

The Practice of Paying Attention
1 Kings 19:9-13; Matthew 13:10-17
August 23, 2020

As we find ourselves at the beginning of another school year, and our son Joshua is beginning his junior year at a new college, God has placed the theme of listening and paying attention on my heart, and it may be a timely topic for us all to consider. I have tried to listen to Joshua as he talks about his hopes and dreams for college, as well as his challenges and concerns during this time of covid.

I have been watching heartbreaking images and reports across the country and around the world as families are separated from loved ones in the hospital being treated for the virus. I have tried to pay attention as teachers and health care workers express fear and anxiety about just doing their jobs.

I watch the stories on TV as protesters for Black Lives Matter demonstrate, but feel like they are not being heard. I hear the rancor from politicians on both sides of the aisle as they attack each other, and I wonder, “Is anybody listening? Is anyone paying attention to what the other one is saying? Do they care?”

The bible has a lot to say about the value of listening and paying attention – paying attention to the outer world as well as their inner world – Jesus, the prophets, the Apostle Paul and others. There are also many spiritually attuned writers and thinkers, contemplatives, mystics, and authors who counsel us to listen and pay attention – Thomas Merton, Thomas Keating, Richard Rohr, Cynthia Bourgeault, and Barbara Brown Taylor, to name just a few.

I often think the outside world would be far better off if people paid more attention to their inner world before they speak. Some people are busy thinking about what they are going to say next instead of listening to the other speak and finish their thought.

I meet with my spiritual director every month on Zoom, and one thing that attracted me to her is that when I spoke, I felt like I was really being heard. Ruah listened fully and completely, and paused after I spoke before responding. Have you had that experience? I haven’t had it very often, but it is amazing. Learning to listen. The practice of paying attention. The bible and spiritual writers of all kinds have a lot to say about this topic for those who have ears to hear.

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So where do we look for God in our lives? Where is God speaking? I was moved this summer while walking in the majestic redwoods, both in Muir Woods and Armstrong Woods in Sonoma County. I was amazed when we went to the ocean and walked on the shore at sunset. What could God be saying in the roar of a

waterfall . . . a beautiful sunset, or gigantic redwood trees that have offered shade and protection for centuries? What could be the message from the One whose creation brought us the Perseid meteor shower that so many enjoyed in the skies recently?

What is the message of the universe in the silence of a dark night when all you can see are the stars, and all you can hear are the nocturnal sounds of nature? When flames of a bonfire crackle and rise to the heavens, do you experience a spark of the divine, or marvel at a full moon that reflects on the water? What comes forth from within when you sit for thirty minutes in meditation, or what jumps off the page for you when you practice lectio divina? What is the message from a dog or cat who offers unconditional love for you at the end of the day? These are some of the questions I have thought about this summer. Extra time at home during covid seems to reinforce this tendency.

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The prophet Elijah went up into the mountains. We read that "A great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before him, but the LORD was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake came a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper." What do you think got Elijah's attention in all of this?

We can venture a guess, because "When Elijah heard it, he pulled his cloak over his face and went out and stood at the mouth of the cave." Maybe he was taking shelter from the storm. Then a voice said to him, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" Notice God asks the same question of Elijah at the end of today's reading as he does in the first verse. The question is repeated. Maybe it was in order to see if Elijah was paying attention. What was he doing there anyway? Can you see him in your mind's eye?

Do you hear that same still, small voice that Elijah heard? What does it mean to pay attention to God? How might life be different as a result? Even when we can't see God, do you notice God's manifestations?

The ancient Celtic Christians were fond of saying, "There is something of God in everything. You just have to know where to look for it." As the poet and Jesuit Gerard Manley Hopkins put it, "The world is charged with the grandeur of God."

What could it mean in our lives if we were to be in tune with nature, and able to listen for the heartbeat of God? Would that tell you something about the direction of your life? What would it mean to trust your instincts and to have a holy hunch about where God is nudging you, rather than leaving it to blind chance?

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The disciples and those living at the time of Jesus had their own ideas. In our New Testament reading, we see that Jesus often spoke in parables. It was puzzling to many. It would take listening between the lines and having the ears to hear stories and meanings that were unfamiliar yet compelling.

People today still hear and heed the parables of Jesus. A 69 year old retired teacher I know heard God telling her to go to seminary. My nephew in Pittsburgh traveled to Guatemala last summer because he felt God was urging him to help build a meeting center for the Young Life organization. People are heeding the call to leave their jobs and travel to areas that have been ravished by natural disasters and help them rebuild. They are doing this because they felt God tugging at them to go.

