***TO HEAR OR NOT TO HEAR, THAT IS THE QUESTION***

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July 4, 2021

Texts: Ezekiel 2:1-5 and Mark 6:1-6a

When I was a junior in high school, our English teacher, Mrs. Martin, had us memorize Hamlet’s soliloquy. One by one each of us had to stand and recite it in front of the class: “*To be or not to be that is the question...*” One of my classmates, Leo, had not memorized it but had managed to write most of it onto the palm of his hand so that when his turn came, he was able to stumble his way through it all, with frequent glances into his palm. Mrs. Martin said nothing, but the next day when she called on those to recite, the list included Leo. “But I did that yesterday,” he protested. “I don’t have any grade for you in my book,” said Mrs. Martin. “You know I already did it!” he exclaimed. “I have no record of it,” said Mrs. Martin, “so either you recite it or you get a zero.” So Leo went up and fumbled his way through without the aid of his palmed crib sheet. The next day Mrs. Martin again called on Leo to recite, indicating she still had no grade for him in her book. For a whole week, Leo had to recite that soliloquy each day. Mrs. Martin never mentioned that she knew he had cheated, but by the end of the week, Leo knew most of Hamlet’s lines by heart: “*To be or not to be, that is the question…*”

Those words of Hamlet came to mind when I read this passage from Ezekiel, for the cadence of Shakespeare’s writing seems to form a fair description of the challenge faced by Ezekiel as prophet to the people of Israel: “*To hear or not to hear, that is the question*.” As God sent Ezekiel to the exiled Israelites, “*a nation of rebels who have rebelled against me*,” says God, there seems to be significant doubt that the people will listen to anything Ezekiel has to say, even though it is a word from the Lord. The Lord sends Ezekiel anyway, sends him to people who God refers to as *impudent and stubborn*, saying: “*Whether they hear or refuse to hear (for they are a rebellious house), they shall know that there has been a prophet among them*.” God had seen their stiff-necked, hard-headed, stubborn, rebellious ways and concluded that enough was enough. Something had to change! In sending Ezekiel, the question was not whether they would be told – for they would know that there had been a prophet among them when Ezekiel was done saying what the Lord had sent him to say. The question was whether the people would hear it and whether it would bring about any change in their rebellious ways. It seemed unlikely. Sending Ezekiel to proclaim God’s word to people who didn’t want to hear it seemed to be an exercise in futility; God sent him anyway. So Ezekiel went.

Ezekiel’s experience is reminiscent of Jonah’s journey to Nineveh to proclaim the imminent demise of that great city. Jonah did not want to go; he thought it not only an exercise in futility, but perhaps a suicide mission. The Ninevites were a wicked mess, and Jonah’s message to them, “*Forty days and you all gonna die!*” did not seem likely to endear him to them. Yet, to Jonah’s surprise – and apparently to God’s as well – the Ninevites believed that word from the Lord that Jonah proclaimed, and they all repented, including their king, in the desperate hope that the Lord might have a change of heart and spare them. Much to Jonah’s disappointment, the Lord did just that – spared the people and did not send upon them the calamity God had planned. What seemed like a futile effort proved to be a resounding success, at least in God’s eyes!

To hear or not to hear, that is the question that falls to all those to whom God speaks, whether God speaks in the voice of a prophet or a preacher or in the pages of Scripture. God does not speak only to those who are anxious to hear a word from the Lord; God doesn’t just preach to the choir so to speak (even the choir isn’t always listening), for often those for whom the message is intended are not those who want to hear it. God speaks to those whom God chooses with a message chosen particularly for them, as God did to the Ninevites, the Israelites, and from time to time, us. The question is not really whether God will speak; that is up to God. The question is whether we will listen!

There are a host of potential obstacles to listening. One of our elders, whose name might be Troy Rexrode, claims his wife says he is “hard of listening”, and I daresay that is true for most of us from time to time. Sometimes we are distracted, too busy with other things to pay attention. Those distractions rarely are all the heavenly things God wants us to consider, and are more likely selfish concerns that are no earthly good. At other times we fail to hear because we don’t recognize the messenger; we don’t expect to hear a word from the Lord from the source from which it comes – be it a stranger, a child, or a preacher. And sometimes the problem is that the messenger is too familiar; we fail to hear the message because we know too well the messenger.

