

1925-1942: Our Jethros and Solomons
1 Kings 3:16-28
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“O, Generations!” SSS

RE-INTRODUCTION of the Series

Today we resume our Summer Sermon Series “O, Generations.” Two weeks ago we began with the G.I. Generation born 1900-1924. Today we examine the Silent Generation, born 1925-1942. Because it was difficult to see the table I provided on May 8, you will find a copy in your bulletin to follow more easily along. This table is based on the book *Generations: A History of America’s Future: 1584-2069*. At the top you will see headings to help you sort out the 4 different generations which recur approximately every 80 years. The 4 types of generations that have recurred in American history for more than 425 years can be found in the 3rd column “Generation Type:” civic, adaptive (today’s Silents), idealist, and reactive. These 4 types can be clues to each generation’s attitudes and behavior. We know that not every person in a generation fits neatly into their own generation cohort. But in the main these descriptions aid us in understanding broader trends that heavily influence American life past, present and future.

As I explained 2 weeks ago, we set as our vision in our last spiritual strategic planning becoming increasingly a multi-generational congregation.

This series is designed to help us answer the obvious question we have neglected up to this point: Who are the Generations?

SCRIPTURE: 1 Kings 3:16-28

Imagine you have a first-born sibling who has a Midas touch for turning everything into gold. They get lots of attention because they think BIG! Not only this, but in a global crisis they return as conquering heroes. They get the red carpet treatment because of their courage and sacrifice. Only trouble is: you're too young to be invited to the party. You can only watch from the sidelines, wishing you were old enough to be a hero too. But your parents know it's a dangerous world and overprotect you. Because you're a conformist, you don't rebel. But you DO envy your older sibling to the point of imitating almost everything they do.

One day a younger sibling comes along. Like you, they're no hero but sure get a lot of attention. They're opinionated, loud, and "do their own thing." They're non-conformist, making up the rules as they go. Because they like to pontificate, whatever attention your older sibling doesn't get, they do, leaving you feeling overlooked. But now you have a second sibling to envy. Greet a member of "The Lonely Crowd," the 1950's man in the gray flannel suit, the heavily conformist Silent Generation!

The word “Silent” is a name G.I. historian William Manchester gave this group¹ Yet, I wonder if a more suitable image for the Silents wouldn’t be the Invisible Man or Woman! Fewer Silents were born than any other living generation. The Silents had the frustration of being born during a Depression and a World War, conditions unfavorable to starting families. Previous adaptive generations, like the Silents: the Enlightenment, Compromiser, and Progressive Generations also had low birth rates, because of previous periods of recession and war when they were being born.

A prime symbol of Silents feeling caught between two more dominant siblings is the Korean War. Korea, the Silent’s war, is often called “The Forgotten War.” Noticeable at Washington, D.C.’s Korean War Memorial is how the sculpted soldiers seem to be marching nowhere. Everything about Silents suggests invisibility and lack of clear direction! The Silent Generation are entering advanced elder-hood never having elected a president to the White House. George H.W. Bush’s presidency concluded the G.I.’s 32-year hold on the presidency. The next was the first Boomer to occupy the Oval Office: Bill Clinton. But perhaps most telling of all is that when Silents are surveyed, “a majority of members wish they were of some other age or generation. Inwardly they lament that they were born 10 years too soon or 5 years too late.”² Admiral William Crowe called his Silent

peers a “transitional generation,” Rose Franzblua a “Middle Generation,” the one she says is “forever betwixt and between.” “Silents widely realize they are the generational stuffings of a sandwich between the get-it-done G.I.s & the self-absorbed Boom. The Silent occupy the gap in the generation gap.”³

As I think about the Silent’s story I thought about the little known person of Jethro in the Moses’ Exodus narrative. Many here may have never heard of him. The scene: Moses finds himself swamped by all the Hebrews bringing their troubles to him while wandering in the wilderness. Moses is about to collapse from exhaustion, when his father-in-law Jethro steps forward and tells Moses that, for his own good, he needs to appoint others from Israel’s 12 tribes to carry his burden. Jethro barely makes an appearance, but his sage advice, which Moses follows, relieves Moses from being completely overwhelmed!

