

Today, If You Hear God's Voice

Psalm 95 / Hebrews 4.7

Lent III: March 15, 2020

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PSALM 95.1-9

O come, let us sing to the LORD;

let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation!

² Let us come into God's presence with thanksgiving;

let us make a joyful noise to God with songs of praise!

³ For the LORD is a great God,

and a great Ruler above all gods.

⁴ In God's hand are the depths of the earth;

the heights of the mountains are God's also.

⁵ The sea is God's, for God made it,

and the dry land, which God's hands have formed.

⁶ O come, let us worship and bow down,

let us kneel before the LORD, our Maker!

⁷ For the LORD, our Maker, is our God,

and we are the people of God's pasture,

and the sheep of God's hand.

O that today you would listen to God's voice!

⁸ Do not harden your hearts, as at Meribah,

as on the day at Massah in the wilderness,

⁹ when your ancestors tested me,

and put me to the proof, though they had seen my work.

HEBREWS 4.7

⁷again he sets a certain day—'today'—saying through David much later, in the words already quoted,

'Today, if you hear his voice,

do not harden your hearts.'

SERMON: Today, if you hear God's voice

Here we are on the third Sunday of Lent. When we were planning for this season, we didn't imagine that this "turning" theme would end up meaning turning people away from being together in the same room.

I used to joke that maybe some year I would give up church for Lent, but it was a joke because I really never meant to do it. And now I know why.

So I am glad that you are not giving up church for Lent. I am glad that we are here together in the ways we can be. Thank you for taking the opportunity of technology to join us this morning. Thank you for reaching out to one another by phone and email and Facebook. I'm convinced that we may end up knowing each other better and being present with one another in ways we hadn't imagined before. Because, after all, I still believe in that power already at work within you to accomplish far more than any of us can ask or imagine.

So we continue the "turning" of Lent.

In the face of temptation by lesser things, we turn our souls toward that which deepens our lives. That was the first Sunday in Lent.

We lift our eyes to the hills and we ask, "From where will my help come?" That was the second Sunday. And we are reminded that the One who created heaven and earth keeps us in a way that frees us to love that same world. Even now.

This week, as beloved Rod Romney has taught us, we sing:

*We lift our hearts, we bring our lives,
Just as we are, without disguise,
O Spirit come, create us new,
That we may walk in peace with you ...
That we may love ourselves in you ...
That we may serve this world for you.*

Now you might imagine that this "heart" thing rings especially true for me. You have probably noticed that pretty much any sermon I preach ends with: "Today, if you hear God's voice, do not harden your hearts."

And occasionally people will ask me when that started to be my routine. That's really a mystery to me. I don't remember when it started. It must have been in the days when I

was serving Grace Baptist Church in Chicago but I have no idea when it occurred to me to say this. And I don't remember ever deciding that this would continue to be the case. It just happened.

And if I don't know *when*, I'm not even exactly sure I know *why* either. I can guess some things.

To say, "today," is to suggest that, while remembering the past and imagining the future is important for spiritual life, listening today is crucial. How we remember the past and imagine the future has everything to do with how we pay attention today. To borrow a line from our UCC friends, "God is still speaking." Today.

So to say, "today, *if you hear God's voice*," is to let you know that I am under no illusion that just because I am speaking, God is. I remind you that the temptation story a couple weeks ago makes it very clear that the Devil is perfectly capable of quoting scripture.

And "today, *if you hear God's voice*," the response is, "do not harden your hearts." Not make sure you get it. Not roll it around in your mind and see what you come up with. Do not harden your hearts. Stay open. Let your heart be softened. Be willing to have it broken if it needs to be. Whatever you do, if you hear God's voice, don't harden your hearts.

Occasionally, people will ask where this line came from. I guess they are curious if I just made it up. I didn't.

It comes from Psalm 95 and then again in its distilled form in Hebrews 4.

In Psalm 95 it is connected to the story in Exodus 17, where God's people are wandering around in the wilderness and they don't have good water to drink. They are grumbling and unwilling to trust the One who had brought them out of slavery. Moses gets so frustrated with them, he uses his staff to hit a rock and beautiful clear water rushes out.

Incidentally, you might see the connection to the temptation story. The people are in the wilderness like Jesus. They are thirsty just like Jesus is hungry – famished – the story says. And under these similar circumstances the people are accusing God of not being trustworthy. Moses has had enough of their complaining and he strikes a rock and water comes out. So perhaps the Tempter was on to something. "You know what

Moses did with that rock for all those thirsty people in the wilderness, why not take things into your own hands, Jesus, and turn these rocks into bread?" "No," Jesus says, "One does not live by bread alone but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God."

So the context for "today, if you hear God's voice," is people who turn away from that voice that says something like "you are beloved" and "you are kept by the One who has made heaven and earth and will set you free," and, instead, let their callousness or cynicism harden their hearts.

It's about the same context in Hebrews 4.

Now, if you ask me *when* I started using this line, I don't know. If you ask me *why*, I have some reasons but those came after the fact. I'm not even sure that I knew *where* this line came when I first started using it.

So it is completely appropriate to ask *what* I could possibly mean by it. What does it sound like to hear God's voice anyway?

