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## *Community Begins with Listening*

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*Acts 2:22-24; 36-47*

In a recent conversation with several preacher friends, we wondered about the impact of our sermons in a time when everything in the world that needs to change seems so large and intractable. No one knows quite what to say.

These are complicated, confusing, perilous, frightening times. How do we speak about them, especially those of us in the Church?

We're seven months into the coronavirus pandemic, with no end in sight. The strains and stresses of social isolation and fear of infection are affecting all of us in one way or another. The Center for Disease Control said this summer that 41% of adults in the U.S. "reported at least one adverse mental or behavioral health condition" due to Covid-19. One-third report being depressed, and 11% of respondents had "seriously considered suicide in the 30 days before completing the survey." Eleven-percent of adults – and that number jumps to 25% among those between 18 and 24 years of age.

<https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/69/wr/mm6932a1.htm>

Add to that toll the realities of unrelenting injustice, protestors and counter-protestors in the streets, a sputtering economy, fires in the West, hurricanes in the Gulf, floods in the South, a downtown deserted – and three weeks until election day, with uncertainty and threats of violence on the rise.

With apologies to W. H. Auden, who wrote in the aftermath of World War II, we live in an *age of anxiety*. Yes, the nation has lived through worse, but it's hard to shake the feeling that something large and sinister is moving among us, determining our fate. One conspiracy, and then another, and then another, tries to make sense of what we cannot understand.

What are we to say on Sunday that will make a dent in such angst? We preachers worry about dwelling too much on this crisis or that. We don't want to alienate anyone, or compound someone's apprehension. Should we be prophetic or pastoral? Can we afford to ignore anything? How do we exegete ancient texts in this time? Then there's the added problem that we can't see those to whom we're preaching. We can't read the congregation anymore. We weren't called to lead from a digital distance. One of my friends says receives no response from the congregation and has no idea if his preaching is even being heard.

“What can we do from the pulpit?” one of my preacher friends asked.

Frankly, that's a question all preachers should ask themselves in *any* time and in *any* place. The Reformation era statement of faith from Switzerland called the Second Helvetic Confession declares, "The preaching of the Word of God is the Word of God." If that doesn't make a preacher think twice on a Sunday morning, nothing will.

These *are* fear-provoking times, but the Christian Church came to life in such times. The Jesus movement of which we are a part was born in an occupied city among people oppressed by foreign forces whose leader had just been arrested, publicly humiliated, and executed. Rumors abounded, and nefarious schemes were no doubt being laid all around. The people were terrified and in hiding. Shadows of despair were closing in. There was little reason for hope – at least by the way the world measures such things.

It was at precisely such a forsaken moment – when believers felt far from faith, a moment perhaps like ours today – that the Holy Spirit swept into the room that day on Pentecost. It lit up the place, with fire and noise and wind. It was quite spectacular and changed everything in a flash. But then it was gone, and reality showed up again.

We often stop at the Pentecostal fireworks and never get to what happens next. *It's the sermon.* Peter gets up to preach.

"You that are Israelites," he starts the sermon, "*Listen* to what I have to say."

That day, and in our time, *the church begins by hearing the good news, community begins with listening to what makes it possible.* Every relationship starts that way. It may be the most important gift we can give another. Those who cannot listen will have difficulty finding their way into authentic, trusting, partnership whether in intimate relationships or collectively.

“You that are Israelites,” Peter says,

*“Listen to what I have to say. Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with deeds of power, wonders, and signs that God did through him among you, as you yourselves know-- this man...you crucified and killed...*

But God raised him up, having freed him from death, because it was impossible for him to be held in its power. Therefore, let the entire house of Israel know with certainty that God has made him both Lord and Messiah.” (Acts 2: 22-23, 36)

In the broken and fearful world that was Jerusalem back then, Peter’s sermon and the Holy Spirit gave the community everything it needed to face whatever would come. The Spirit bound them together and they began sharing their lives, sharing their material things, sharing their joys and their sorrows, sharing their very daily lives...building community, listening to one another’s stories.

We who stand in that same tradition are part of that same body, we have access to that same hope, we claim the same promise of which the prophets of old spoke: that God is at work among us; that God's love and justice *shall* reign on this earth one day; that every tear will be wiped away and death will be no more. To proclaim that Jesus is Lord is to say that God is sovereign over all of life, and we have nothing to fear.

If we listen closely to that Pentecost experience and that Pentecost sermon, we discover it wasn't simply the gift of languages that made the difference that day, it wasn't only the miracle of multi-ethnic understanding that stirred possibilities in the hearts of those terrified by the circumstances of their time. *It was the community itself that made the difference.* That's where Peter directed his words, to those summoned by that holy fire – he was speaking to frightened people. Broken people. People who thought themselves inadequate or overwhelmed. People undone by life. People not sure what lay ahead and what tomorrow might bring.

People like us. People longing to hear the sound of good news.

That day the Spirit gathered them and formed them into a body, a company of wounded and frightened souls, a community held together by God's love – and with each they found hope.

The gospel is preached on Pentecost in Jerusalem that day: *It was impossible, Peter says, for the power of death to hold Jesus...or any power that works against what God would desire in this world, or any*

*power that would stand against the justice God longs for in this world, or any power that wants to separate us from God's love and the hope we have in God. It was impossible to do that – to separate God from the human community.*

*Therefore, let the entire house of Israel know with certainty that God has made him both Lord and Messiah.*

With his words, Peter wants to give them courage to live into their troubled time. No matter how long the night, he's telling them, the dawn will come, because with God all things are possible. That's the heart of the biblical witness: that God will make a way out of no way.

Nine months ago, on the Sunday of Martin Luther King weekend, we sat in the pews of Dr. King's former church, Ebenezer Baptist, in Atlanta, Georgia. The choir had sung and warmed up the congregation, and we were all now listening and responding to the preacher, Dr. Raphael Warnock. One line in the sermon that day stayed with me: "The will of God," the preacher said, "Will never take you where the grace of God will not protect you."

That word was offered two months before Covid hit, four months before George Floyd's death, and months before the turmoil in which we now find ourselves, that word offered balm to the soul back then, and it does still, today.

*The will of God will never take you where the grace of God will not protect you.*

Christianity, at least as we Presbyterians practice it, depends on preaching to convey the essence of the faith. But sermons don't take place in a vacuum. They depend on a listening congregation, on a gathered community, on people brought together by the Spirit, longing to hear the gospel.

This is the Year of Listening for Westminster. Our listening project will introduce us to new voices and challenge us as we hear different perspectives about what our faith requires of us. Let us remember as we move through this year, either in the preaching or on the streets of this city, God will never take us to a place where God's grace will not protect us.

These are complicated, confusing, perilous, and frightening times. But you and I, we have been formed into a community that has listened well and heard good news about "the tenacious solidarity of God," to use Walter Brueggemann's phrase. *The tenacious solidarity of God.*

There *is* something large and hidden moving among us, and it is the power of God's love.

Anyone feeling overwhelmed by these continuing days of distance – you are not alone.

Anyone impatient for justice to take root – you are not alone.

Anyone caught in a web of anxiety over the politics of the day – you are not alone.

Anyone struggling to find balance and healing and hold things together when they feel like they're falling apart – you are not alone.

Anyone facing the end of life, their own or that of someone they love – you are not alone.

*The will of God will never take us where the grace of God will not protect us* – and the community summoned by the Holy Spirit at Pentecost – the Church – witnesses to that truth.

The gospel we preach, you and I, in its simplest form, is the good news that *God's love will prevail – in fact, it already has.*

Thanks be to God.

Amen.