

Second After Epiphany B, January 20, 2008
Galilee Church, Virginia Beach, VA
A sermon by the Rev. Dr. James B. Magness

Isaiah 49.1-7
Psalm 40.1-12
I Corinthians 1.1-9
John 1.29-42

"If God calls, will anyone be there to hear?"

Why are you sitting here in church this morning?

What possibly possessed you to climb out of your warm bed on a wet, cold and quiet Sunday morning and come to church ... again?!

Christmas is over, remember? The tree is down, the ornaments put away, and even the pine needles have pretty much worked themselves out of the carpet by now. Though I know some of you are here today because we have a baptism, there is no big liturgical holiday scheduled for this Sunday. And yet there you sit. I see you.

Why? What are you expecting? Could it be that you are expecting to hear something?

I don't need to see a show of hands, but how many of you mothers have ever said to your talkative children: "God gave you two ears and only one mouth. Let that be a sign to you that you will do well to listen twice as much as you talk?"

Over three centuries ago, the Danish theologian Soren Kierkegaard said that had he been a physician and could prescribe just one remedy for all the ills of the modern world, he would prescribe silence. For even if the Word of God were proclaimed, Kierkegaard said, it would not be heard or heeded, for there is too much noise and busyness in our world.¹ If Kierkegaard's world in Denmark during the 1700s was busy, what does that say about the pace of life and living in our world today?

The contemporary church in the Western world has been slow to get this message. Historically though we've always known that God speaks, and God's people are called to listen. Sacred sound has been as important as sacred time, sacred space and sacred images. This spirituality has been very pronounced in the western world:

In the Gregorian chant of the Roman Catholic Church,
In the "Jesus Prayers" chant of the Eastern Orthodox Church,

And in hymns of Protestantism through Martin Luther's insistence that God is a *deus loquens* – a "speaking God."

¹ Soren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death* (Penguin, New York: 1989) p. 53.

If God calls you, are you going to be listening?

Hear again the words from Isaiah in the Old Testament: "Listen to me, O coastlands, pay attention, you peoples from far away!"²

If the servants of God are going to know the wisdom of God, first the servants of God must listen. At times that means we must be set apart from the maddening and sometimes very noisy world where we normally live so that we can hear.

Next month the women of Galilee are going to set themselves apart in an overnight retreat. The following month there is a similar overnight retreat for the men of Galilee. The primary reason we set ourselves apart is so that we can stop talking and listen for God.

Even Jesus, the Son of God, had to set himself apart so that he could quiet his soul and listen to his Father. In the Gospel of Mark we are told that after a day of what was probably physically, spiritually, and emotionally exhausting work of healing sick and demon-possessed people, Jesus had to go away to reestablish the prayerful connection with his father: "Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed."³

Isaiah's call for people to listen is like the willingness of an earlier Isaiah who, after having stopped to listen to God, is recorded to have said in the sixth chapter of the book named for him: "Here I am, send me."⁴ This is the willingness of a person who is captivated by God's Word. Though persons who are captivated by God's Word may not necessarily always be the most capable, they are the most willing.

Are you always capable? – No. Are you willing? That is the question, isn't it?

It does not so much matter what you and I say. It may not be that the elimination of all of our character flaws matters. What matters is that we've listened when God calls us – and said "Yes." Then we took the first step toward the sound of the voice.

Recently I was talking with a good friend of mine, whose life was literally saved when God came into his life through involvement with AA and NA 12 step programs. He told me that he was going off to an AA meeting to celebrate the 16th birthday of his sobriety. Somewhat lightly I asked him how he was doing with his character flaws. He said, "I'm almost there." "ALL-MOST there?" I asked. He then told me, "It's like this, Jay. Most days now I can tell the difference between my character-flaws and my character-strengths. I have done this by learning to listen to God. Sixteen years ago I didn't have a clue as to the difference. Most of what I thought was a character-strength was actually a character-flaw. That was what got my life into the fix I was in." My good friend first had to hear God.

² Isaiah 49.1, *The Holy Bible, New Revised Standard Version.*

³ Mark 1.35, *NRSV.*

⁴ Isaiah 6.8b, *NRSV.*

In contemporary society sounds are important. There are even some sounds that have been trademarked. Among them are these: 1-the NBC chimes, 2-the MGM lion, and 3-the Harley-Davidson motorcycle engine sound of its "Hog." The idea is that when you hear these sounds, you don't have to stop, think and wonder what it represents. You know.

The sounds of God reveal the most intimate details about God. We have only to open the scriptures to Genesis 1 to find that God is sound. Creation was a speech event. Creation is sound: "And God said..."⁵ When God spoke all of creation was brought into being. Only after God had spoken and the listening void was filled did God see that it was good. The biblical account of Creation suggests that all matter had to "listen up" to God's creative voice in order to take on the form and function intended by the Creator. God created the world from sound.

The Psalmist, the writer of the book of Psalms, also proclaims that once a person has heard God, then one of the habits of the heart is to listen, to seek and to find. In Psalm 40 today the Psalmist is clear that though he had to obligation to proclaim God's message, first and foremost he must stop everything so that the connection with God can be made. Hear the Psalmist once more: "I waited patiently upon the Lord; he stooped to me and heard my cry."⁶

This same Psalmist tells us that the sounds of the world give back praises to God. In Psalm 29 this message is made clear: "The voice of the LORD is over the waters; the God of glory thunders. . . . The voice of the LORD is powerful; the voice of the LORD is full of majesty."

