

Can You Hear...?

The Rev. Debbie Cook, Grace Church in Haddonfield
The Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 18, Year B
September 6, 2009

Can you hear me now?

Hear, O Israel, Isaiah says: Do not fear, for God is with you. And God's intention is to save, to restore, to bring wholeness and healing and abundance. And yet, as the circumstances of our lives seem to be destined to confound us—economic stress, aches and pains, illness, loss and grief to name but a few—we find it hard to hold onto a description of a God who desires good for us. For, if God desires it so much, why is it not happening? And we struggle—for the temptation is walk away, to believe only what we can see and hear and feel right now, to lose trust in God's intention, in God's character. God tries to reassure us, perhaps using words, perhaps using other people and circumstances to give us hope, but it is up to us as to whether or not we continue to listen, to hear, to believe. Fear can make us blind to God's presence and action, insensitive to God's touch, make us deaf to God's words. But God continues to show up, continues to hold out a hand and a heart and a voice even when we fail to recognize it. Do not be afraid, God whispers; do not fear, the prophet shouts. Here is your God.

Can you hear Him now?

Listen to James' words of admonition, words of instruction. Fulfill the royal law, the divine law, he exhorts his listeners. Truly love your neighbor as yourself—and not just the neighbors you feel comfortable with, agree with, or who demand nothing from you. Welcome the least among you as you would the wealthiest. Do not show partiality, do not dismiss or devalue someone because they don't speak your language, have the same customs, or are physically or mentally

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disabled in any way. Treat all the same, valuing their life as you would your own. And show that love in tangible, real ways, James says.

For faith by itself, without works, is dead, James declares. James does not dismiss our belief, our being saved by faith, but he does point out that real faith is one that is evident in the way we live our lives. I daresay that there is no one here who has not been faced with that pivotal decision: a neighbor or friend or relative in need of some money, resources, or even that most precious of things in this world—your time, and we need to decide how much, if any, of our selves or resources to share. Those of you who were here for Jay Pierce’s visit (from Food for the Poor) may remember the story he shared of his childhood friend’s family struggling, and when his father asked him what he was going to do for his friend and family, he replied, “I’ll pray for them”. But his father, obviously steeped in James’ words, told him not to push off onto God’s agenda what should be on his. In other words, you share what you have with them, even if you have to sacrifice a bit. And so he listened and sacrificed, and learned a lesson about generosity. He listened to James’ words and allowed his faith to show forth in action, he heard the unspoken cry of those in need. We too, need to listen to the words behind the words in conversations with the lonely, those struggling in so many ways, financially, physically, mentally, emotionally. Hear the cry of the hungry, the rejected, the poor.

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Jesus can hear all their cries, even when he may so desperately wanted not to. We forget sometimes, in all the miracle stories, that Jesus is fully human—as such, gets tired, seeks rest, wants to just run away for a little while. And yet, even without newspapers, television or the internet, people figure out who he is wherever he goes, even in a foreign territory. And so the cry of the Syrophenician woman came to him. He wanted not to listen, even failed to be welcoming and kind but she would not let go—for the cries of her daughter resounded too loudly in her own being for her to be silent. Her persistence helped to Jesus hear again, and respond with mercy in a very tangible way.

As Jesus traveled his way back towards Galilee, he encountered others with their own cries of distress. A deaf man—one without hearing—with his speech perhaps difficult or even garbled because he cannot even hear his own voice is brought to him to be made well. This time Jesus does not hesitate, and draws the man aside—not wanting an audience, wishing to fly under the radar? We do not know. And unlike the healing of the woman’s daughter, this time he touches to communicate his intention—for he knows that words alone will not convey his intention to this man. The touching, the use of physical actions, may have been how this deaf man ‘heard’ others, how he understood and communicated with those around him—and Jesus honored that. For all his physical actions, Jesus spoke but one word, meaning ‘be opened’—and the man could again hear and speak clearly. His deaf ears, his tangled tongue, listened to words uttered by their creator and redeemer, and responded. That which perhaps isolated him from those around him—his deafness, his difficult speech—was now gone, and he was restored not only to health but to his community as well. Not only was his hearing and his speech opened up, but his soul was

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opened too—open to hear Jesus’ teaching, open to be transformed by God’s mercy and compassion. He could hear the joy and proclamation of those around him, their wonder and their praise of Jesus, their acknowledgement that wonderful and great things were happening in their midst.

He can hear them now.

The voices of those hurting and in distress still sound in our world today. As members of the body of Christ, we are asked to be open to hear them, to listen and respond to them. And we are also called to listen to the voice of the One of who cares for us, who saves us and redeems us, urging us to not fear as we make our way throughout this life, trusting that God is always with us and calls us each by name with the deepest love.

May we always hear Him—now and always.

Amen.