I love those opening lines of Psalm 19:

¹*The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims God's handiwork. ²Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night declares knowledge.*

³*There is no speech, nor are there words; their voice is not heard; ⁴yet their voice goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world.*

The psalmist says that one of the ways to hear God's voice is to listen to the sounds of creation. And again, I offer Barbara Gibson's earth-centered adaptations of the psalms. This is her version of Psalm 95:

*O come, let us sing to the beloved,
let us make a joyful noise to the one who loves us!
Let us come before her with thanksgiving
and praise her with songs and dance.*

*The beloved holds the depths of the earth,
and the heights of the mountains are hers.
The sea belongs to her, for she made it,
and also the dry land, which her hands have formed.*

*O come, let us worship and bow down,
let us kneel before the One who made us.
For we are the sheep of her pasture
and the people of her very hands.*

*O listen to the voice of the beloved!
Do not harden your hearts
with cynicism and doubt.
Come listen to the voice of the beloved!*

Today, if you hear the voice of the beloved in the sounds of creation, do not harden your hearts.

In fact, in that creation story in Genesis, these newly minted human beings in the garden do not see God. The story says, they hear the Voice walking in the cool of the day.

And when they hide because they are naked and they don't want to explain how they got that way, the Voice says: "Where are you?"

I remember hearing a Korean student in a preaching class about 30 years ago preach a brilliant sermon on Genesis 3 and 4. He said that in this initial story about creation, the Voice asks: Where are you? And when sibling rivalry boils over into murder, the Voice asks: Where is your brother?

His point was that the voice of God in creation is sometimes heard in the most uncomfortable questions: Where are you? And where is your sister or brother?

Beloved, creation is trying to tell us something today. Can you hear it? It's asking us some serious questions about lives and how we are living it. And no matter how persistently we try to harden our hearts against that voice, it will go on speaking.

You remember the story of Pharaoh? Moses goes in to the palace and says: "Let my people go!" And old Pharaoh says "no." And then all hell breaks loose. There is fog and plagues and death and, the story says, "Pharaoh hardened his heart." The earth was speaking – it was shouting - but Pharaoh refused to listen – even to let his heart break at what was happening to his people and to himself.

Today, if you hear that voice in the sounds of creation and in those serious questions facing us, do not harden your hearts.

In the Godly Play story, you heard Bartimaeus crying out, “Help me; help me!” And the followers of Jesus try to shut him up. Sometimes to hear God’s voice is to listen to those who are crying out for help when even religious people are trying to shut them up.

Today, if you hear those voices crying out for help, do not harden your hearts.

In Psalm 95, there is a lot of talk about music: “sing; make a joyful noise.” There is something about music that can open and soften and break our hearts. As I say, no one goes home humming the sermon.

But music. That’s a different story.

Nancy Burke says that she wishes she could thank Patti La Belle in person but instead she wrote a kind of thank you note:

Every week, for two winters and two summers, as I drove to and from the cancer clinic for treatments, I played her renditions of “Somewhere Over the Rainbow” and “There’s a Winner in You” over and over. When I was frightened and I thought I couldn’t make one more trip, I played those songs to get me there. Afterward, when I was tired and afraid I couldn’t make the drive home, I played them again. My spirits never failed to recover, and the miles flew by ... In the midst of the darkest time in my life, that voice made me feel grateful to be alive ... [And she says] There’s a song for everyone, one incalculable mix of melody and magic that so neatly wraps the heart that we are lifted out of the here and now. And something in us is healed. Search for your song.

I wonder if “today, if you hear God’s voice,” happened at Grace in Chicago because it was the late 80s and early 90s when another virus was stalking the earth – HIV/AIDS. That’s where I got introduced to:

*Healer of our Ev’ry Ill; light of each tomorrow;
Give us peace beyond our fear and hope beyond our sorrow.*

That was our song. And when the world was hardened against us, we would sing that song and that voice would open and soften and break our hearts.

We started this morning with “Amazing Grace how sweet the sound.” What does the voice of God sound like? Maybe it’s the sound of amazing grace.

And when you hear that sound of grace and forgiveness and another chance, and it sounds too good to be true and you don’t exactly understand it, whatever you do, do not harden your hearts.

When you find yourself alone and the only sound you hear is the sound of your own breathing, let your own voice cry out, “Bring Us Home:”

*Bring us home on love’s renewing tide to the place of our belonging,
Bring us home to your redeeming side; bring your scattered people home.*

That’s our song, beloved ones.

And today, if you hear that voice, do not harden your hearts.

NOTES

Barbara Gibson, *Psalms for Troubled Times*, (Crestline Press, 2003), p.70. See Genesis 3 & 4 for the Adam and Eve and Cain and Abel stories. See the Moses and Pharaoh story in Exodus chapters 7-14, see especially 7.22, “so Pharaoh’s heart remained hardened, and he would not listen.” The Bartimaeus story is in Mark 10. Nancy Burke’s story is in *Spiritual Literacy*, eds. Frederic and Mary Ann Brussat (Scribner, 1996), p.303. “Bring Us Home,” is one of Seattle First Baptist’s Heritage Hymns, one of eleven hymns we sing regularly as an expression of our values and vision. It was written by Dr. Rod Romney as part of a connection with a person who died of AIDS.