

The First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
Alive in the Story of Creation: The Power of Listening
Rev. Dr. John Judson
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Isaiah 6: 1-13
Matthew 9:9-13

I feel this morning a bit like Rod Serling, on the Twilight Zone. I offer this morning, two ways in which people have used scripture. The first is an interview of the senator who heads the Environment and Public Works Committee. The topic was global warming. *“Senator, we’re going to talk about your book for a minute, you state in your book which by the way is called The Greatest Hoax, you state in your book that one of your favorite Bible verses, Genesis 8:22, ‘while the earth remaineth seed time and harvest, and cold and heat, and summer and winter, and day and night shall not cease,’ what is the significance of these verses to this issue (of global warming)? Senator: Well actually the Genesis 8:22 that I use in there is that ‘as long as the earth remains there will be seed time and harvest, cold and heat, winter and summer, day and night,’ my point is, God’s still up there. The arrogance of people to think that we, human beings, would be able to change what He is doing in the climate is to me outrageous.”* In other words, there is nothing that we as human beings can do that would negatively impact the climate because the climate does only what God commands it to do.

The second was the way in which the people of Judah in the time of Isaiah understood the role of God in their nation. God was their protector. God was their defender. As long as the people carried out their sacrificial duties God would insure their success. It didn’t matter if they crushed the poor. It didn’t matter if they broke most of the commandments. It didn’t matter that the great Empires of Assyria and later Babylonia were surging toward them. They did not have to fear. They were God’s chosen people. And in their possession were the Temple and the Ark of the Covenant. God would never let them fall. God would never desert them. In other words, there was nothing they could do, or any empire could do that would negatively impact their lives because God would not let it happen. So the question for us this morning is how did the Senator and the nation of Judah come to these two rather remarkable conclusions? The answer is that they only listened to one voice in scripture.

What I mean by that is that scripture does not speak with a single voice. It is not like a novel in which the author offers us a consistent literary point of view. Scripture is history, and poetry, and theology, and parables, and prophetic utterance, and saga and well, I think you get the point. Scripture is contradictory and complimentary. Scripture offers us different views on holiness, and power and kingship and the role of the messiah. Scripture, is written across centuries and centuries, in different cultures, under different conditions. What this all means is that we can prove whatever we want to prove out of scripture...especially when we only listen to one voice; to one strand; to one tradition; to one point of view. The Senator believes in the strand of tradition that God will never abandon this creation. That God will save us from ourselves. Yet what he fails to do is to hear the writer of Revelation saying that God will destroy the destroyers of God’s earth; meaning there are consequences for the creation and for ourselves, of our actions. The people of Judah failed to hear Isaiah when said that their cities would lie waste without inhabitants, until the land is utterly desolate; which is was happened because the people refused to listen.

Listening to a single voice in scripture is like driving a car that only turn left at 90 degrees. You are driving along and see a pothole in the road. You make a slight adjustment causes you to swerve across oncoming traffic and end up in the ditch on the far side of the road. In other words, listening to a single voice is what gets us as human beings in trouble. Listening to a single voice is what led the church to persecute the Jews. Listening to a single voice is what led the church to demean women. Listening to a single voice is what led the church to ostracize members of the LGBTQ community. Listening to a single voice is what led to slavery. Listening to a single voice is what led us to the Crusades and the slaughter of tens of thousands. As I said a moment ago we can prove and defend anything we want by listening to only a single voice; a voice that agrees with all of our preconceived notions and prejudices. What we are called upon to do then is to listen to all of the voices; to listen to multiple voices that may or may not tell us what we want to hear, yet tell us what we need to hear. And if we are looking for an example, we need to look no further than Jesus.

In our morning's Jesus' story, we find Jesus out on the road again. He calls Matthew, a tax collector, to be a disciple. He then eats with sinners and tax collectors. In some ways this is one of those stories that we use so often that it loses its importance. Yet it is a place in which Jesus asks people to listen to a different story; a story that they may not have considered in a while. The primary story that guided many Jews in Jesus' time was what I call the holiness story. This story called on Jews to be ritually pure by carefully following the rules and regulations of the Second Temple period. A large part of these rules had to do with having no contact with those people and objects which were ritually unclean. This would have included sinners and tax collectors. This is why the people around Jesus wondered why he was eating with such people. In response Jesus offers a different story. He quotes the prophet Hosea, who says, "I desire mercy not sacrifice", meaning that what God desires is compassion for outsiders rather than judgment stemming from rules and regulations. Notice that Jesus does not condemn the holiness tradition, but instead adds something new to it, a call to love and compassion.

Hearing different stories. That is what we are to be about. The question then is how do we do this? There are many ways, but the one I would suggest this morning is to join one of our We Make the Road by Walking Groups. I say this for two reasons. First, the book itself offers us stories to which to listen that we might not otherwise read and consider. The book also offers us a particular perspective on scripture and its application to the world in which we live. The second reason I encourage becoming part of a group is that many of the groups, much like the two in which I participate, are filled with people of different ages, different political persuasions, different religious backgrounds and different ways of seeing life. What happens is that we listen to the stories. We listen to one another. We listen and we are enriched. We are enriched in our ability to consider what God is about in the world; what God wants of us in the world. We don't answer all of life's big mysteries. We don't come out in agreement. But neither of those is the point. The point is that we listen to stories that we might not otherwise hear, so that we can be open to the full story of God in Jesus Christ.

My challenge for you for this week then is this, to ask yourselves, how am I listening to stories that are different from the ones I already know, that I might be enriched as a follower of Jesus Christ?