***ARE YOU LISTENING?***

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Texts: Isaiah 51:1-8 and Acts 4:1-12

*Listen to me, you that pursue righteousness, you that seek the Lord…*

*Listen to me, my people…*

*Listen to me, you who know righteousness,*

*you people who have my teaching in your hearts….*

Three times in this brief passage from Isaiah, the Lord tries to get the attention of the people whom God has claimed as God’s own, the descendants of Abraham and Sarah who have been living in exile. Now, you might think that the people would be anxious for a word from the Lord, given their circumstances in exile, but it seems like the Lord doubts the people are listening, or at least believes they need a not-so-subtle reminder to pay attention to what God has to say. Perhaps the Lord is concerned that the people have tuned out, regarding God as no better than that preacher described by Garrison Keillor:

*Listening to him preach is like waiting at the crossing for a freight train to pass, and after a hundred boxcars have gone by, the train stops, and sits, and begins backing up.[[1]](#endnote-1)*

Or perhaps the people feel that listening for a word from the Lord is like standing at the crossing and waiting and waiting with no train in sight, so that eventually they wander away and stop waiting at all. Are you listening, or have you given up, or are you tuning out God amid the din of voices competing for your attention?

The story is told about a man seeking to be the pastor of a new church. He preached a fine sermon, and the people were so impressed that they voted to call him as their pastor. They were a bit surprised then when he preached the same sermon on his first Sunday there, and even more surprised when he preached it again the next week. After he preached the same sermon the third week in a row, the elders met with him to find out what was going on. The pastor assured them, “*When you start living out this sermon, then I’ll go on to my next*.”[[2]](#endnote-2)

I wonder if God has that same frustration with us. How many times must God say, “*Love me with all that you are and love your neighbor as yourself*.”? How many ways must God say, “*Trust me!*”? How many times must God say, “*Stop worshiping idols*!”? How many ways must God say, “*I am with you. I love you. I will deliver you. I will save you.*” before we believe that what God says is true and begin to live accordingly? God has something to say to us. It is said through the voices of prophets and the voice of Jesus, in the letters of Paul and the pages of Scripture, through the voices of preachers and saints across the ages, and in the voices of your neighbors and children and even total strangers. But if we are not listening, how can we expect to hear what God has to say, let alone understand and believe it! As one of our elders remarked, “*My wife says I am hard of listening!*” I think God may say the same thing of us! We are hard of listening!

At the Transfiguration when Jesus’ identity is divinely revealed on the mountain to the handful of disciples who see him with Moses and Elijah, a divine voice from the cloud above declares, “*This is my beloved Son with whom I am well pleased,”* and then God adds*, “Listen to him!*” All who are called disciples of Jesus are to listen to him, to believe in him, and to follow him, to do as he asks us to do. But if you do not listen, how will you know what to do? Are you listening, not to me in this pulpit, but to God wherever God finds you? Too often our prayers are one-way conversations with God in which we lay out what we want God to do for us. Do you take any time in your prayers to LISTEN to what God might say TO you rather than just LISTING what God should do FOR you? Listen to me, says the Lord. Listen!

In that passage from Acts we read this morning, Peter and John get into hot water with the Sadducees and religious authorities, because the people to whom they were speaking were listening and dared to believe that what they said about Jesus’ resurrection was true. Five thousand came to believe in the risen Jesus, because they were listening and found their hearts moved, says Luke. I suspect that if those five thousand had been like many of us, the Sadducees and religious authorities would have had no reason to arrest Peter and John. Two more noisy voices in the street would just add to the din being ignored, not pose a threat, but the people listened and believed. Has your heart ever been so moved – moved to believe and to change your life and to follow a more faithful path? If not, is it because you are not really listening – present in body but absent in mind, allowing God’s word to run off you like water off the back of a duck?

“*Listen to me!*” says the Lord. Do not listen to those who tell you I am dead and gone. Do not listen to those who promote themselves as the answer to all your problems, those self-appointed saviors who are no saviors at all! Do not listen to those false prophets whose words contradict my Word! Do not listen to the preachers of a prosperity gospel who claim I want nothing more than for you to be rich in things even if you are poor in soul! Do not listen to the warmongers and the racists and the xenophobes and the so-called Christian Nationalists who would divide you and set you against one another in my name! Do not listen to those who urge violence instead of peace,

hate instead of love,

revenge instead of forgiveness,

fear instead of hope,

greed instead of giving,

judgment instead of justice,

self-righteousness instead of self-sacrifice.

