

The First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham

The Voice-Our Choice: Will We Listen?

Rev. Dr. John Judson

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Genesis 1:15, Mark 1:4-13

The flight attendant was very clear. We were all to stay in our seats until they had counted the thru-passengers, then we could move to any seats we wanted. Cindy and I were headed home on Christmas day, but the only way we could get there was to go through the other Birmingham on Southwest Airlines. During the stop the flight attendants made their plea...not once but several times while passengers were deplaning. As soon as the last local passenger was off, the announcement was made again, just as the three people in the row ahead of us got out of their seats and began to move about the cabin arguing about which seats were best. The announcement was made again, "Please stay in your seats until you are counted so that we can board the next group of passengers." The people in front of us continued to argue and moved row to row trying to find the perfect seats. As I watched them, a bit irritated I must add, the only thing I could think of was this was a perfect illustration of the difference between hearing and listening.

Hearing is what we guys do while we are watching sports. A female voice says something. The sound waves created by that voice carry through the air and reach our ears. The ears and all of their wonderful connections to the brain do their thing acknowledging that something has been transmitted yet it never registers. In a sense it might have just as well not been said at all. Listening on the other hand occurs when the same process is followed; speech, sound waves, reception, interpretation. Yet this time what is spoken not only receives a reply other than, "Huh?" but new possibilities and opportunities are created. What I mean by this is that listening is the act in which we become open to the speaker and their speech changing us; changing our attitudes, our actions, and if you will, our realities. One of the best examples I have of this is the president's State of the Union message. The people in the party of opposition hear, meaning it impacts them not at all. The people in the party of the president listen, meaning they are open to the new ideas being put forward.

Why does this John Judson differentiation between hearing and listening matter this morning? It matters because God asks us to listen and not just to hear. God asks us to listen because in listening to God new possibilities for our lives and for the world are made possible. We see this in both of our lessons this morning. In our opening lesson we have God speaking to creation and creation responding. I realize that this may appear to be a strange statement, that God speaks to creation and creation responds. But this is one of the great themes of the scriptures, that creation is more than a composition of electrons, protons and neutrons but that it is somehow alive. And so when God speaks, creation does the appropriate thing and listens and it is transformed. A new reality occurs and there is day and night. Let me be clear, I am not a Creationist, meaning that the universe is only 10,000 years old, but I believe that the Biblical writers are trying to show us that this reality in which live was not created by God wrestling with matter, but that it is what it is because things happen when God speaks and someone, or something listens. And by the way, creation, in the end, seems to be the only something that consistently listens to God.

Our second story concerns a bunch of people who listen. John the Baptist is the one who comes in from the wilderness, which is a place of listening. The Wilderness is the place to which one goes to listen carefully to God. Recall it is the place where Moses listened and received the Law. It is the place to which

Jesus will be sent to be tested, to see if he can listen. John then arrives on the scene and begins to preach a baptism of repentance for sin. Please note that Judaism already had ritual in place through which one could find forgiveness. Yet John arrived with a message from God to the people. As three out of the four Gospels tell us, people from all over listened and came to be baptized. They came because in this word of God arriving in the words of John they seemed to sense that there was the possibility of a new reality for themselves and for their nation. Finally we have Jesus listening. Jesus hears God calling him to baptism, blessing him as God's own Son, and then sending him out into the aforementioned wilderness. This listening was critical because it set up all of Jesus' ministry. It set the stage for the complete transformation of creation; a second beginning.

The choice that confronts us is twofold, first will we listen and then to whom will we listen. The first question is whether or not we will listen. I say this because most of what we do day by day is hearing and not listening. We tune in to our favorite newscasts, listen to our favorite radio personalities and read our favorite newspapers and magazines. And we do so because they reinforce the view of the world that we want to maintain. By reinforcing this viewpoint we are never opened up to new possibilities in the world. We are never opened up to the fact that our perceptions of the world might not be accurate; that our choices might not be the right ones. We hear what is being said, but unlike creation or those people going to see and be baptized by John, nothing changes. There is no new creation within us or without of us. So the question is will we truly listen? Will we be open to what is being said that might challenge us and our assumptions?

The second choice that confronts us is whether or not we will listen to God. Our world is filled with those who claim to be offering new realities for ourselves and for the world in which we live. We buy their books. We pay to hear them live. We will in fact, go anywhere and pay any price to hear the latest guru of change and success. Yet, for all of their insights they cannot offer us the life transforming, world changing Good News of God in Jesus Christ. My friends, the reality of life is that God continues speaking. God speaks through people. God speaks through scriptures. God speaks through experiences. God speaks in the midst of prayer, worship and service. This is what God does. God's love for us and for the world is so great and amazing that God cannot stay silent. God desires that each of us along with this world in which we live be made fresh and new. God desires it to be a place to love, grace, forgiveness and compassion. God desires that it be a place in which all persons are welcomed and accepted. This can only happen when we consciously choose to listen; to listen to the love of God poured forth in Jesus of Nazareth and to the new possibilities that Jesus offers.

One last note, and that is that this morning we ordain and install the leadership of this church community. These people have been called by God and chosen by you the members to lead us. What this calls them to do is to be our lead listeners. While all of us are called to listen, the elders and deacons of our church are called even more to do so. Elders are called to listen because they are tasked with discerning God's plans for this faith community. They are tasked with discerning where we ought to go, how we ought to get there and what path we are to take. The deacons are to do so because they are tasked with hearing the cries of the least and the lonely; the hungry and the homeless. And listening is at the heart of both of these offices.

My challenge then for all of us this week is to ask ourselves, how am I intentionally listening to God? How am I taking the time and space to hear what God is telling me through prayer, worship, scripture, meditation and the voices of others in order that God's new reality might be created in me and through me?