The Silent Generation has been our society’s Jethros: little noticed, but often helpful in some faceless-administrative capacity. Silents have excelled as bureaucrats, technocrats, political advisors, and administrators. Consider, for instance, that nearly every Chief of Staff or top Presidential aide in the past 50 years has been a Silent: Pierre Salinger, Bill Moyers, John Ehrlichman, Stuart Eizenstat, Dick Chaney, and James Baker.⁴ These

are the folks who gave us due process in law & kept the trains running on time.

Silents and previous Silent-like generations, like the Compromisers of the early 1800's gave us all kinds of middle-of-the-road solutions, like the Missouri Compromise of 1820. They have always been a very caring but little noticed group. They are America's stagehands rather than star actors. They are the mediators, the parliamentarians, the labor-management negotiators, the back room conflict managers, the psychiatrists. The work they do is often behind the scenes. They are people who put in many hours of work in the church without expecting attention. This is why, along with being the Jethros of the world, they are the apostle Paul's "ambassadors of reconciliation." No one knows their name, but they get the job done. They make excellent members of Pastoral Relations Committees and negotiating boards. An outstanding Silent was former long-time President of our denomination's Council on Christian Unity, Paul Crow.

Not to say Silents are never famous. Long after the 20th century is a distant memory, a Silent will be remembered as one of the most outstanding Americans who ever lived: Martin Luther King, Jr. In fact, "The Silent Generation has produced virtually every major figure in the modern civil rights movement—from King to Omaha-born Malcolm X, from Cesar

Chavez's farm workers' union to Russell Mean's American Indian Movement."⁵ Name a social or cultural movement which has advanced in any era of American history—from civil rights (the Abolitionists) to women's rights (Gloria Steinem) and you'll find a Silent-like generation member. We Boomers often get the credit for these advances, but Silents nearly always got the ball rolling! The irony is that adaptive generations like the Silents are always born during a period of low immigration, unlike their counterparts, the GenX'ers, born at a time of high immigration, like the late 1800's and the past few decades.

This is why if a member of the Silents were to answer: God is _____, Silents would likely answer God is "love;" with "justice" coming in a close second. This is why, if the G.I.'s are "The Greatest Generation," the Silents should probably be called "The Nicest Generation," if not "The Wisest Generation." Silents have for the most part been the Solomons among Americans. "They practice inclusivity and genuinely appreciate the strengths of multiculturalism. Adaptive-like Silents, strive for consensus to weld the diversity articulated at the leadership table into a greater than the sum of its parts. They believe a good process will promote consensus."⁶

Twice in my ministry I had the opportunity to work with David Downing, former Regional Minister of the Christian Church in Kansas City.

Dave was a quintessential member of the Silent Generation. I never heard anyone use the words “consensus” and “share” more often. Little wonder he served a term as President of our Disciples Peace Fellowship.

Though it would be a mistake to get the impression Silents are all business. This generation gave us some of America’s best comedians: Woody Allen, Alan Alda, and Norfolk, Nebraska’s own Johnny Carson.

Along with this, Silents also have contributed some of America’s most famous musicians, like Bob Dylan and Elvis Presley, who began his life as a very obedient, southern church-going young man, who drew upon Spirituals and Rhythm & Blues as major influences in creating Rock ‘n Roll. Strauss and Howe refer to Silents among the recurring “Artist” generations.

Like actor James Dean, Silents play the part of “Rebels without a Cause.” Because adaptive-like Silent generations tend to be intellectual—the only president ever with a Ph.D. was Silent-like Progressive Wilson—their M.O. is mediating conflict rather than creating it. Wilson tried to get the League of Nations off the ground. Silents prefer to talk an issue to death than to solve it.