Do not listen to them. “*Listen to me*,” says the Lord, “*for I am the Lord your God – the God of Abraham and Sarah, the God of your ancestors, the One who created you in my holy image! Listen to me!*”

The Lord lifts up Abraham and Sarah as examples for the exiled people to follow, for their story is a story of faith lived out in response to God’s Word as they heard it. They picked up their tent pegs and went where God sent them, not knowing where that would be, because they trusted God with their lives and futures. They were blessed with a son whose descendants were the very people to whom God was speaking. Their story is a story of their faith and faithfulness, but also of God’s faithfulness and blessing. Look to Abraham and Sarah, says the Lord. They listened. They believed. They were faithful. And they were blessed.

The message that God wants us to hear – really hear – is one of faith and faithfulness, blessing and salvation, hope and joy. For the people living in exile in Isaiah’s day that message is described poetically as a desert wilderness remade into a verdant garden, a reshaping of the world into a new creation in which all nations, not just Israel, would participate and thrive. In the preaching of Peter and John in Jerusalem, God’s good news is described as salvation for all people through the resurrection of Jesus. “*There is salvation in no one else*,” declares Peter, “*for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we can be saved*.” That message was not intended as a club with which Christians can hammer non-believers! Rather it is intended to be good news for the world – that Jesus came to save all people – not just the saints, not just the Jews, not just the descendants of Abraham and Sarah, but all people in all places – including us in this place and time! Listening to that Good News – really listening and believing – we should be more hopeful, joyful, loving people, trusting God and following Jesus Christ. Are you – hopeful, joyful, faithful – or is the bad news of today’s news drowning out that Word from the Lord? There is no doubt that life is not the way it should be or the way God wants it to be. What then are you doing about it?

Last week Ralph Yarl, a 16-year-old Black high school junior in Kansas City, rang the doorbell of a house on Northeast 115th Street ty to pick up his younger brothers who had been playing with friends. The 84-year-old White man who answered the door saw Ralph standing there and promptly shot him through the locked glass door – shot him not once, but twice – wounding him in the head and arm. Ralph made no threatening gestures, had no weapon, and said nothing; he simply rang the doorbell and waited for his brothers. As it turned out, he was at the wrong house; his brothers were at Northeast 115th Terrace, not Northeast 115th Street one block away – a common mistake due to the similarity of the street names. The shooter, Andrew Lester, said he feared for his life, though it is hard to imagine what he found threatening about the slightly build teenager. As the district attorney said in charging Mr. Lester: “*There was a racial component to this shooting*.” Are you listening?

Last week Chris Earhart shared with me some documents from the early days of Covenant – a bulletin from the first worship service, financial statements from the early ‘60s, minutes from a Deacons’ meeting, and a letter to Bob Wetzel as Clerk of Session from R.L. Stover, chair of the Board of Deacons. The letter was dated July 29, 1963 – a time when there were significant racial tensions in the country and schools were still segregated in this community. The letter addressed what should be done if Black folks were to come to worship here at Covenant on a Sunday. This was the proposed response: “*It was decided that they would be greeted, admitted, and ushered to their seat, preferably toward the front pews*.” Thus began a tradition of inclusivity and welcoming that has continued to this day. Are you listening?

A few years ago, one of our folks delivered a prayer shawl to a member who was in the hospital. They were at opposite ends of the spectrum politically and theologically. It was a moving experience for both of them, I am told, and I will always remember the comment of the one who delivered that shawl: “*How can I love someone so much with whom I disagree on practically everything!*” Are you listening?

*Listen to me, you that pursue righteousness*, says the Lord. *Listen to me, you who have my teaching in your hearts*. Listen to me and learn – learn to love and to live, for my deliverance will be forever and my salvation to all generations! Are you listening? Amen

1. Garrison Keillor, Wobegon Boy, p.226 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. *Our Daily Bread*, March 2007 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)