3-7/8-20 Listening and Paying Attention Rev. Amy Haines

Ps 119:105-112, Lent- Walking with Jesus  
Jn 10:1-5, 14-16

Last Sunday during the children’s moments, Kim had the children play a short game of Simon Says. Remember Simon Says? “Simon Says put your hands on your head. Simon Says put your hands in your lap. Touch your ear. I didn’t say Simon Says!” You have to really listen and pay attention to only do what Simon Says.

How many of us have ever gotten in trouble for not listening well or not paying attention to the directions of a teacher, or the story of a spouse, or the specific instructions of a boss at work.

..Writer Charles Swindoll once found himself with too many commitments in too few days.

He got nervous and tense about it. He said,

"I was snapping at my wife and our children, choking down my food at mealtimes, and feeling irritated at those unexpected interruptions through the day. Before long, things around our home started reflecting the patter of my hurry-up style. It was becoming unbearable.”

"I distinctly remember after supper one evening, the words of our younger daughter, Colleen.

She wanted to tell me something important that had happened to her at school that day.

She began hurriedly, 'Daddy, I wanna tell you somethin' and I'll tell you really fast.'

"Suddenly realizing her frustration, I answered, 'Honey, you can tell me -- and you don't have to tell me really fast. Say it slowly."

"I'll never forget her answer: 'Then listen slowly.'"

-*Bits & Pieces,* June 24, 1993, pp. 13-14. sermonillustrations.com:listening

If we are honest with God today, most of us have to confess to times when we don’t listen well.

We choose selective hearing. We zone out on kids, parents, coworkers, and friends as they tell their stories. We work as we listen, trying to multitask, then five minutes later cannot recall anything that was said.

Listening is a lost art, as many voices compete for our attention. Some are noise. Some are important. Some encourage us. Others discourage us. Some shatter us. Some strengthen us.

Some sadden us. Some bore us. With so many voices competing for our attention, no wonder we pick and choose which voices to pay attention to!

Today, we are invited to listen to the one voice that matters most in life—the voice of Jesus, our Good Shepherd. Jesus is the voice of God, a voice that reminds us we are loved, a voice that teaches us God’s ways, and a voice that calls us to follow. And the best way we learn the voice of Jesus, our Good Shepherd, is through the intentional study of the Scriptures, the Bible, the Word of God.

Study of the Scriptures is one of several spiritual practices, or as I call them, holy habits,

that grow our relationship with God. These holy habits are not new. Jesus lived by them.

They are illustrated throughout Scripture. They have been the foundation for a relationship

between God and God’s people across generations.

Throughout this season of the church year we call Lent, I invite you to journey with me

in growing deeper in these holy habits so that we strengthen our walk with Jesus.

For when we strengthen our walk with Jesus, we then better respond to God in word and action, in living with God and living for God.

Last week in worship and on Wednesday night we reflected on the foundational habits

of communal worship and private prayer. This week we reflect on the importance of listening to God and learning from God through the study of the Bible, God’s Word.

Every week in worship- we hear a small sampling of God’s word. Sometimes we hear and reflect on a longer story of our faith ancestors. Other times we hear and reflect on select verses that are always part of a greater story.

Our Psalm today was a portion of Psalm 119. If we were to read aloud all of Psalm 119, we would have to cut out a song or two from worship. There are 176 verses in Psalm 119, all that celebrate the glory of God’s Word!

Do we pay attention to the commitment to God’s Word proclaimed through this psalm?

Your word is a lamp before my feet and a light for my journey.

I will keep your righteous rules.

Teach me your rules!

I won’t forget your Instruction.

I won’t stray from your precepts.

Your decrees are my heritage forever; they are the joy of my heart.

Notice that this psalm rejoices at God’s Word. How often do we rejoice in the Bible as the Word of God? Do we view the Bible as God’s love letter, or God’s law? Do we view it simply as history,

or as God still speaking to us today?

Like other voices in our lives, we need to learn to listen to God’s voice.

..Brian Brown tells the story of being at the community pool with his family. Kids were screaming, playing, and splashing in the pool, music was playing, the lifeguard whistles were blowing and in the midst of conversation, his wife shooshes him.

He said, "What are you doing?"

"Shoosh, did you hear that?"

"Hear what?" he said.

"Listen!"

And over all of the noise, she had heard their youngest daughter screaming. As she listened to it, she then said, "OK, everything's alright. That's a happy scream."

