

Listening Along the Pilgrim's Way

Fifth in a Lenten Series

“...that he gave his one and only son.”

John 12:20-33

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**Prayer** - For all our listening, please Lord, let us hear. Let us take in what you have for us. Let us embody mercy, hope, and love.

**Message**

There's nothing like it. The smell of lodge-pole pine, western sage and prairie grass. Together they are like an intoxicating mountain cologne. Then there is the sound of the Aspen trees clapping their hand-like leaves in the breeze. The sight of the fine black dust swirling at your feet. The air is so crisp it almost stings to breathe it in and feel cleansing at the same time. The sky is so big and wide it's like you're walking across the canvas itself. The silence is so loud it almost hurts your ears to hear it. It is one of my most favorite places to be in the world. It is there I remember how to listen with all my heart, soul, strength, and mind. It is there I remember how easy it is to listen when there is nothing to distract me from what is being said.

Shhhh, ahhhh....listen.

Then there is reality! (Acting out the following):

Phone rings - Hello - no son, I haven't seen your chrome book charger....

The last time I saw your favorite sweatshirt, it was on your floor...

Hello - no bud, I don't know where I left your hat...

Next Thursday? I don't know, I barely know what we are doing today...

And yes, if you switched the laundry then your clothes gott dried...

Knock on the door - Hey there, do you have just a minute, I'll be short.

Yes mam, it is about dinner time, but we were just in the area offering free window inspections.

Hello Pastor, hey this won't take long I just need to tell you something.

Phone rings - Hello? No I don't want to renew my auto insurance on a car I never owned

Hello? No, I am not interested in extending the warranty on my 15 year old vehicle.

Hello? No I don't need a free estimate on replacing the vinyl siding on my all brick house.

And last but not least: just sitting at home...or while in the car

At home - Buddy, please turn down that stuff you call music!

Stop yelling and just come in here and talk to me!

While driving - Did that guy really just honk their horn at me?!

Oh please, by all means, we ALL need to hear your music while in the drive thru lane!

The noise of life.

The noise of living.

The noise of being.

How can we hear any one thing when it seems everything and everyone is making some kind of noise around us? How can we listen along the path of life and faith when it seems there are way more and way louder distractions and disruptions in our world than ever before. How can we hear the voice / voices we need to hear when we can't even hear our own?

We have walked through a lot of noise this past year or so...locally, nationally, and internationally. As families, as classmates, friends, and colleagues. Personally - in our relationships, at work, and through change or disappointment. As organizations, school districts, and businesses. We did not ask for all the noise and disruption. We did not expect the interruptions we have endured. We did not anticipate just how loud some voices, issues, causes, groups, or organizations would become and how silent or silenced others became. It has been a journey on multiple levels, including what some would call a spiritual pilgrimage - a walk that takes us deeper into the heart of God by way of struggle, pain, loss, discomfort, and tension.

Listening can for sure be a challenge. Learning to listen is critical for our faith walk. We can learn a great deal when we listen and listen well. When we listen to understand and not judge. When we listen as an act of mercy and not criticism. When we listen for truth and not just what we want to hear.

Listening takes practice - a lifetime some would say. It takes patience - to listen to their story, their need, their side and just our own. It takes presence - you have to show up ready and willing to listen.

When I was on the highschool swim team we would compete against our biggest rival. The stands were packed. The energy was palpable. The buzzers, whistles, and starter gun were loud. It was the final relay of the meet, the 4X100, four swimmers, each swimming 4 lengths of the pool. Whichever team won this relay was going to win the meet and bragging rights. I can't remember a whole lot about that race. I can't even remember which leg of the relay I was (probably third or fourth) and to be honest, I can't even remember our time. I remember two things: The sound of my coaches' distinct whistle rising above the cheering, yelling, and screaming to give me the motivation and direction I needed to swim my best and give my all. I swam for that coach from the time I was seven years old until I graduated from high school, I knew his voice and I knew his

whistle. I learned to listen for it. I learned to hear it above and in the midst of all the other noise. I can still hear it when I close my eyes and listen. Oh and I remember we won!

We stand on the edge of week five of our lenten journey...our forty days of intentional self reflection and personal growth. We are on the home stretch. It may feel like it's time to let up, to breathe a sigh of relief that it's almost over. All that's left is to cruise through to Palm Sunday and Holy Week and celebrate Easter. However, it's not over yet. Our wilderness work is not finished yet. If anything, now is the time we need to listen like we have never listened before. Now is the time to gather all the noise of life, living and being and filter them through the presence of the Holy; hold them up to the light of Jesus, that we might discern all that we are hearing; so that we come to listen to and for God in our midst, and not just the chaos, worry, anger, fear, and divisive voices clamoring around and within us.

