

Sermon Sounds of Distant Silence

As Christians, if we want to understand Jesus and much of the Christology that has flooded our churches, we must read the book of Isaiah, one of the most profound theological and literarily expressive works in the Bible. Scholars have divided it into three sections, each section authored by different people. The first 39 chapters comprise the original book and it is known as First Isaiah, because it was most likely it was written by the prophet himself with assistance of his followers around the years 740 BCE.

Chapters 40–55 are known as Second-Isaiah is, which was written 150 years later by members of the “school” of Isaiah when the Jews were exiled in Babylon circa year 585 BCE. This section of the book seeks to comfort the Jewish people who have been conquered by the Babylonians and forced to live in a foreign land with foreign gods.

The final 10 chapters are known as Third-Isaiah.

Today’s reading is the first chapter of Second Isaiah and it begins with words that we often hear at Christmas time, “A voice of one calling out in the desert: prepare a way for the Lord.”

True to this genre of writing has God directly speaking to the prophet. Several verses before this morning’s passage, God asks, “To whom will you compare me?” And then God saying, “do not liken me to gods made with human hands.” Isaiah also gives us a new image of God, one who is stretching out the heavens like a tent. The metaphor is common in the Hebrew Bible, as the action of stretching out animal skins around poles to create a tent would have been familiar. I’m sure the Jewish people listening to this prophet asked, “What kind of creator is this?” One who makes a home for God’s creatures. One who provides and protects.

Let us listen to this reading from Isaiah.

May the words from my mouth and the meditation of all hearts be acceptable to you, O God, our rock and our redeemer. Amen. Grace and peace be with you on this day.

Do you ever wonder what exactly people are hearing? They may be in the same room, listening to the same talk as you, but somehow, they hear something completely different.

Back in the late 90s I was serving a church in Homestead Florida comprised mostly of migrant farm workers, factory workers, and 1st generation immigrants.

One Sunday, two young men who went to High School together were eager to get into a fist fight. So, I preached the most passionate non-violence and peace-making sermon I could muster. At the end of the worship service, the two young men were on the church lawns getting ready to fight with their parents watching.

I ran over to stop the fight. To my surprise, the parents were egging them on. Well, I managed to avert the skirmish that day, but I thought to myself – did they not hear my sermon?

I figured it out several years later when I was part of a conflict resolution workshop. Preaching love and peace is not enough, especially for people who are in the middle of a struggle. Telling people to love one another is not going to resolve their differences. There has to be a recognition of their grievances and they must believe they're not alone in their struggle.

Today's reading from Isaiah is asking the Jewish people to not lose faith. Our Creator God, who set the stars in their place, will set things right. Have hope in the Lord, says Isaiah, and your strength will be renewed. You will soar on eagle's wings. You will run and not grow weary.

Isaiah's question, "Do you not know? Have you not heard?" is what caught my attention when I first read it. Because it's the question I ask many people today.

It reveals a level of exasperation I can connect to. How many times do I have to tell you? Were you not listening? How can you not know this? Over 2500 years have passed since the author of

Isaiah wrote these words, and we still see people not knowing and not listening, and preachers everywhere asking, “Do you know? Have you not heard?”

And we’re not surprised because it’s everywhere. It’s in politics. It’s in our neighborhood and churches. It has become so pervasive that we publicly lament how the art of listening is practically gone. People just want to say what they what they want to say. They don’t want to hear what they sound like, and much less listen to an opposing point of view.

A woman suddenly stops a man walking down the street and says:

“Henry, I am so happy to see you after all these years! My, how you’ve changed! You were so tall and now you’re not. You used to so well built, and now look at you, you’ve gotten rather plump. You were so fair, one might even say you were pale, and you’re kissed by sun. Good grief you have changed! What happened, Henry?”

“Excuse me ma’am,” the man said, “My name is not Henry! My name is John.”

To which the woman calmly responded: “Oh, so you changed your name too!”

As comical as that situation is, we have to admit that similar exchanges happen all the time with people who hold on to their preconceived, erroneous notions and refuse to listen. We have to be careful with preconceived notions, because they could very easily be labeled as prejudice.

For those of us who are Hispanic, we often have to help people with their preconceived notion that being Latino or Hispanic is not the same as being Mexican. Just because we speak Spanish, or have Latino features, it does not automatically make us Mexican.

It is possible to be Latino and have Black features, even Asian features. But many people have preconceived notions of what a Latino is.