He said he was blown away that, over all of the other voices, she not only recognized her child's voice but was able to identify what type of scream it was. Why? Because every day she talked with them and in the process learned the sound of their voices.

-- Tim Smith sermoncentral.com

When I worked with multiple pastors at Leipsic, I could tell when Pastor Ruth was walking down the hallway simply by the sound of her voice and her distinctive laugh.

And yes, it is true, as a mom I can distinguish the cry of my children in a group of children

as I know their voices quite well.

Just as we learn the voices of those closest to us in our lives, we are also called to learn the voice of God in our lives. How do we do that? By spending time with God, speaking and listening in prayer, reading and reflecting God’s Word, praising and pondering God’s presence with us in worship.

Jesus himself learned to listen to the voice of God through prayer and worship and study of the Scriptures. Today, he calls us to do the same. These holy habits strengthen our walk with Jesus

because they train us to listen for God’s voice.

In John 10, Jesus describes himself as the good shepherd whose followers know his voice.

In Jesus’ time, shepherds would often pen their sheep together for the night, for protection and support. Then the sheep would be divided in the morning simply by the call of the shepherd’s voice. Sheep will only follow the voice of their shepherd, not a stranger’s voice.

When we follow Jesus as our good shepherd, we learn the voice of God speaking into our lives.

How do we learn to listen and pay attention to God speaking to us?

..Theologians use the term “revelation” to describe God’s self-disclosure of God’s efforts to speak to us. Some theologians speak or two categories of revelation: general revelation and special revelation. General revelation is often used to describe what we learn of God from observing the world that God has made, including not only nature but the arts, our human story, and more. Special revelation involved God’s direct action to speak to us—this includes the work of the Holy Spirit, the life, teaching, death, and resurrection of Jesus, and the Scriptures.

-Adam Hamilton, “The Walk” Chapter 2: Study p.43

If we are open to paying attention to the world around us, God is often speaking to us in the ordinary of everyday life.

..Jesus routinely saw in nature metaphors or illustrations of the kingdom of God. Mustard seeds, wheat, weeds, sheep, fish, fig trees, and yeast all figure into his parables. He had a keen eye for how the natural world reveals truths about God. -Adam Hamilton, “The Walk” Chapter 2: Study p.44

I cannot see a sunset or a sunrise without saying thanks to God for the beauty of God’s creation. And often when I am worrying about something and see a bird hop across our back porch, I am reminded of Jesus’ words of God’s care for all creation, and I worry a bit less.

As a musician, I can appreciate the diversity of the arts. How many have been given the gift of creativity, be it art, music or literature. Often that creativity speaks to our human condition

and the struggles and hopes and goodness of our lives. The songs of our faith also speak to my soul, and remind me of God’s Word.

In our Wesleyan tradition, we believe that God is also revealed in our experiences and tradition and reason and intuition. God has often spoken to me through the stories of other people.

Their stories of fear and courage, of sin and redemption, of despair and hope strengthen my faith journey. The stories of those who have gone before us encourage me to keep on growing in faith.

God has given us brains, to reflect on what we see around us and how that relates to God.

I also believe God has given us intuition and reason to gut check if what we are learning

is from God or from our own wishful thinking.

God speaks a lot through the sacredness of our ordinary days and ongoing relationships.

Yet we verify these general revelations with divine revelation.

How is the Holy Spirit moving in and through our lives? What have we learned through Jesus, God’s Word in the flesh, about loving God and loving others? And what do we continue to learn about God, about ourselves, and about the relationship between God and humanity as we read and reflect on the Scriptures?

The Bible is the best selling and often least read book, even though it proclaims the story of God and our story as God’s people! A recent study found that 87 percent of all Americans own a Bible, but a majority of these had read little or none of it. Another poll found that only 35 percent of Christians read their Bible weekly. But if we’re serious about walking with God daily,

knowing God and God’s will for us, reading and studying Scripture will be a regular part of our lives.

-Adam Hamilton, “The Walk” Chapter 2: Study p.49

Yes, the Bible is complex. 66 different books from a variety of genres of literature.

Stories of the people of Israel as God’s people. Stories of Jesus as God’s Son and the difference knowing Jesus made in the lives of his believers. The Bible was written over many generations,

yet is still the living word of God for us here today.

The Scriptures were foundational for Jesus. Jesus read, studied, and memorized the Bible.

