

HEAR YE! HEAR YE!

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LUKE 4:14-21 *Jesus Rejected at Nazareth*

¹⁴ *Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit, and news about him spread through the whole countryside.* ¹⁵ *He was teaching in their synagogues, and everyone praised him.* ¹⁶ *He went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom. He stood up to read,* ¹⁷ *and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written:* ¹⁸ *“The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free,* ¹⁹ *to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”* ²⁰ *Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him.* ²¹ *He began by saying to them, “Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.”*

Our scriptures this Sunday are two different descriptions of God’s people doing what they are called to do. In the passage from Nehemiah, read for us by Nancy, we heard of something life changing for the people of Israel. Upon returning from exile, as the walls of Jerusalem are being rebuilt, a scroll is found hidden in the walls. It’s a Torah scroll, Israel’s sacred scripture that we know as part of the Old Testament. It had been a long time since God’s people had access to God’s word. One of the reasons they were in exile to begin with is because they did not take heed to the preaching of their prophets and no longer paid attention to the Torah. While in exile they had no holy places. So now they return and try to rebuild their life with God and the priest stands on a platform built so the people could see and reads from the scroll from early morning to late in the afternoon. When the people hear God’s word read and then interpreted by the priest, they lament (for it has been a long time since they have had guidance from God) and they also shed tears of joy that at last they are back in touch with God through God’s word.

The second place we find God’s people and the story of His Word is in this Sunday’s gospel. This is the story of Jesus as he returns to his hometown synagogue. They don’t ask him to share his heart with them, to tell of his personal experiences growing up in Nazareth. They do what Jews do: hand him the sacred text. He reads from the Isaiah scroll, then he interprets what he has read to the people. They didn’t like what they heard and were so upset that they tried to kill the preacher for reading and teaching from scripture it is amazing how nervous it makes many people when people read and interpret the scripture these days.

We are witnessing what it means to be a Jew or a Christian. We are a people gathered here by the Word. Who is a Christian? For this Sunday, with Nehemiah and Luke tutoring us, a Christian is somebody who dares to be present when the scriptures are opened and read and interpreted in preaching. We are a word-formed people. Words, particularly God’s Words are powerful and life-changing.

According to my reading of Genesis, the first book of the Bible, God created humanity because

God loves conversation. Everything begins as something said and then heard. Before time and creation, God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—were one in constant harmony. The genesis of the world is a sermon God preached to the formless, silent void, *“Let there be light”* (Gen 1:3). All God needed do was to say *“Light,”* and there was light. God’s word is performative; God says the word and creation is as good as done (Ps 33:9). The Word not only informs the world also forms a people.

Have you heard the phrase, he or she hears only what they want to hear. In a real sense that is true of all of us. Because in order for us to hear, our brains refuse most of the sound that enters our ears, discriminating, allowing our minds to go to work only after filtering out what the brain considers to be inconsequential. Trouble is that what our brains discard as unimportant could be just what we’ve been dying to hear.

Hourly we are bombarded with news. Much that passes for news is just advertising: Good news! Buy this, wear that, smear this on your face, and thereby get your best life now. Or mere information: The Yankees won the World Series. The President has gone to Camp David for the weekend. Data filed away or else discarded as soon as we’ve heard it.

But other news engages, makes a claim, and anticipates response. When someone shouts, *“Fire!”* it’s more than information. It’s persuasive, demanding, and imperative truth. The gospel—good news—is not just reported and received but news that begs reaction. Say to a group of famished children, *“Hey, I’ve got bread enough for everybody!”* or to the incarcerated, *“Here’s how to get out of jail,”* you’ll get a hearing.

If you have news that could save someone’s life, you’d be cold-hearted to keep it to yourself or to mumble so that the message is inaudible. A good, life-changing, world-naming message creates messengers and finds its intended audience, though you may be shocked by God’s choice of both messenger and hearer.

One of the great joys, and sometimes great perils, of being a preacher is to get a front row seat on those moments when someone hears God speak through my reading and interpreting of God’s word.

So, when the pastor asked a young woman in one of his early congregations, *“Carolyn, what possessed you to drop out of college—with your 3.0 GPA—and barge off to be a nurse in a clinic in Honduras?”* she answered, *“Because of what I heard you say in your sermon last Sunday. That bit about ‘most of us are living just for ourselves.’”*

The pastor forgetting his role in the work of the Holy Spirit in the young lady’s life was the one of all people, to respond to her: *“Look, Carolyn, I was just preaching.”*

After having spent years preparing himself to be, maybe not the greatest but at least an adequate instrument of God to share His message he was surprised and maybe even a little dismayed that a parishioner would hear the Word and respond to it. The young lady had through the Word heard a disruptive summons from God Almighty.

I was about to say that the trouble starts, in most Christians’ lives, when somebody like me stands up, reads from scripture, and then dares to preach, *“Thus sayeth the Lord . . .”* or the words of the town crier, Hear Ye! Hear Ye. There is no holy confusion when someone like you dares to listen for God.

You become the young Isaiah:

“Then I heard the Lord’s voice saying, ‘Whom should I send, and who will go for us?’

“I said, ‘I’m here; send me.’” (Isa 6:8)

Every time, right here in church, when you hear, your active response to sermons is Genesis 1 all over again, new world created out of nothing on the basis of God just saying the word, perhaps through a preacher. It's the people gathered at the Water Gate and Ezra reading to them the ancient words from the Torah scroll or Jesus preaching in the synagogue at Nazareth. God in conversation with God's people, God's people listening for a word and then aligning their lives on the basis of what they have heard. It's the mystery at the heart of our faith.

