose not to remarry—because she would have been forced to prioritize her role as wife over her role as mother, even though it was difficult to live as a single mother in her patriarchal culture.

Amena's grandmother and my grandmother. Two different women, two different periods in history—but injustice didn't silence them or stop them from acting on their own behalf and on behalf of their families. We need to give voice to these uniquely embodied stories. We need their complexity and beauty. And this is where I see my story, and the various stories of diverse communities, and the biblical stories of Esther, the bleeding woman, Moses, the women at the cross, and the resurrection colliding—in identity formation, in community, and in advocacy against racism and misogyny.

Most of the books I've read and speakers I've heard on the topic of voice and identity have been white men or women with little nuance and contextualization for individuals and communities that reside both on the margins and simultaneously in the intersections. I believe we need to address voice and identity through the intersections of race, ethnicity, gender, and class, as well as in personal and public spheres of communication. The growing focus on racial reconciliation and the pursuit of justice only highlights the lack of nonwhite and nonblack voices, especially but not exclusively in evangelical circles. Women of color need to be part of the reconciling work of the gospel. We all need to understand

that voice, identity, and agency are given by God but often underdeveloped or ignored in people on the margins. We need to be seen and heard.

## **ETHNICITY AND PLACE IN OUR STORIES**

People on the margins and in the intersections need to see themselves and their stories in the conversation, but they also need to learn to tell those stories. A common retelling of the book of Esther is through a white male lens: Esther is the winner of a beauty pageant, and the titles of king and queen are filtered through a western understanding of power and some degree of equality if not equity and agency for both king and queen. But when I look at Esther's story I see racial passing and the implications of a young, disenfranchised woman who has assimilated but not completely lost her culture accepting the opportunity to seek justice for her people in a misogynistic culture. I see how Esther couldn't have come to her journey if it were not for the prior example of Queen Vashti choosing first to speak out by refusing the king's demands for what amounts to a lap dance for his friends.

Esther was both Esther and Hadassah. She was a Jewish woman living crossculturally in exile in Persia. Her social location and ability to navigate her identity impacted how she was seen and heard, and how she saw herself and eventually used her voice.

Like Esther, I grew up knowing about my ethnicity and place. I was a Korean who immigrated to the United States. I became Korean American and then later Asian American. I wasn't just one or the other. I was both, and it can still be

confusing. Americans are stereotypically loud where Asians are stereotypically quieter. America is a young country perhaps just on the front end of puberty whereas Korea's existence goes back centuries.

Somewhere between being Korean and American is where I learned I was supposed to raise my hand and speak up in school, but if I raised my hand too often classmates would say I was trying too hard or showing off. I also learned that if I told teachers about the racial bullying I experienced, the perpetrators retaliated with even more ignorance and force. At home and at my Korean immigrant evangelical church, I was supposed to listen and stay quiet. Pastors and spiritual leaders spoke with authority, and they were all men. I was supposed to listen to my elders and defer to their judgment. Each space had a different set of rules.

In college the conflicting messages took root internally and marked the beginning of my journey with imposter syndrome: the internal voice that tells you that you aren't qualified to do, say, or be whatever it is that you are actually doing, saying, or being. It tells you that you have been hired not because you were the best candidate but because a quota had to be met. It tells you that at any moment you will be found out for being less qualified, incompetent, and an imposter or fraud. American psychologists Pauline Clance and Suzanne Imes coined the phrase, describing it as a feeling of "phoniness in people who believe they are not intelligent, capable or creative despite evidence of high achievement." These people (also known as me and some of you) want to achieve but also "live in fear of being 'found out' or exposed as frauds."<sup>2</sup> There is

some research indicating a possible correlation between imposter syndrome and introversion as well as people who experience anxiety in multiple situations because imposter syndrome itself is an anxiety-driven experience.<sup>3</sup>

## BEING FOUND OUT

Imposter syndrome isn't unique to women, and while it was given a name in the twentieth century, feeling like a fraud is not a modern conundrum. One of the first recorded examples of this internalized self-doubt is in the biblical story of Moses. Hebrew baby boys were supposed to be killed by order of the Pharaoh, but Hebrew midwives "feared God and did not do what the king of Egypt had told them to do; they let the boys live" (Exodus 1:17). Moses was one of those surviving babies; he was adopted by Pharaoh's daughter and grew up in Pharaoh's family.

As an adult, Moses comes to understand that he is Jewish: "One day, after Moses had grown up, he went out to where his *own* people were and watched them at their hard labor. He saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, one of his *own* people" (Exodus 2:11, emphasis added).

What we learn in the rest of the chapter is that Moses' understanding of his identity and his internal bent toward justice is where his struggle with imposter syndrome pivots. He wrestles with his identity (is he Egyptian or Hebrew?). He comes to understand his motivation (a sense of justice and freedom that ought to be afforded to all people). And he tests out his voice. Only then does he begin to become who he was meant to be.