Yet, despite their positive contributions, Silents have also contributed to their share of America’s problems. To their dismay, Silents began the trend toward the rise of the divorce rate in this country. Because they were

so overprotected by their parents as children, they were late to “test the waters” of their own libido. Early in life they were a compliant generation. “A 1943 survey of Texas teachers listed the 2 major high school discipline problems as excessive gum chewing and cutting in line.”⁷ Their generation married younger and gave birth younger than any generation in American history. Many Silent couples were influenced by a book titled *Ourselves and Our Children*, whose word order is telling regarding personal and family priorities. The book gave the impression that parents had nothing to fear if they left their children—many of whom are GenX’ers—to fend for themselves! Thus began the kind of narcissism which marked the last third of the 20th century. From 1965-1975 the divorce rate quadrupled in America and left a lot of “Home Alone” latchkey children. It was Silent-dominated courts and state legislatures who gave us “No Fault Divorce,” which GenX’ers sneer at. And yet, it was also Silents who have refined laws that made America far more humane and kept people from being run over than might have otherwise been the case. Silents have truly been “*ambassadors of reconciliation.*”

They have often shown the best Wisdom of Solomon, who, born of sexual license, also lived it. Consider the 2 mothers who fought over their maternal right to a child. What did Solomon do? He commanded the child

be cut in half because he knew the true mother would give her child away rather than watch it killed. So are today's Silent Generation our Solomons. They believe and act on the belief that God is love, because they know there is no other way to keep a world from doing itself in all for the sake of moral rectitude or pride. Praise God for the Silent Generation. More than any other generation they have mediated God's grace when everyone else was ready to shoot first and ask questions later! The words of a Silent Bobby Kennedy expresses the best of what the Silents stand for, when he said after his brother had been killed:

Aeschylus once wrote, "Even in our sleep, pain which cannot forget falls drop by drop upon the heart, until, in our own despair, against our will, comes wisdom through the grace of God." What we need in the United States is not division; what we need in the United States is not hatred; what we need in the United States is not violence and lawlessness, but is love and wisdom, and compassion toward one another, and a feeling of justice toward those who still suffer within our country. Let us dedicate ourselves to what the Greeks wrote so many years ago: to tame the savageness of man and make gentle the life of the world.⁸

¹Carl G. Eeman, "Accentuate the Flexible," *Generations of Faith*, Washington: Alban Institute, 2002, p. 30.

²*Ibid.* p. 43.

³Quotes from William Strauss and Neil Howe's, "The Silent Generation," *Generations: A History of America's Future: 1584-2069*, NY: Quill, 1991, p. 281

⁴Ron Allen and Joey Jeter, "Preaching and Different Generations," *One Gospel, Many Ears*, StL: Chalice Press, 2002, p. 29

⁵Strauss & Howe, *Ibid.*, p. 285.

⁶Eeman, *Op.cit.*, pp. 35-36.

⁷*Ibid.* p. 29.

⁸Tom Brokaw, *Boom!*, NY: Random House, 2008, pp. 51-52.

<i>Generation Name</i>	<i>Birth Years</i>	<i>Generation Type</i>	<i>Character</i>	<i>Biblical Character</i>	<i>Sample Figure</i>	<i>Ex. of Prior Gen.</i>
WWII G.I./Builders	1900-1924	Civic	Hero	David & Esther	John F. Kennedy	<i>Republican</i> Jefferson
Silent	1925-1942	Adaptive	Artist	Jethro and Solomon	Martin L. King, Jr.	<i>Compromiser</i> Henry Clay
Boomer	1943-1960	Idealist	Prophet	Moses	Bill Gates	<i>Transcendental</i> Lincoln
GenX/13er	1961-1981	Reactive	Nomad	Gideon	Tom Cruise	<i>Lost</i> H.S. Truman
Millennial	1982-2001	Civic	Hero	Joshua	Mark Zuckerberg	<i>Glorious</i>
Post-9/11	2001-?	Adaptive	Artist	Reconciler in 2 Cor. 5:17	??	<i>Progressive</i> Teddy Roosevelt