Now is the time to listen like never before for Jesus has walked with us every step of the way and perhaps his most important words are yet to come.

Read Text John 12:20-22,27-31 (Context: large festival, people, booths, market, events, activities, crowds - State Fair and then some!)

If ever there were words of Jesus that could fill his listener's hearts with excitement and then in the same breath, leave them bewildered and awestruck, the words we just read are it. These are the words the people of God had been waiting for, yet they were nothing like what they expected.

The dream and long awaited hope of the Jews - the people of Israel; what is called the awaited golden age, was a life where *they* would be masters of the world rather than the historical world powers they had come to live under. The Assyrians, Babylonians,

the Medes, and the Persians. These were the known powers of the world Jesus came into and they were cruel, savage, and even sadistic. They were and are described in historical documents and commentaries as wild beasts; a lion with wings, a bear with ribs between its teeth, a leopard with four wings and four heads, and a terrible beast with iron teeth and ten horns. (Barclay 121-122).

When the Jews gathered in Jerusalem and heard Jesus say, “the time has come for the son of man to be glorified,” the Jewish followers understood that to mean “the undefeatable world conqueror sent by God” had arrived and was about to lay down the smack on their enemy (or what my boys like to call, about to open a can of Jesus on them). What they heard would cause them to “catch their breath and believe that the trumpet call of eternity had sounded, the might of heaven was on the march, and the campaign of victory was on the move.” (Barclay 122).

Jesus did not mean by glorified what they thought he meant. By glorified, Jesus meant crucified. They thought the conquest of the armies of God, Jesus meant the conquest of the Cross. (Barclay 123).

Like so many before and after them, they heard his words but did not listen. They listened but did not hear - could not hear, because they were listening for the wrong reasons, wrong motives. They listened and heard what they wanted to hear, not what Jesus was truly saying. They made it fit their narrative, not God’s.

Church, we will never understand Jesus nor the attitude of the Jews, or even those first believers until we understand how Jesus turned their ideas upside down, replacing a dream of conquest with a vision of mercy on the Cross; a dream of vengeance, paybacks, and a we’re better than them kind of community, with a vision of sacrifice, pay it forward and no one is better than any kind of community.. Some say the tragedy is that they

refused to try to listen - refused to try to hear what Jesus was really saying. Maybe they did refuse, but if they did then so do we.

This passage of scripture is one of the few in the New Testament where we are told that there was an actual, audible voice from heaven. Some who heard, thought it was a loud noise - thunder, distant rumbling, or perhaps a loud, nearby storm rolling in, or even the growing crowds and commotion of the festival. Others knew that Jesus had just prayed so they thought what they heard was an angel answering him. With our vantage point to the story, and with John's account, we know it wasn't thunder, the roaring crowd, or an angel. It was God.

Even with our vantage point, I can't help but ask, how often do we miss the voice of God because we are not listening with our whole heart, soul, strength, and mind? How many times do we miss what God is doing because we don't want to hear it, don't want to see it because it doesn't fit *our* narrative for God?

People of God, our entire life on earth is a long walk in the same direction and that direction is toward the God who created us. Toward the others of this world. Toward the folks walking through the same mess as we are. Toward our truest self. We cannot walk that pilgrim path successfully without listening to and for God; without deciphering all the noise around us.

It's like we are swimming in the pool against our biggest rival - the stands are full, the noise is loud and coming from all sides. We have to tune ourselves to hear God above, through and in the midst of all that. That takes practice. That takes patience - discipline. That takes presence - opening our ears and staying the course. The more we practice, the better we get at not only hearing God but listening to what God is saying and doing. The better we get at recognizing where and when God has something to say along our pilgrim journey.

As we walk the last leg of this Lenten journey, I want to encourage, invite, and challenge you to commit yourself to listening. Give ear (and heart and mind) to Jesus and remember, he likes to turn things upside down. You might be surprised what you hear...and what you don't. You might be surprised at what he is saying and what he is not.

AMEN.

#### Resources

William Barclay - Daily Bible Series, John.

N.T. Wright - John for Everyone Part 2

“Long walk in the same direction” quote from Eugene Peterson