"The time is coming—and is here!—when the dead will hear the voice of God's Son, and those who hear it will live ...the time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice" (John 5:25, 28). Somebody—dead or living—unbound, crawls out of some tomb and says after a sermon, "I heard..." reprise of Christ's resurrection.

You listeners have your work cut out for you in listening to scripture and then in listening for God to speak in a sermon. Dietrich Bonhoeffer spoke up for the church against the Nazis and paid dearly for it. Yet Bonhoeffer urged his seminarians while in exile first to be listeners: "Our love for God begins with listening to God's Word, ...God's love for us is shown by the fact that God not only gives us God's Word but also lends us God's ear."

Chiding us preachers for thinking that we must always have something to say, Bonhoeffer says that *"listening can be a greater service than speaking. Many people seek a sympathetic ear and do not find it among Christians, because these Christians are talking even when they should be listening. But Christians who can no longer listen to one another will soon no longer be listening to God either; they will always be talking even in the presence of God."* *"Christians have forgotten that the ministry of listening has been entrusted to them by the one who is indeed the greater listener..."*

Christians, *"be quick to listen, slow to speak..."* (James 1:19).

"Reveal yourself!" we cried to God down through the ages. And God did! God spoke through Jesus, The Word tenting living among us (John 1:1). Jesus's main occupation? Jesus came preaching (Mark 1:14).

The gospel is news that passes from the lips of one who has heard to the ears of one who has not yet heard, then (God willing) burrows in the soul, energizing heart, and hands in daring response to news received. Preaching is instigated by an astounding claim: Good news; God has spoken to us. The Christian life is what you get when ordinary folk respond: *"Keep talking, I'm all ears."*

"Israel listen!" precedes many prophetic pronouncements. Whereas God could command us to work or to fight, God asks us to listen. *"Hear the Lord"* is repeated thirty times among the prophets, more often than *"obey"* or *"do."* But like the young woman who went off to work in Honduras—one must listen before one can obey or do.

Each generation must listen carefully so that they can speak to the young about the Lord's goodness. God's people are to attend to the reading of the sacred texts (Deuteronomy 31:1-12; this Sunday's Old Testament scripture, Nehemiah 8:3; Revelation 1:3). A *"child of God"* is someone who hears the words of God (John 8:47). The sheep of God's pasture hear the voice of the Shepherd (John 10:3, 16, 27). Our first duty to God? Listen.

Lack of hearing is occasionally attributed to divine judgment upon human sin as in Isaiah 6:10 or Deuteronomy 29:4. Amos predicts there'll be a day when there's a famine in the land, not from a lack of bread but for *"hearing the Lord's words"* (Amos 8:11). We have select hearing, we heard only what we want to hear. Yet the day will come when God shall restore Israel's auditory ability (Isaiah 32:3).

Sometimes listeners hear God speaking distinctly, as when God called to Moses from the burning bush or gave the Ten Commandments (Deuteronomy 5:22; Isaiah 6:8), or when Peter is directly ordered to let go of his prejudices and receive even Gentiles for baptism (Acts 10:13). God's word is spoken straightforwardly into the prophet's ears and then passed to the people so that listening to a prophet is hearing straight from God (Isaiah 22:14; Ezekiel 3:10–11, 17; Deuteronomy 18:19). But other times we are afraid to hear that Word from God.

The Israelites, in terror at the thought of actually hearing God, ask Moses, *"You go and listen to all that the LORD our God says. Then tell us all that the LORD our God speaks to you. We'll listen and we'll do it"* (Deuteronomy 5:27).

My prayer is that we will listen to God's Word today so we can obey it.

Do you expect to hear God speak today? Elijah expected to hear God in wind, earthquake, and fire but heard nothing. Only after a sound of *"Sheer Silence"* did the prophet hear (1 Kings 11:11-12). God's word is often subtle, gentle, like falling snow or rain (Isaiah 55:10). When Jesus, deeply troubled, cried out to the Father, there was a sound from heaven. Three out of five listeners said, *"It's thunder"* the rest thought, *"An angel spoke to him."* None recognized the voice of God (John 12:27-29). In my experience, rarely is God's word obvious.

Disciples are blessed because they have heard the message of the coming kingdom that God's people have longed to hear (Matthew 13:16–17). Jesus repeatedly urges those who hear to act upon what he says (Mark 4:9, 23, etc.). Yet this week's gospel, Luke 4, reminds us that Jesus was not always heard with gladness by the congregation.

Though God is unheeded by rulers of the world, the lowly and foolish hear good news. All you lowly and foolish, listen up!

Maybe you haven't heard much in my sermon today. That could be due to your poor listening or my lousy preaching. Failure to hear might also be a function of the gifted nature of preaching. It takes three to hear a sermon: someone to speak (the preacher), someone to listen (you), and then a God who makes communication happen (the Holy Spirit).

But maybe, by the grace of God and the work of the Holy Spirit you have heard something, a word you can't tell yourself, an insight that you couldn't get any other way other than by participating in this peculiarly Christian act of listening for a word from this ancient text and this ill-equipped preacher.

Genesis 1 all over again. A fresh new world offered to you, conversation resumed between you and a God who is determined that you know that God is God for you. God loving the world and you through words. Amen.