Today, many cellular biologists are concurring with this ancient idea. As biological beings, basically you and I are "dancing energy." Not only does all of creation around us hum with the sounds of life, your genes, your brain waves, every one of your cells vibrates. The laws of resonance apply: Anything that vibrates sympathetically responds to vibrations, even the smallest vibrations we have yet to measure. Cosmic vibrations are everywhere.

By and large, however, Western philosophy and even the church have been more interested in space and time than in sound. Perhaps we need to go beyond thoughtful and visual approaches to God – so we can once again learn to listen when God speaks.

As a church our balanced Christian witness to the world is dependent upon listening at least as much as it is dependent upon seeing. This is particularly true for those of you who are leaders in the church. Leaders need to listen as much as they need to set and pursue their vision. Instead of only squinting at the future, the church should keep its ears cocked; trying to pick up the soundtrack God is playing for Galilee's 21st century mission. I believe we must learn to hear before we can learn how to see. That means

⁵ Genesis 1.3a, 6a, 9a, 14a, 20a, 24a, 26a, *NRSV*.

⁶ Psalm 40.1, *NRSV*.

that we must place an emphasis upon listening to God in addition to our emphasis upon seeing God.

Today we are baptizing Jacob and Alauna. I believe that in this central sacrament of our church the Holy Spirit will give them the ability to hear the call of God – at times when they are in the awkward and sticky places of life. We will affirm that they will be “...sealed by the Holy Spirit in baptism and marked as Christ’s own for ever.”⁷ Do you believe that they are marked forever? I do, and as I do so I believe that God’s Spirit is so implanted in them that they will be able to hear God for all of their lives.

If ever there has been a time and place when and where listening to God and one another is important, that time is now and place is here. As well over one-hundred people in this congregation know, since I arrived at Galilee a couple of months ago I have been working to listen to you. As we have met together and you have told me your stories, I have been straining to hear when God was in the midst of our conversation. I know it is hard to listen, but listen to one another we must.

At various times throughout the year I go away for a few days to a monastery house with my spiritual director to learn to be quiet again and listen to God. The first day is always hard, very hard. I know I will have so much roof-brain-clatter in my head that I’ll hardly be able to sort out the difference between the noise of the world and all of the things I think I need to be doing, and the voice of God. But then ever so slowly the volume of the world will be turned down, and the only remaining sound will be the still, small voice of God, a voice that will be calling out to me.

When God does call out to you, how will you answer?

The only good response is “yes.” The Christian’s “yes” is a spiritual habit of the believer’s heart.

In this week’s gospel John the Baptizer, our close companion in the season of Epiphany, shares his words – if you will, his testimony to and about the Christ – to anyone who will take the time to come down to the river and hear him out. And guess what, “The two disciples heard ... (John), and they followed Jesus.”⁸ One of those who heard the message and followed Jesus was Andrew who would become a disciple. He could not wait another minute, so he went and spoke his words about the event to his brother, Simon Peter. As a result, then Simon Peter became a follower of Jesus as well.

There is a fellowship in the Episcopal Church known as the Brotherhood of St. Andrew. This group of men in our church is founded upon these very simple verses. As the old hymn says: “as of old, Saint Andrew heard it by the Galilean lake, turned from home and toil and kindred, leaving all for his dear sake,”⁹ the members of the Brotherhood of

⁷ Holy Baptism, *The Book of Common Prayer* (1979), p. 308.

⁸ John 1.37, NRSV.

⁹ St. Andrew, *The Hymnal 1982*, Hymn No. 549.

St. Andrew seek to emulate Andrew's work of going out to tell their brothers and sisters about the saving work of Christ.

Andrew brought Simeon Peter to Jesus so Peter could hear what Andrew heard. Andrew wanted Peter to have the chance to be changed just as he had been changed. John's gospel identifies Jesus as the Logos, the Word, that which must be heard. As the Logos, Jesus acts like a tuning fork to the Creator, the Eternal. As we seek to get our own lives back in tune with God, it must be through listening to Christ's frequencies and tuning or adjusting our actions and attitudes to Jesus' frequency. Some people call Jesus "God's perfect pitch." Any chance that we may have of achieving a new state of harmony depends on our willingness to first hear Christ and then to hear one another. If we are ever going to find healing at Galilee Church, then we must first listen.

Some of you who have spent time in other Christian churches may know the music of Fanny Crosby. Long ago she wrote a hymn by the name of "Rescue the Perishing." Here is a poignant verse from that hymn:
Down in the human heart, crushed by the tempter,
Feelings lie buried that grace can restore.
Touched by a loving heart, wakened by kindness,
Chords that are broken will vibrate once more.¹⁰

Healing of the strife-torn soul comes when we listen – listen up – and hear the living word of God.

When was the last time you heard from God? When was the last time you listened? The late theologian Carlyle Marney liked to tell people who complained of God's silence to live on the basis of the last clear word from God they heard until they could hear another one.

Then you can listen, listen and listen. God is speaking. If we will but listen, we will hear.

AMEN.

¹⁰ "Rescue the Perishing" by Fanny Crosby,
<http://www.cyberhymnal.org/htm/r/e/rescuetp.htm>.