

Drop Everything and Listen
© Rev. Dr. Gary Blaine
University Congregational Church
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Reading: Psalm 95: 1 – 7a (The Message)¹

Come, let's shout praises to God, raise the roof for the Rock who saved us! Let's march into his presence singing praises, lifting the rafters with our hymns! And why? Because God is the best, High King over all the gods. In one hand he holds deep caves and caverns, in the other hand grasps the high mountains. He made Ocean – he owns it! His hands sculpted Earth!

So come, let us worship: bow before him, on your knees before God, who made us! Oh yes, he's our God, and we're the people he pastures, the flock he feeds. Drop everything and listen, listen as he speaks:

Another rendering of verse 7a:

We will know Your power and presence this day if we will but listen for Your voice.²

There is a deep and widespread hunger for spirituality, whatever that means to you. You hear the clamoring for inspiration and sacred touch in baby-boomers, but even more so in their children and grandchildren. Indeed, many people will claim that they do not believe in organized religion. But they claim to have or want to have a spiritual life. They complain that the average Sunday worship service is too formal, or ritualized, or sterile. They believe that Sunday worship and spirituality

¹ Eugene H. Peterson, *The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2005), pp.780-781.

² Robert Benson, *Venite* (New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher/ Putnam, 2000), 8.

are synonymous or should be interchangeable. They will travel great distances and spend a lot of money on spiritual retreats at monasteries, conference centers, and outdoor expeditions. You can imagine some of the alluring titles; “Fly-fishing for Faith,” “Hiking with the Holy Spirit,” or “Ceramics and Contemplative Prayer.” Well, when you go off “Killing Caribou with Christ” the Sunday morning worship service is really pretty bland by comparison.

This search for spirituality is not unique to any one church or denomination. Everyone struggles with it and few have found satisfaction. It is a complaint that I have heard in every church I have ever served and every minister I have ever met struggles with it. People thirst for an intimacy with the Spirit of Life and they expect that their ministers, church staff, Sunday school and Sunday worship will slake that thirst.

I think that it is possible for people to experience a movement of the Spirit of God in a worship service. I had just such an experience several weeks ago. You may recall that the Boys and Girls Club Samba band played here. Those beautiful children offered a stirring percussive presentation. You may recall that I wept. Why? I wept for joy. It was my experience in the eight minutes or so that the rhythm of God, the pulse

of life, was alive in those children. I was transported out of my ordinary experience of worship to a transcendent expression of the sacred, throbbing through young hands on drums and sticks.

That was not the same experience that everybody had that morning. Some did not like it. They were annoyed by the loudness. It was so extra-ordinary to their habits of worship that they felt repelled or alienated. That is the challenge of corporate worship. The same thing happens with sermons, prayers, hymns, and choral music. Each may open a window to some souls but not to others.

Sometimes something “spiritual” happens in a Sunday worship service. More likely are moments of inspiration, awareness, and understanding. Let us be reminded that the word worship comes from the Old English word, “worth-ship.” We gather on Sunday to lift up the worth of our faith, moral principles, and sacred values. I believe that the Sunday morning worship service is the central activity of the community of faith. We gather regardless of whether or not we like the minister or the hymnal or the choir. We are assembled around the probity of our covenant and mission. We come together to identify and affirm the essential characteristics of the Christian way of life. We pray about, sing about, and preach about the integrity of God’s grace, justice, peace, and

human dignity. This is the heart of “worth-ship.” The essential question is not was it “spiritual” enough but was it true to the character of our faith.

I am also not sure whether it is fair or realistic to expect the minister or the organist or the choir to reveal the Spirit of God. After all, said Jesus, “The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from and where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.” (John 3:8) I actually do not trust preachers who presume to be the depositories or channels of the Spirit of God.

I am reminded of the preacher who had a flair for the dramatic. On Pentecost Sunday he gave the church janitor a cage with a white dove inside. He told the janitor, “When you hear me declare in my sermon, ‘And the Holy Spirit descended like a dove,’ I want you to let this white dove lose from the balcony.

The janitor crept up to the balcony with his caged white dove. The order of service proceeded normally. The preacher entered the pulpit and began the delivery of his sermon. He arrived at that point in his sermon and declared, “And the Holy Spirit descended like a dove.”

Nothing happened. He repeated the line with a little more power, “And the Holy Spirit descended like a dove.”

Nothing happened. Finally he belted out, “And the Holy Spirit descended like a dove.”

From the back of the balcony the janitor called down, “The cat ate the Holy Spirit. Do you want me to throw the cat down?”

The Spirit blows where it chooses. It may or may not choose me. But that is not the most important fact. The biggest question is, “Can we hear the Spirit when it blows?” Can we see the Spirit when it flashes by? Can we touch the Spirit when it moves among us? Can we taste the Spirit when it tantalizes us? Can we smell the Spirit when it wafts among us?

The Psalmist urges us to “Drop everything and listen, listen as he speaks.” Or, as rendered in the prayer book *Venite*, “We will know Your power and presence this day *if* we will but listen for Your voice.” The Spirit and Power of Life might be blowing in one ear and out the other but if you are not listening you will not hear it. As the Buddhist teachers remind us, “Wake Up! Pay attention!” If we are not listening it does not matter what is blowing in the wind.