Moses, who knows he is Hebrew, sees an Egyptian beating a Hebrew. Later, believing that no one is watching, he kills that Egyptian in an attempt to serve justice. Before we get all high and mighty about Moses being a murderer and wrap it up neatly by saying God uses the most unlikely people, we need to acknowledge that Moses had lived a life of privilege while watching his own people suffer. What does watching your own people suffer do to a person? Moses isn't just an unlikely leader because he is also a murderer. He is an unlikely leader because he has yet to come to an understanding of his identity.

The next day, perhaps emboldened by his secret act of revenge, Moses tries to intervene in a fight between two Hebrew workers. The problem? The two Hebrew workers don't see Moses as one of their own. "The man said, 'Who made you ruler and judge over us? Are you thinking of killing me as you killed the Egyptian?' Then Moses was afraid and thought, 'What I did must have become known'" (Exodus 2:14).

The question of identity doesn't end there. Pharaoh hears what happened and tries to kill Moses, the young man who was raised by his daughter. Moses runs, hides, and makes a life for himself among another tribe. He voices his loss of home and identity when he names his son Gershom: "I have become a foreigner in a foreign land" (Exodus 2:22). Talk about passing your issues on to your children.

For the next two chapters of Exodus, we witness Moses working through his imposter syndrome, culminating in communicating with God through a burning bush. What I wouldn't do for an actual burning bush to make it clear to



me that God is the one calling me to do something! Lucky Moses gets a real burning bush. However, at some point we all encounter a metaphoric burning bush and experience God: a fire that burns but doesn't consume, a source of energy that doesn't flame out or destroy the host.

What is Moses' response to hearing God call him by name from the flames?

"Here I am" (Exodus 3:4).

I'm not certain I would know what to do if I audibly heard my name being called out from a fire, but I'm fairly certain I wouldn't use Moses' words. It's important to consider that Moses is willing to be fully present and that he allows his curiosity to take over any sense of confusion or fear. Moses is in the wilderness leading a flock of livestock. He has responsibilities that people depend on him to complete. We don't know what happens to his flock, but we do know what Moses does: he stops what he's doing and pays attention to God.

God commands Moses to take off his sandals. As a Korean American, I know that you don't track outside dirt inside a home, so this command would make sense to me if Moses were entering a house. But in this context, Moses' sandals were a symbol of his privilege as a free person<sup>4</sup> who had some status or degree of wealth.<sup>5</sup> An encounter with God not only renders the space holy but also renders a symbol of privilege absolutely unnecessary.

Like Moses, in order for us to begin the journey of finding and using our voices, we need to be fully present and also recognize and take off whatever privilege as best we can. Using

your voice is holy work, and God doesn't need or require you to have an advanced degree or wealth. God certainly can leverage that privilege and challenge us to think of privilege differently, but the privilege itself is not necessary. And for a woman, an immigrant, and perpetual foreigner in this land, that is good news.

Fortunately for us, Moses' experience with imposter syndrome doesn't end neatly because reality is rarely neat. Moses and God have a conversation, almost a call and response, as God invites Moses to be the one to bring the Israelites out of captivity. Moses responds by asking, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" (Exodus 3:11).

Just moments before this, Moses was present and ready, but now he has a quick change of heart. I'm sure that Moses isn't the only person who has instantly experienced this type of buyer's remorse.

But Moses isn't chickening out. He's doing exactly what any one of us might do when presented with an opportunity to take a risk, to do something a little outside of our comfort zone, to be a leader when we think of ourselves as followers, or to say something that might be controversial or political. When we find ourselves questioning ourselves, doubting and hesitating, we can try to find affirmation and a deeper understanding of ourselves by inviting others to give us feedback or pray with us. We can meet with a spiritual director or a life coach. We can be open to the wisdom and input of wise friends. Ultimately, we will find ourselves asking God about our identity.

God's answer to Moses doesn't satisfy my personal longing for words of affirmation and praise for a job well done. God's answer is simple: "I will be with you" (Exodus 3:12). That's it. God is with Moses. God is with us. Our identity is known and defined by the very One who created the universe in all its diversity; it's complex and at the same time beautifully simple. God is able to identify us not by the lowest common denominator—we are all human—but by knowing precisely how Moses' story is unique and yet intersects with ours in present day.

I'd like to think that knowing that God knows me better than any game of identity politics I can play is enough to give me the confidence to do some crazy things, but it isn't and it wasn't for Moses. Thank goodness for reality.

Moses isn't satisfied with God's answer and has more questions: "Suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' Then what shall I tell them?" (Exodus 3:13).