The first time I preached in my home church in Slippery Rock a woman who I have known my whole life stopped at the door of the church to tell me:

*It was wonderful to see you and your dad up there together this morning. It didn’t matter what you said, it was just wonderful to see you up there.*

Now I think she was trying to be kind, but maybe not. At any rate, whatever word from the Lord I bore that day (maybe *bore* is not the right word but then again maybe it is), that message fell on deaf ears, because to her I was just Johnny son of John, a son of the church returning home, and that familiarity was a distraction that obscured anything God had to say to her through me that day.

I was no prophet, just the son of a preacher man, but imagine something like that happening to Jesus in his hometown synagogue, for that is what Mark describes in the passage we read this morning. Jesus comes home and on the sabbath begins to teach in the synagogue; unlike my sermon, his words amaze the hometown crowd. They are astounded at what he has to say and the wisdom with which he says it. His miracles exceed their wildest imaginations! But instead of considering the possibility that he is who some think he might be – a prophet or even the messiah – the people dismiss him by saying, “Isn’t this the kid from down the street, the son of Mary? Isn’t he the one with the brothers and sisters we have known our whole lives?” Instead of embracing what he has to say with wonder and hearing in his words a word from the Lord, they take offense that he should speak to them in such terms. They are skeptical of his message, because they know the messenger too well, or at least they think they do!

When I was in seminary Paul Achtemeier was one of my New Testament professors. He was a world-renowned authority on the letters of Paul, and had written several books and commentaries on Paul and his epistles. One day as he was lecturing about Paul’s letter to the Romans one of my classmates raised his hand and asked, “*Where did you get this stuff?*” “*Excuse me*,” Dr. Achtemeier asked, somewhat confused. “*I mean, who wrote this stuff you’re telling us about and where did they get it?*” asked the student. “*How do we know it is true?*” “*I wrote this stuff*,” replied Dr. Achtemeier, with a bemused smile. “*I am a New Testament scholar. That is what I do.*” “*You mean these are your ideas?*” said the surprised and somewhat skeptical student who somehow missed the part about professors actually researching and writing and knowing what they are talking about!

Perhaps the hometown folks had the same reaction to Jesus. We don’t really know. We know only that they were quick to dismiss what he said, because ***he*** was saying it. They refused to hear what had amazed them, refused to embrace the good news he brought to them, refused to learn from him and receive the word from the Lord that he brought directly to them, because it was just Jesus, son of Mary, saying it. “*Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house*,” Jesus said, making one wonder whether his siblings gave him a hard time at home or his mother had him take out the trash while he was there to visit.

But sometimes it is not the messenger that is an obstacle; it is the message itself. The Ninevites did not want to hear that they were all going to die; nor did the Israelites want to hear about their stubborn unfaithfulness to the Lord. But when that message was proclaimed, they had a choice: To hear or not to hear. The Ninevites chose to hear. The response of the Israelites was more mixed, some taking to heart what Ezekiel had to say, while others dismissed him as yet another pain-in-the-butt with an axe to grind, someone who made them uncomfortable with their status quo. The scribes and Pharisees reacted that way to Jesus; they didn’t like being told they had betrayed the Lord’s trust and been unfaithful. So angry were they, so fearful of losing their power, that they had Jesus put to death and refused to hear the word from the Lord he proclaimed to them.

What about you? Do you hear only what you want to hear from the pages of Scripture or from this pulpit or from any of those other voices through whom God may be speaking to you? Do you dismiss those indictments that make you uncomfortable, skip those commandments you don’t like, and seek out those voices that will tell you only what you want to hear? It is said that in our nation today many of us live in echo chambers that only reinforce what we want to hear; we don’t want to listen to those who challenge what we think. We believe only the facts we want to believe even when they prove untrue. On this Independence Day some want to celebrate the nation without acknowledging the systemic racism that has stained our history and our complicity in it, while others focus on the sins of the nation without acknowledging the blessings we receive and the progress we have made. We hear only what we want to hear, and no more.

Thus says the Lord: “Whether they hear or refuse to hear, for they are a rebellious house and a stubborn people, they shall know there is a prophet among them.” Listen for the voice of the prophet who may be speaking to you at an unexpected time in an unexpected place in an unexpected voice with an uncomfortable message that is a word from the Lord. It could happen in church, or in the voice of a child or stranger, or in reading a passage of Scripture that catches you by surprise. Some prophets are well known – like Martin Luther King, Jr. or Mother Teresa – but most are lesser known; none are self-appointed! They rarely tell us what we want to hear, but instead challenge us to hear what the Lord has to say. Listen then, for the Lord has not given up on us, but longs for us to listen, to hear God’s voice and believe, and then to change for the better! To hear or not to hear, that is the question – the question for you – says the Lord! Amen