Listen to this story and see if we might hear the voice of God. On May 15th I had surgery for a deviated septum. The surgery was a little more demanding than expected and the surgeon had to break and cauterize some cartilage. There was a great deal of swelling and blood

loss and I think the packing ended somewhere in my esophagus. Anyway, the recovery was a lot more complicated than anyone hoped for. Because of my sleep apnea I was getting about two hours of sleep at night. After six days of this I was exhausted, frenzied, and worn out. The following Sunday morning I asked Dr. Richard Steckley for help. He wondered if I had a full-face mask for my CPAP machine, which I had never heard of. He left the church, went to Kansas Heart Hospital, procured a full-face mask, and brought it back to the church. That night I got about six hours of sleep and was on my way to full recovery.

Now listen to this. Yes, it was an act of kindness. But I also think of Dr. Steckley's kindness akin to another Physician who wandered Galilee. Or how about this story? Drop everything and listen. Many months ago I had lunch with three members of our youth group. They told me that one of their dreams for our youth group was mission trips. They wanted to go some place and meet the needs of other people. Karen Robu developed a plan for them to work with the Mennonite Housing Committee to build new homes in Greensburg, destroyed by a tornado a couple of years ago. The youth group needed to raise money for their mission trip to pay for food and housing. They planned several fundraisers, including a car wash. Every Sunday their car wash was rained

out. A week or so before their trip I asked you for a free will offering to cover their expenses. You gave them nearly \$1,300. They had a wonderful experience and some family and church will have a roof over their head, in part, because of them and because of you. Thank you! But listen for the power and presence of God in the movement of generosity – yours and our youth’s.

Drop everything and listen to this story. Yesterday I officiated at two weddings. The first one was at Riverfront Park at 3:00 in the Gazebo. There were a lot of people in the park, including a big motorcycle club called – and I will have to spell this out for you so you will not write me a letter – Phat Azz. They had 60 or 70 bikes and a number of gleaming muscle cars, and a smoking barbeque. On large speakers rap music was playing to about 125 people. We are off in the gazebo with a wedding party that, let’s say “affirms” body art. Tattoos, things coming out of parts of their bodies. The groom’s name was Paul and the bride’s name was Paula. Paula walked up the sidewalk into the gazebo with that old rock n’ roll song, “Hey, Paula.” You remember that one? Now try to imagine that song, “Hey, hey, Paula – da-dada-boom.” I offer with greeting and charge of the minister to the accompaniment of **vroom, vroom.**

Two hours later I am here, in this noble sanctuary. The groomsmen are dressed in sharp tuxedos; the bridesmaids in beautiful dresses; gorgeous flowers. Helen is playing Pachelbel's canon in D on the organ.

But in both places, in both settings, and with both couples was the spirit of love. I watched the wind blowing in the park and out of our windows and I must tell you that the grace of God was in both weddings. But I had to listen for that.

In terms of spirituality I know that there are some people hoping for a release from this world. This is very different from finding God – or being found by God – in this world. My spirituality is very much centered on the here and now. I have never experienced God beyond the realms of nature and humanity. I have only found God in the midst of pain and triumph, slop and human dignity, disease and courage. I do not have extraordinary ears that allow me to listen beyond the realm of this world. Nor do I have to. Jewish theology and that of Jesus affirms the creation and her creatures.

The challenge for me is the listening challenge. Am I paying attention to the movement of God in thunderstorms, the giggle of a baby, a note from an old friend, the weeping of a dying one and the daughter who holds her tight against her breast? This has been my experience in

just the past week. I will know the power and presence of God if I will
but listen to God's voice. Mary Oliver presses this point with her poem:

Where Does the Temple Begin, Where Does it End?

There are things you can't reach. But
you can reach out to them, and all day long.

The wind, the birds flying away. The idea of God.

And it can keep you as busy as anything else, and happier.

The snake slides away; the fish jumps, like a little lily,
out of the water and back in; the goldfinches sing
from the unreachable top of the tree.

I look; morning to night I am never done with looking.

Looking I mean not just standing around, but standing around
as though with your arms open.

And thinking: maybe something will come, some
shining coil of wind,
or a few leaves from any old tree –
they are all in this too.

And now I will tell you the truth.
Everything in the world
comes.

At least, closer.

And, cordially.

Like the nibbling, tinsel-eyed fish; the unlooping snake.
Like goldfinches, little dolls of gold
fluttering around the corner of the sky

of God, the blue air.³

Now here is the thing about listening. You have to learn how to do. It is a discipline in a world where we are bombarded by sound – from television, radio, MP 3 players, computers, and *ad nauseam*. Listening is more than sound bouncing off of your tympanic membrane. Listening is the apprehension of meaning and presence when sound is uttered. Listening is the discernment of the persona that utters the sound, the word, the song, the cry, the laugh, and the sigh. Listening is the comprehension of power and grace in the voice of another, even the voice of the Sacred. To listen is to abandon your self, and especially your voice, to the other and the Holy Other. Somerset Maugham wrote, “Most people have a furious itch to talk about themselves and are restrained only by the disinclinations of others to listen.” And there are many stories of the desert fathers who kept a stone in their mouths, often for years, as a discipline to bridle their tongues and listen carefully.

The discipline of listening is not contained in one sermon. This is not the right venue. All I can say to you this morning is, “drop everything and listen.”

Finis

³ Mary Oliver, “Where Does the Temple Begin, Where Does It End?,” *Why I Wake Early* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2004), pp. 8 – 9.