SPIRITUAL PRACTICES: LISTENING

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Texts: 1 Samuel 3:1-11 and Mark 1:35-39

When is the last time that you took a walk in the early morning or sat in your backyard in the early evening and just listened to the songs of birds? When is the last time that you picked up a seashell and put it to your ear and heard the distant roar of the sea? When is the last time that you sat with an infant in your arms and just watched and listened to the contented miracle of life-giving breaths? When is the last time that you stopped everything else that you were doing and just listened to the world around you or to the sounds of silence or to your own breathing or to a whispered word from God? Listening is an art. How artistic are you?

Amid the hustle and bustle and hectic pace of our lives it is sometimes hard to carve out space to just be still, to step off the hamster wheel of life and just listen in the stillness. There was a young mother in the church in Slippery Rock, PA where I grew up who had two young, very active boys. She had an agreement with them that for twenty minutes each morning she would have time to herself at the kitchen table with a cup of coffee while they played on their own. One morning as she was enjoying this quiet time alone, she noticed that the boys kept peeking into the kitchen. Finally, she asked them, “Boys, what is it?” “We just want to see if the goldfish is okay,” replied the boys. “What goldfish?” she asked. “The one we put in the coffee pot to warm up,” they answered. Linda rushed over to the coffee pot and there, floating in her morning coffee, was a very dead goldfish. So much for her quiet time that day!

Do you make any such quiet time for yourself in the course of the day or week or month? Do you take any time to be still and listen or reflect or let God speak to you? As we heard in the reading from Mark’s Gospel this morning, such time was precious to Jesus, perhaps essential to Jesus in his ministry. After a long day in which he preached, cast out a demon, healed Simon’s mother-in-law (no indication that Simon asked him to do that!), and spent time late into the night casting out more demons and healing a host of folks who had come to the house where he was staying, after all of that, Jesus rose early the next morning, while it was still dark, and went out to a wilderness place to pray. At a time when many of us might have been too exhausted to lift our heads off the pillow, Jesus found it more essential to escape to a solitary place to pray than to sleep a little longer. We have no idea what he said to God in that wilderness place or what God said to him, but we do know that he was still there, alone, when his time apart was interrupted by disciples hunting him down to drag him back to the new day’s version of the needy crowd he had left the night before.

Life has a way of tugging at us, of intervening with a whirlwind in the midst of any calm we are enjoying. And how easy it is to be swept away by it all, to find it impossible to carve out space for silence or for quiet or for God. But then again, perhaps we are just making excuses to God instead of making time for God. Martin Luther once said that he had such a busy day ahead of him that he had to get up an hour early to pray in order to get through it. Far from seeing prayer as one more thing to be done on a laundry list of things to do, he saw that quiet time for prayer as essential to getting through the day – not only to pray for strength, but also to listen for what God might have in mind for him that day.

That seems to be how Jesus regarded his time in that wilderness space. He went there to pray before beginning another day in which he knew he would be the man in demand. And when the disciples came to get him, he discerned that it was not back to the adoring crowd from the night before that he was called to go. He chose instead to move on to another town and then another and then another in order to fulfill his mission – proclaiming the good news of God’s kingdom, casting out demons, and offering healing to God’s children in new places. Was it perhaps in that wilderness place, apart from the crowds and disciples, that Jesus heard the voice of God telling him to keep moving, to keep preaching, to keep healing more of God’s children? We do not know for sure; all we know is that Jesus made time in the dark of the morning to get away and pray alone – as he often did, as he did in Gethsemane on the night before his crucifixion – he prayed and then did what God told him to do. If it was that important to Jesus, might it be worthwhile for us to follow his example and do as he did - take time, in the words of the psalmist, “to be still and know that God is God”?

For it seems more often than not that God speaks to people when they are alone in a quiet space, sometimes in the dark of night. That is when God spoke to Joseph. It was when Samuel was alone on his bed that God spoke. It was when he was alone that God spoke to Moses from the burning bush and in solitude that God spoke to Mary and to Zechariah. When does God speak to you? If you do not remember God ever speaking to you, might it be because you were not listening? In King Henry IV, Part II, William Shakespeare speaks of “*the disease of not listening*”. Do you suffer from that dreaded disease – not listening to others or to God? Are you a good listener, or are you hard of listening?

Our culture is a cacophony of sound – beeps and blips from our ovens and dishwashers, ringtones from our phones, music flowing from ear buds, voices interrupting one another on Zoom calls, televisions droning on, horns honking, sirens blaring, children fighting (not your children of course but other people’s children), dogs barking, and to-do lists running through your mind and ears. A problem that hospitals have had to address is something called alarm fatigue. With the multitude of alarms that sound from modern medical equipment – from IVs and monitors and patient bells and phones and beepers – doctors, nurses, and caregivers risk becoming numb to all the alarm sounds and as a result, tune them ALL out. Strategies have been developed to distinguish the truly urgent or critical alarm from the more mundane hospital noises. Amid the din of distractions, we have to choose what to tune out and what to tune into across our lives.

In making that choice what do you tune out? Is it perhaps the voice of God or at least the teachings of Jesus that tell you something you don’t want to hear? Some of us have selective hearing when it comes to the Word of the Lord; we listen for what will confirm our own perspectives and tune out what conflicts with what we otherwise believe or want to be true. We like the beatitudes without any woes; we interpret the Ten Commandments as the Ten Suggestions; we are willing to love our neighbors but not so sure about our enemies; and as we noted last week, we pray devoutly “forgive us our sins” while mumbling past “as we forgive those who sin against us.” There are a host of voices offering alternatives to the Word of the Lord and encouraging us to listen to them instead of listening to God. But if we are to call ourselves disciples of Jesus, then we really ought to listen to what he has to say and follow it – whether we agree with it or not!

At this point, it is probably worth noting, lest any of you think that you have a ready-made excuse, that listening to God has very little to do with being hard of hearing, for while it may be a human voice through which God speaks, often the voice of God speaks in a voice that requires no ears for you to hear. It requires just a faithful heart, a willing spirit, and a mind attuned to the possibility that it might be God speaking to you. In that story of Samuel’s call that we heard this morning, Samuel had no idea who was calling his name. It was a reasonable assumption for him to assume that it was Eli. But Eli, without ever hearing the voice that was speaking to Samuel, discerned that it might be the Lord calling young Samuel’s name, and so he encouraged Samuel to be open to that possibility and to respond, “Speak Lord, for your servant is listening!”

We who are the servants of God are called to be open to that possibility too, each day, every day, for our God is not some distant God who has little to do with us, but a God who is actively involved in and through our lives, a God who longs for us to respond as Samuel did, “*Speak Lord, for your servant is listening*!” Listen then, not just with your ears, but with your heart and your mind and your spirit, listen with all that you are! Amid the busyness of your life, make time apart from the din of distractions and demands upon you to listen for God’s voice speaking to you. For who knows, in the silence you just might hear God calling your name: “*Chris, Anne, Katy, Michael, Tucker, Julie….*” Amen