The same happens in many other communities. Shall I name a few?

- Asians who are accused of being Chinese, even though they might be from Singapore.
- Palestinians who are accused as members of Hamas
- Italians accused of being related to the mafia

- Irish with excessive drinking
- Germans with rigidness and inflexibility
- Millennials and Generation Z with being fragile and oversensitive
- LGBTQ people with artistic or flamboyant flare
- And Christians with being narrow minded

As I said earlier, it's everywhere. And for the purposes of this sermon, I will suggest that it all stems from our inability to listen to each other. To be more specific, the problem is not that we're not listening. It's just that we're listening for a very narrow spectrum of information. We only listen to what we want to hear. Do you know what I mean?

Too many of us have narrowed down our spectrum of listening so that we only pay attention to those voices that will agree with what we already think.

You may want to think about this in terms of our spectrum of hearing, the detection of sounds emitted at a variety of ranges. I'm sure that a choir director has perfected her hearing to such an extent that her spectrum of hearing is broader than most people. She can hear which member of her choir is off key. [Nobody is looking at you, Mark Musser.](#)

The same goes for listening. What is our range? Do we only listen to what we like? Do we stop listening when the range of information does not match our preconceived notions?

[Two friends were walking on the sidewalk of a busy street during rush hour. There were all sorts of traffic noise surrounding them: car horns honking, feet shuffling, people talking! And amid all the noise, one friend turns to the other and says, "I hear a kitten."](#)

["No way," her friend responded. "How can you hear a kitten with all of this noise? I can't hear anything. You must be imagining it."](#)

["No really, I hear a kitten." She stopped for a moment, walked towards a cement planter with a tree in it, pushed back the leaves and found a little tabby kitten.](#)

“That’s amazing!” said her friend, “You must have a super-human hearing. What’s your secret?”

“No, my hearing is just the same as yours,” The first woman replied as she reached for the kitten. “I think it has to do with what sounds will grab your attention.”

“What do you mean?” Asked her friend, still amazed at the kitten in her friend’s hand.

“Watch, I’ll show you.” She reached into her pocket, pulled out some loose change, and threw it on the sidewalk. Amid all of the noise of the city, everyone within thirty feet turned their head to see where the sound of the money was coming from.

“See,” she said. “It’s all a matter of what you are listening for.”

What is our range of listening? Can we hear that sound a kitten makes amid all the traffic? Are we able to hear our own preconceived notions? Can we hear the sounds of distant silence, the Holy Spirit calling us to a life of love and service? Is our prayer full of words and sounds, or do we allow for silence to be part of our prayer?

Those of you who know me, won’t be surprised when you hear me say that I have a very vivid imagination. I’m a visual person, and today’s gospel lesson from the Gospel of Mark is one that provides a lot noisy images. The passage states that the whole city was crowding around the door of the home where Jesus and his disciples were staying. Can you hear the multitudes, people begging for Jesus to touch them? Can you see how overwhelming that must have felt? In the early morning Jesus retreats to a deserted place, away from the noise, in search of silence. Why? Because Jesus knew that in the silence is where he would encounter God.

Sound and noise is part of our existence. In many ways, we’re attracted to it.

We talk too much, and sometime too loudly, drowning out all other voices. We purposefully fill up our days with sound by turning on the radio or entering mindless chatter with no purpose. We fill up our thoughts with voices that reinforce our preconceived notions. We even fill up our

prayers with words and petitions, asking God to give, give, give. Have we ever prayed without a petition? Can we pray and just be.

Those of us who meditate know that the biggest challenge we face is to quiet the mind.

If you haven't tried it yet, I want to encourage you to find a segment of time when you won't be disturbed or distracted by anything. And then, dedicate several minutes to sit with your eyes closed, in silence. You will still hear the sounds from this physical world, but none of it is directed at you, so you'll be able to block it, ignore it. Continue to sit, eyes closed and focus on nothing. What will you hear? Your own mind, playing back recordings of conversations, of music, of voices filled with preconceived notions. That internal dialogue is the next challenge, to block and ignore those voices generated by your mind.

If we succeed, and enter the realm of silence, where we will encounter the Divine.

16th century Christian mystic, St. John of the Cross, wrote "Silence is God's first language."

20th century Christian mystic, Thomas Merton, wrote "God is hidden within me. I find God by hiding in the silence in which He is concealed."

PAUSE – Ringing of a bell - SILENCE

Friends, do you not know? Have you not heard? God loves you, all of you. AMEN