

January 25, 2004  
Third Sunday after Epiphany  
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### Hearing and Doing

Psalm 19      *Day to day pours forth speech,  
and night to night declares knowledge.  
There is no speech, nor are there words;  
their voice is not heard;  
yet their voice goes out through all the earth,  
and their words to the end of the world.*

Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10      *Then he said to them, "Go your way, eat the fat  
and drink sweet wine and send portions of them  
to those for whom nothing is prepared, for this day  
is holy to our Lord; and do not be grieved,  
for the joy of the Lord is your strength."*

Luke 4:14-21      *And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant,  
and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him.  
Then he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been  
fulfilled in your hearing."*

Listening to God and then doing what we hear. That is essentially the meaning of the life of faith and obedience. The root meaning of "obedience" is to listen. It doesn't mean "obeying" laws and rules like robots. It means that we become so attuned to God's voice that we simply know and do what is needed and right in the given moments and circumstances of our lives. Faith and obedience mean listening to God's voice and then doing what we hear, living out what we understand.

The psalmist says that God's voice is everywhere in creation. Two weeks ago we heard Psalm 29 speak of God's voice sounding over the waters, thundering over land and sea, splitting trees and making hills skip. With vivid images, the psalmist wants to awaken our souls to hear God's voice everywhere in creation. The psalm for today, Psalm 19, completes the dialogue. The creation responds to God, voices the praise of God. It is a speechless speech, a voiceless voice that pours forth day and night. We have the ears and voices to enter this dialogue of life. All we have to do is wake up, to listen and to respond as the human part of God's creation.

That's really what the life of faith, or the spiritual life, is about. It is about understanding and taking our good and right place in God's creation as human beings. The creation itself, what we call "nature," is not the problem. The creation spontaneously and naturally knows how to be itself and to give God praise. It is we humans who are the problem. We forget how to listen to God, or stop listening, or think we are listening to God but are really listening to our own ideas about God. And when we are not listening to God's voice, we create all kinds of disaster and violence. Those who see themselves as Christians, who pepper their language with God-talk, mindlessly carry out the devastation of war and of the creation itself. This is not listening to God. This is not true obedience.

Psalm 19 reminds us to listen in on this dialogue of life, the voiceless voice of all creation responding to God. As we listen, we regain our sensitivity to that voice speaking to and in us. God has a particular voice for us human beings, a living Word that speaks to us in scripture, in worship, in community. That living Word can awaken us to who we truly are as God's creatures. That is the why Psalm 19 turns to the laws, the precepts, the

commandments of God, those words that God has spoken through and to the community of faith. The psalm also speaks of the “fear of the Lord” being pure and lasting forever. The “fear” of God is not “being afraid of” God. It is awe. In us humans it is the same response of praise and awe that we hear in the creation itself. The fear of God is our soul’s sensitivity to the loving nearness and mysterious “otherness” of God, as traditional Christian theology calls it, the immanence and transcendence of God. God is as near to us as our breath, enfolding us with eternal love. God is as unknown and unknowable as the infinite expanse of the universe itself.

The story from Nehemiah is about our listening to God’s voice and then responding. The people of Israel are home from Exile. Cyrus, king of Persia, defeated Babylonia and ordered the Jews to return home and rebuild their cities, their temple, and their society. Nehemiah, the governor of Judea, has finished rebuilding the wall that encircles Jerusalem. Now everyone gathers in a square of the city, in front of the Water Gate (not the one of Nixon fame, of course!). The story emphasizes how everyone was there and how eager they were to hear the reading of the Law, the Torah, hungry for God’s living word to them. Behind them are the desolate and despairing years of Exile, filled with painful spiritual searching. Before them lies the overwhelming task of rebuilding. The people sense that this is a new moment, a critical moment, a moment when their relationship with God needs to be re-established.

The people ask the priest Ezra to read to them the Law. He does so from morning until noon that day. He doesn’t just read the scriptures. They are interpreted so that everyone understands, so that the scriptures speak to the present moment and circumstances. Children, youth, adults of all ages—everyone wants to understand. Here is a beautiful picture of Ezra standing up above the people so that they can all hear and see, reading from the Torah. And below, the Levites, a kind of priestly-teaching order, are moving through the crowd, opening up the scriptures, explaining, engaging in dialogue about what it all means to the people of God in their present situation. It is what we called in the 1960s a “teach-in”!