Moses is asking God about theology and knowledge. This makes sense when you consider that Moses probably received some formal education in the Pharaoh's palace, but at this point he is a shepherd. Moses asks God how to explain God to the Israelites. Viewed in the light of the modern American church, which may be too dependent on advanced degrees, knowledge, theologies, and structures, Moses doesn't have the credentials to be a church leader. With his felony record, I'm not sure if he even could get a job.

The question about theology and knowledge is quickly followed up by Moses' final question: "What if they do not believe

me or listen to me and say, “The LORD did not appear to you?” (Exodus 4:1).

Friends, this is imposter syndrome turned up to eleven. At this point, God has given Moses a script of how things are going to go down. But Moses doesn’t believe he is the right person for the job, even though God appeared to him in a burning bush, called him by name, patiently answered his questions, and gave him instructions. But Moses still isn’t sure. I’m totally with Moses—I get him.

## **STRUGGLING WITH CREDIBILITY**

I’m a Korean American married mother of three with no advanced degree living in the suburbs in the middle of a midlife crisis, wondering how or if my twenty years of vocational ministry can transfer into a different vocation. I write infrequently. I speak even more infrequently. I have been told that I’m a prophetic voice, but I cringe at that description because biblical prophets are lonely and cranky, and I want to be perceived as fun and warm. Oh, and did I mention that I’m a woman of color in ministry?

Almost ten years ago, I supervised a ministry staff team that worked with four distinct student populations with a reach of about three hundred active students. I learned that a group of local Asian American pastors were meeting periodically to talk about ministry and leadership and pray for one another—but I never received an invitation to those meetings.

A few years later, I hired a graduating student leader, a young Korean American man, to join my staff. He fairly quickly

received an invitation to attend the pastors' gathering. Holding back tears, I told him that I had never been invited to attend those meetings. Still, with a mix of frustration based on my experience and hope for what he might experience, I told him that I wanted him to go, learn, and speak into that group.

It took him a moment to realize what the significance of the invitation was for him and what the lack of an invitation meant for me. Ten years of ministry wasn't enough credibility to overcome the fact that I am a woman.

Moses struggled with credibility as well. It's almost comical to read God's assurances in Exodus 4 when you realize that Moses is just as insecure as the rest of us. God goes to great lengths to build up Moses: he gives superpowers to Moses' staff, he shows Moses a cool cloak trick involving leprosy, and teaches Moses how to turn water from the Nile into blood. Yet Moses says, "Pardon your servant, Lord. I have never been eloquent, neither in the past nor since you have spoken to your servant. I am slow of speech and tongue" (Exodus 4:10). And if that wasn't enough, Moses then says, "Pardon your servant, Lord. Please send someone else" (Exodus 4:13). This is when I want to laugh at Moses. Who does he think he is?

Oh, wait. Kathy, meet Moses.

Before taking the ministry staff job, I was struggling with what I still struggle with—managing work and family. I was a mom to one preschooler and two grade school children. My internal script screamed, *Who do you think you are trying to lead and grow ministry and develop a staff team while raising three children and being a good wife? I have kids who get sick and want me at their Valentine's Day parties. Please send someone else.*

I suppose if I had kept that thought to myself, it might have been a little different, but instead of talking to God or a burning bush or my backyard fire pit, I shared this internal script with my staff team. I tried to paint a picture of how and where I thought ministry could grow on campus while also externally processing my personal insecurities. I would remind the team, “I am just part-time, so I can’t fulfill all of my job responsibilities; also, I have to leave to pick up my sick kid, so I’ve asked my predecessor to lead the rest of the meeting.” Yes, I actually said those things out loud, which doesn’t set up expectations well for anyone. My years managing the team weren’t my best as a leader, but I learned a lot about imposter syndrome. It can kick your ego and paralyze you.

God knows that Moses has impostor syndrome but essentially gives him no room to back out. God enlists the help of Moses’ brother Aaron as a wingman, reminds Moses that his shepherd’s staff has superpowers, and pushes Moses out of the wilderness. The rest of Exodus reminds us that just like Moses, whether or not we carry a shepherd’s staff, we don’t know the power of using our voices until we try it.

## **CALLED OUT BY GOD**

As I sat there in the conference leadership meeting that last night, my mouth was covered but I knew the questions had to be asked. I felt the heat of shame in my cheeks and could feel my heart pounding in my head. I moved my friend’s hand off of my mouth, took a deep breath, and continued to speak.

We are silenced by someone else or sometimes by ourselves. Women of color who speak up tend to face swift backlash

with labels of being an angry (fill in race or ethnicity) woman. Words are powerful and can be used to free people from captivity or to sentence people into captivity. God created humans to communicate with one another, not so that we would use words and actions to hurt and destroy one another but to be a blessing to one another. God used words to assure Moses of his identity as one beloved and known by the Creator, and then asks Moses to go out and speak up on behalf of the Israelites.

Likewise, we are seen by God and called out of our imposter syndrome wilderness to proclaim freedom and good news to the world. God asks you to raise your voice.



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