

“Listening to God”¹

By Rev. David Harris, Prince of Peace Presbyterian Church

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Based upon 1 Samuel 3: 1-12; Mark 1: 9-12

It’s good to see you today, I mean, to be with you on this summer Sunday. We live in an unusual time, but luckily technology is helping. I have on several occasions asked in session meetings, sermons, and in conversations: “how often do we listen versus speak to God” in prayer in church and as we go throughout our week? In Presbyterian circles, I usually get a perplexed, quizzical look in response. We are frequently eloquent in composing and saying our prayers, but how often do we stop, get quiet, center ourselves, and listen to what God would say to us? I know for me not nearly often enough.

We pray for God to guide us. So, doesn’t that mean we need to stop, get quiet, and listen? Mindfulness, meditation, yoga, etc. are all the rage currently. Well the church for 2,000 years has been supposedly focused on inner spiritual development, so why does this stuff seem so new?

Today’s passages are just two of many examples of God speaking and expecting to be listened to: Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, prophets, disciples, and yes Jesus. There’s often confusion and resistance initially in part because it seems impossible and challenging what God has to say. It was that way for young Samuel. He had to be sent back three times to listen, and the message he was given was to go back to his mentor/boss and deliver bad news. Yuk! Not a fun thing to do. How would you like to be Moses and be given the assignment God had for him? Our passage from *Mark* is at the outset of Jesus’ ministry. It’s brief and to the point referencing three things: He’s baptized; he’s chased into the desert for 40 days alone; and he comes out proclaiming the Kingdom of God beginning his ministry. Let’s look at that sequence. We’re baptized or recommitted to our faith. We move to prayer, study, learning God’s will, hopefully deeply into our souls, our being.

But in too many cases we get “stuck” there, in a never-ending loop. You know... prayer, confession, worship internal commitment to repent, and then back to life as usual, not only personally but collectively. I never heard a sermon on God’s call for community justice until college. It was all about me individually caring and loving my family and neighbors and maybe others further away with gifts of charity.

In college and beyond I began to hear the rest of the Gospel: change to bring about Justice and God’s righteous kingdom, but not much time for inner spiritual development or listening. It was all about action! (**Slide 1 shown.**)² Two giants of inner listening to God, Thomas Merton, a trappist monk, and Howard Thurman, a mystic Methodist minister, had an enormous impact on the church and social action, mentoring many social change agents. You must be

¹ This manuscript is an earlier draft of the sermon preached live at Prince of Peace Presbyterian Church (Crofton, MD) on August 9, 2020.

² Slides referencing ripples in water were shown throughout the live sermon.

anchored in inner spiritual life – listening to God – if you want to be effective in social change. Gandhi, MLK, Nelson Mandela, and of course the late John Lewis are all examples of those anchored in this way of being.

God works in ripples from inside us, outward. **(Slide 2 shown.)** Think of prayer and singing, personal to congregational and beyond. From one haunting voice to band music that draws immense crowds. God cares for all of God's creation. All means all not just parts, soul, individual, or charity alone... the Sun, moon, earth nature, as well as the oppressed and poor. As Jesus said at the beginning of his ministry:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,

The gospel is not just about our relationship with God or our neighbor. It's concerned with justice in culture and societal structure. That is with Justice for all people.

Today we are in the midst of enormous stress from COVID-19, Black Lives Matter, presidential election politics, and so on. The news is full of individuals and groups acting out. **(Slides 3 and 4 shown.)** As we struggle to live our lives, our ripple is buffeted by many other ripples. **(Slide 5 shown.)** How are we to move forward in our lives? How are we to feel God's loving guiding hand? How are we to help others find love and justice? How are we to spread the Good News of God's kingdom?

People in our own presbytery's congregations are being buffeted about trying to minister to each other. Discussions resulting from Black Lives Matter are tearing some congregations apart. One elder resigned from the session of a church saying, "I've got too much stress in my own life; I can't deal with this church controversy too." Ministers are depressed and struggling with how to pastor, how to have congregations deal with conflict in a reconciling way, and how to respect differences while preaching the Gospel as God inspires them without alienating anyone.

What are we to do? We must immerse ourselves and others in God's "ripple." **(Slide 6 shown.)** How? Start with quiet, deep listening to God in your heart and soul. From that centered place encounter your loved ones, your neighbors, your congregation, maintaining that contact with God's ripple. Let the Holy Spirit guide you into what God wants to happen, the road he's calling us to. Be freed from getting caught up in our own personal biases and disagreements with others. But do enter the conflicts – riding on God's ripple of love – mercy – justice – and peace, humbly! We must love all with God's agape especially with those who are in opposition to our view seeking always to discern the Gospel and God's will not our own. Movie *Invictus* example of Mandela. May we feel God's ripple as he holds all of us in his arms! Amen.