He was able to quote it, and freely did. His life’s mission was shaped by its words. His ethics, his theology, his spirituality were all shaped by Scripture. But we also see him challenging prevailing interpretations of Scripture, debating the meaning of Scripture, and at times even setting aside Scripture… in light of the two commandments to love God and love neighbor.

-Adam Hamilton, “The Walk” Chapter 2: Study p.51 adapted

Even on the cross, Jesus breathed out Scripture as his prayers.

First, he quoted Psalm 22:1 as a lament in his anguish.

*My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?*

Then later, he offered Psalm 31:5 as his prayer of trust and surrender.

*Into your hands I commit my spirit.*

If God’s word was foundational for Jesus, God’s Word is also foundational for us. Scripture reminds us of who and whose we are. We are called to read Scripture for what it says

about God, about us, and about the relationship between God and humankind.

Again, if we are honest today, many of us would confess that we don’t read the Scriptures

as often as we ought. We get bogged down in words we don’t understand. We can’t get beyond the Old Testament violence or moral code that doesn’t speak to our context. Or we read Jesus’ words, and pretend to not understand them because they call us to change our ways.

Yet God’s Word is God’s Word, that calls us to study and reflect and follow and live by God’s ways of love and justice, hope and promise, community and redemption.

As you study the Scriptures this week, as you read to grow deeper in your walk with Jesus, consider these ways to read the Bible:

Read for understanding

What is happening in the story?

What is the passage’s historical context?

Read for formation

What does the passage say about the character or heart of God?

What is God saying to your life through the passage?

Pray the scriptures

Turn the verses into your prayer for the day

Practice Lectio Divina, a divine reading

where you read the same passage 3-4 times,

asking God to speak to you through a word or phrase

Study with others

Gather in a small group or a Sunday School class

to reflect together and learn together

from one another’s life experiences and insights

..Two members of the same Sunday School class were once in the hospital at the same time,

and as Bill and his pastor were talking about how Ken was getting along, a nurse walked in and began to laugh to think these gentlemen were in Sunday School. She equated Sunday School with children and flannel graphs and cute songs about the BIBLE.

"At your age?" she chuckled, not believing what she was hearing.

Bill, who was 70, replied, "You're never too old to learn."

--David Leininger “Growing in Faith” 9-10-00 leiningers.com adapted

However you study the scriptures, start somewhere! Find a readable translation, then start with five verses a day. If you regularly study the scriptures, move up to five chapters a day.

Maybe during this season of Lent you want to read through the entirety of one Gospel. I would suggest starting with the Gospel of Luke, to get the full picture of Jesus’ birth and ministry, death and resurrection.

Scripture records what the biblical authors heard God saying to them as they listened to the Spirit. It is the testimony and reflections of God’s people concerning their experiences of God’s deliverance, God’s discipline, God’s grace, and God’s will. It is the primary witness we have

to God’s Word that became flesh in Jesus Christ. As we read it, illumined by the Spirit, we hear God speak through it.

- Adam Hamilton, “The Walk” Chapter 2: Study p. 62

As we open ourselves to listening and paying attention to God’s voice, the Scriptures will not only inform us, but also transform us. We will grow more like Jesus as we follow God’s ways

that we learn through the scriptures.

I find that every time I read a Scripture, I glean something new. Because my walk with Jesus is different now than it was 30 years ago, or even 5 years ago, my understanding of God’s Word has changed along with my faith journey.

As you study Scripture, you will find that you are, like Jesus, able to draw upon what you’ve studied in Scripture to guide, shape, direct and comfort you.

-Adam Hamilton, “The Walk” Chapter 2: Study p.148

As Eugene Peterson once wrote:

Christians feed on Scripture. Holy Scripture nurtures the holy community as food nurtures the human body. Christians don’t simply learn or study or use Scripture; we assimilate it, we take it into our lives in such a way that it gets metabolized into acts of love, cups of cold water, missions into all the world, healing and evangelism and justice in Jesus’ name, hands raised in adoration of the Father, feet washed in company with the Son.

*-Eugene Peterson, Eat This Book, Eerdman’s Publishing Company. -*thepastorsworkshop.com:theBible

Today, we are invited to listen for the voice of Jesus, the good shepherd. Today, we are invited to learn the voice of Jesus through the intentional study of God’s Word. Today, we are invited to follow the voice of Jesus to live by God’s ways.

May our holy habits deepen our walk with Jesus.

God, guide us on the journey. Let us pray.

HYMNS on this day:

#451 Be Thou My Vision

#601 Thy Word

#396 O Jesus I Have Promised