

January 27, 2013 / Third Sunday after Epiphany / David L. Edwards

The Life of Faith: Listening and Living

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 living out of what we hear. That is a simple to say what it means to live a "spiritual life"--simpler to say, of course, than to do. The root meaning of our English word "obedience" is "to listen". It means becoming attuned to God's voice so that we know what is needed and right in the moments and circumstances of our lives. Living by faith does not mean living out of religious ideas in our heads. It means listening to God's voice, in and around us, and then doing what we hear, living with ever-deepening wisdom and understanding. This is what all three of our scripture readings for today are about.

The psalmist says that the creation is permeated with knowledge and awareness of God. 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 tries to awaken us to the world around us expressing the presence and voice of God. Psalm 19 tells of the creation having a speechless speech, a voiceless voice that pours forth day and night. We have the ears and voices to enter this dialogue of life. Yet our contemporary culture has rendered us deaf to the voice of God in all creation. We have become strangers to the natural world as our physical and spiritual home. However, we can wake up, learn again to listen and respond as the human part of God's world. I think this is the importance of the missions of Camp Kum-Ba-Yah, Chrysalis Retreat Center, and, we hope, one day an outdoor school for young children.

The life of faith, or the spiritual life, is first of all about listening, not thinking or feeling or doing. When we grow in our capacity to listen, to live with awareness, we can find our good and right place in God's creation as human beings. The creation is not the problem. The creation knows how to be itself and to manifest God. We humans are the problem. We forget how to listen to God, or simply 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 unhappiness for ourselves and others. Too many Christians pepper their language with God-talk, yet mindlessly perpetuate poverty, war and every other kind of violence, and the devastation of the creation itself. This is evidence that we are not listening to God. As Jesus once asked, "Why do you call me 'Lord, Lord,' but do not do what I ask?"(Luke 6:46)

Psalms 19 then says that besides the "voiceless voice" of the creation, God has a particular voice for us human beings, a living Word that speaks to us--the law, the precepts, the commandments of God, those words that God has spoken and speaks to and within the community of faith. "Law" in this sense is not about control or constraint or punishment. It is not about legalism. Israel always understood the law as a gift from God, bringing life. Children, Worship & Wonder calls the story of the Ten Commandments the "Ten Best Ways to Live." That is the true sense of law as Israel understood it. The law of God is all the wisdom, guidance, and instruction that comes from awareness of God and of ourselves as God's creatures. I like the word precept, used here, which is prominent in Buddhism. It is simply the recognition that there are ways of living that lead us to our true selves and fullness of life, and there are ways of living that lead to unhappiness and suffering for others and ourselves. Love of God and love of neighbor as we love ourselves was the greatest precept in Jesus' view. Next week we will hear Paul's words on love as the greatest commandment, the all-fulfilling precept.

The story from Nehemiah is about listening to God's voice in community. The people of Israel are home from Exile. Cyrus, king of Persia, overthrew Babylon and ordered the Jews to return home and rebuild their cities(539 BCE), their temple, and their society. The wall around Jerusalem, destroyed in the Babylonian invasion, has been rebuilt. 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, eager to hear the reading of the law, hungry for God's living word to them. The people sense that this is a moment, when their relationship with God is being renewed.

Ezra reads to them from morning until noon that day. He doesn't just read the scriptures. They are interpreted so that everyone understands as fully as possible, 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. Below are the Levites, a kind of priestly-teaching order, moving through the crowd, opening up the scriptures, explaining, conversing with the people about what it all means 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, and contemplated

deeply so that we hear in and through it the LIVING Word of God for us today. Scripture needs ongoing interpretation within the community of faith and in our lives. Interpretation is not the unearthing of some absolute and unchanging “truth”, but the effort to hear through scripture God’s voice speaking to us in our day and time, in our experiences, our struggles, our joys and sorrows. Scripture is not the Word of God, but the Word of God can speak to us through scripture as we grow in our capacity to listen.

As Ezra reads, the people weep. Why? Maybe the emotions of being home at last, or exhaustion from the tasks of rebuilding, or anxiousness about the future. Or perhaps awareness of how far they had drifted from the life God created them to live. And yet, God had given the dawn of a new day for them. Tears can be good, a response to hearing something that touches the reality of our lives.

What do Nehemiah, Ezra, and the priests and Levites tell the people to do? Wipe your tears now. Go forth and enjoy life! Eat the fat and drink sweet wine. Share with those who have nothing. Go celebrate and live life to the full, and make sure everyone can join in. 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 they told the people is just what we need to hear today, as well. Celebrate life! Take joy in life! In the midst of a culture and mentality of greed, self-centeredness, that disregards the sacredness of people and the rest of 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 as well. Everyone is to “taste and see the goodness of God”(Ps. 34).

How’s that for a prescription for obedience? Listen so closely and deeply to the creation, to God’s law, God’s living Word, that you begin to hear this command--go forth and enjoy this life to the full, sharing so that others are able to do the same.

Five centuries later we find Jesus visiting his hometown synagogue. This is where he grew up. This hometown boy seems to be doing well and gaining some notoriety. 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, God’s redeeming of the people. What will this redemption look like? 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 society built on the foundations of God’s loving will that every person enjoy the fruits of this creation.

Jesus sits down to teach, to “give the sense” of the scripture reading. We don’t know all that he said, but Luke tells us it came down to one astonishing affirmation: “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” It’s not a pipe dream. These are not lovely words to hear on the Sabbath but ignore the rest of the week. It is not about “idealism” that lets us off the hook by saying, “But let’s be ‘realistic’.” 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 the day of God’s favor NOW. This is what God is doing, says Jesus, and it is who I am and what I am about. And this is the life to which I call you. This is what got him into trouble, for as we read the rest of the story, people turned from what a great guy Jesus is to throwing him off a cliff. He taught God’s kingdom as a reality to be lived now, to be put into practice. Listening to God’s living Word, to the law, to the creation itself pouring forth knowledge of God, leads us to embody, to live out what we hear. That can be liberating, bringing infinite joy and the sense of fulfilling who we truly are as human beings. And it can be threatening to those who simply don’t want to do it, who want to keep God distant and God’s kingdom or realm as some ideal while we perpetuate the mess we call “reality”.

Following Jesus 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 here and now in God’s good creation. I don’t think there is that much difference between what the people heard from Ezra and Nehemiah, and what was heard in the synagogue from Jesus. It is a voice for us today, which we can hear in the creation, in and through the scriptures, in our worship and life together in community. It is a voice to which we can respond with the gifts God gives us and the callings God stirs in our hearts: Go forth and enjoy this life that God has given us, celebrate it, embrace it whole-heartedly, and make sure 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. It all has to do with listening and then living what we hear.

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, the gift of deep listening so that we come to understand and then live we have heard. Amen.