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What is God whispering in your ear? Listening is a skill we acquire, and it means not only listening to voices on the outside, but listening to the voice inside of you that is important. It does not come naturally to many people. It takes work and effort, and it's even harder when we are not just "listening" for words that are spoken, but sensing a movement of the Spirit. It is the kind of listening that probes deep into our souls to discern what even a good set of ears cannot hear. It is so exciting. I don't know that there's anything more important in all the world than listening for the voice of God, or feeling God stir deep within your soul.

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For three years while living in New Jersey, I attended weekly classes for three years that focused on spiritual formation and training to become a spiritual director. It meant paying attention to how God could be speaking and acting in your life. God put it on my heart to help other people do the same.

The prophet Elijah did not understand how God was communicating with him at first. It took time. It took effort. And most of all, it took becoming attuned to what the message might be for him.

Who or what is it that speaks to you when you are paying attention? What is it that is revelatory for you? Doesn't the very heart of the Christian faith dictate that God was revealed in Jesus Christ? So why wouldn't God continue to reveal to us today? If so, we ought to prepare ourselves by cultivating holy habits, and hanging out in sacred places, where God is sure to be present, which is just about any place you go if you have the eyes to see and the ears to hear.

What are you seeing and hearing? Maybe we've been looking for God in all the wrong places. Maybe we haven't heard God call our name or give us a nudge. Maybe we've turned up the volume so loud in our radios and in our heads that the voice of God gets drowned out.

I used to wear ear buds when I went out to walk or jog, But now I just leave them at home, because I've found that walking early in the morning or late in the evening is a prime time to hear God speak, and it's important not to be distracted.

There's nothing more important in all the world than learning to listen for God's Word to us. That voice goes well beyond words and stirs the depths of our souls. It is the universal language of God where no words are needed. It does require that we learn to listen and pay attention.

When you hold a new born baby, you don't need words. When someone gives you a hug in a time of sorrow, you don't need words, although we have all been missing hugs during covid.

The Psalmist in the OT laments,

Hear, O my people, while I admonish you;

O Israel, if you would but listen to me!

¹¹ *'But my people did not listen to my voice;*

Israel would not submit to me.

¹² *So I gave them over to their stubborn hearts,*

to follow their own counsels.

¹³ *O that my people would listen to me,*

that Israel would walk in my ways!

Ps. 81:8, 11-13

Are we listening? Are we walking in the ways of the Spirit as the Psalmist urges? Elijah finally got it as he stood at the mouth of a cave and pulled his cloak over his face. He knew that God was speaking and he was paying attention. Could it be that God was speaking to Elijah all along, but he did not know it?

Many people in the day of Jesus also neglected to pay attention or did not listen.

Jesus said to the disciples,

“You will indeed listen, but never understand,
and you will indeed look, but never perceive.

¹⁵ For this people's heart has grown dull,
and their ears are hard of hearing,
and they have shut their eyes;
so that they might not look with their eyes,
and listen with their ears,

and understand with their heart and turn— and I would heal them.”

¹⁶ But blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear.

¹⁷ Truly I tell you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see, but did not see it, and to hear what you hear, but did not hear it. Matthew 13:15-17

Do you see what the disciples saw? Do you hear what they heard when their ears burned? It takes time. It takes prayer. It takes paying attention to the tiniest details of your life everyday.

You've probably heard the saying, "The devil is in the details," and yet I think just the opposite is true -- God is in the details. God is in the details of your everyday life. Jesus says as much in Matthew today. Elijah discovered it to be true when he stood at the mouth of the cave.

“God is still speaking” is the motto of the United Church of Christ, and today, more than ever, it is important to listen. Amen

1 Kings 19:9-13 The LORD Appears to Elijah

And the word of the LORD came to him: “What are you doing here, Elijah?”

¹⁰ He replied, “I have been very zealous for the LORD God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, torn down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too.”

¹¹ The LORD said, “Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by.”

Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake.¹² After the earthquake came a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper.¹³ When Elijah heard it, he pulled his cloak over his face and went out and stood at the mouth of the cave.

Then a voice said to him, “What are you doing here, Elijah?”

Matthew 13:10-17

¹⁰ Then the disciples came and asked him, ‘Why do you speak to them in parables?’

¹¹ He answered, ‘To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given.

¹² For to those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away.

¹³ The reason I speak to them in parables is that “seeing they do not perceive, and hearing they do not listen, nor do they understand.”

¹⁴ With them indeed is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah that says:

“You will indeed listen, but never understand,
and you will indeed look, but never perceive.

¹⁵ For this people’s heart has grown dull,
and their ears are hard of hearing,
and they have shut their eyes;
so that they might not look with their eyes,
and listen with their ears,
and understand with their heart and turn—
and I would heal them.”

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