Scripture always needs to be interpreted, wrestled with, opened up, taken apart, and searched piece by piece so that we hear in and through it the LIVING Word of God for us today. Those Christians who say they don’t interpret scripture, who criticize those who do as liberals and relativists, have not read this story or the Bible itself. Scripture doesn’t need defending; it needs ongoing interpretation within the community of faith. Interpretation is not the unearthing of some absolute and unchanging “truth” but the effort to listen to God’s voice speaking to us in our day and time.

As Ezra reads on, the people weep. Why? Maybe the emotions of being home at last, or exhausted from rebuilding, or fearful of the future. Or perhaps as they heard the scriptures they realized how far their lives had drifted from God, from the life God created them to live. Tears of remorse, regret, shame. But whatever the source of the tears, Nehemiah tells them to stop. Tears are not enough. Remorse is not enough. We need to move beyond the tears, beyond the remorse, beyond the confession of sins, beyond the past. We need to hear God’s living Word, come to an understanding, and then live what we have heard. That’s obedience—hearing and doing, listening with understanding and then living what we have understood.

What does Nehemiah tell the people to do? Stop weeping. Go forth and enjoy life! Eat the fat and drink sweet wine. Share with those who have nothing. Go celebrate life and care for those who are in need. It was the fall of the year. The Feast of Booths was coming up, a festival of the harvest and of God’s care for the Israelites while they wandered in the wilderness after escaping from Egypt. What Nehemiah told the people to do is just what we need to hear today, as well. Celebrate life! Take joy in life! In the midst of a culture and mentality that treats the world as an object for greed and destruction, that robs the world of its sacred nature as God’s creation, we are to go forth

and celebrate, sanctify, and rejoice in the goodness of life and the world that God has made. We are to make sure that others are able to join in the celebration, the enjoyment, the goodness of life. Everyone is to taste the goodness of life that God has given.

How's that for a prescription for obedience? Go and enjoy this life to the full; and help those who do not have enough to do the same.

Four and a half centuries later we find Jesus visiting his hometown synagogue. This is where he grew up. He's doing well and gaining people's approval and support. The leader of the synagogue invites Jesus to read from the scriptures and to give the teaching. Jesus is given the scroll of the prophet Isaiah and reads the portion for that day's service, from Isaiah 61. Words of the anointing of a messiah, a servant of God who will announce the year of God's favor, the time of God's redeeming of the people. And what will this redemption look like? What kind of messiah will this be? It is good news. It is the bringing of good news to the poor, the freeing of prisoners, the recovering of sight, the lifting of oppressions of all kinds. It is not a message about "getting saved and going to heaven." It is a message of God's desire for a new world, a new society, built on the foundations of God's love for all people, God's will that every person enjoy the fruits of this creation.

Jesus sits down, the customary way to bring the teaching, the interpretation of the scripture reading. We don't know the full content of his teaching on this text, but Luke tells us it was centered on this one astounding affirmation: "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." It's not longer a pipe dream. These are no longer beautiful words to hear on the Sabbath but safely pushed into the distant future. These are no longer inspiring ideas to be talked about endlessly. The time is NOW. Whatever Jesus said that morning, it had to do with calling people to live this day of God's favor NOW. This is what God is doing, says Jesus. And he identified himself with Isaiah's words. This is who he is and what he is about, and this is the life to which he calls us.

When we see our lives as bearing good news of God's liberating, healing, and empowering love, everything we do, every gift we have can be an instrument of that good news. Following Christ means living now the day of God's favor, the coming of God's kingdom. It does not have to do with life after death, but with life before death, life here and now in God's good creation. I don't think there is that much difference between what the people heard from Nehemiah and what those in the synagogue heard from Jesus. It is a voice for us today, which we can hear in our own lives, which we can respond to with the gifts God has given us: Go forth and enjoy this life that God has given us, celebrate it, embrace it whole-heartedly; go forth to those who have been excluded from life, bringing good news of healing, liberation, and empowerment, so that all of God's children know the pleasures and joys, the delights and blessings of this life that God has created for us all.

Let us pray:

O God, you are speaking to us all the time, throughout the whole creation and through your particular word to us in scripture and our life as a community of faith. Grant us the gift of faith, that is, the gift of deep listening so that we come to understand and then to do all that we have heard. Amen.