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## *Listening to Those Long Silenced*

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*Psalm 18:1-6; Luke 5:12-16*

Our God is a listening God.

We learn this in the very opening pages of scripture. The Creator *listens* in the Garden as the first earthlings find their way into the creation. God *listens* when the people of Israel cry out in bondage in Egypt. God *listens* as the Hebrews grow tired of desert wandering and complain against the Lord. The Almighty *listens* as the poor cry out in Israel of old- and sends prophets in response. God *listens*, as we did this morning, to the lament of the psalmist.

And Jesus spends his entire ministry listening – listening to voices everyone else ignores...

The Samaritan women at the well? *Off limits, according to the disciples.*

The woman with uncontrolled bleeding? *Breaking rules in reaching for Jesus.*

The man possessed by demons? *Not on the agenda.*

Some children needing comfort? *An unscheduled intrusion.*

Those who are despised? *An embarrassment.*

A man “covered with leprosy?” *Stay away.*

Jesus is not supposed to talk to any of them *because no one else does*. They’re outside the listening circle people drew around themselves back then. Who’s outside *our* listening circles? Whom do we deem to be an embarrassment, or someone we should stay away from, or someone who is off limits? Where do our boundaries of acceptability lie? Who defines them? To whom have we stopped listening – or maybe never even listened to in the first place? What would we hear?

Author Suleika Jaouad has just published a memoir of her journey living with acute myeloid leukemia, in which she describes the torment she knew from “some wet, starless savagery unfolding beneath my skin.” (*Between Two Kingdoms*; quoted by Chanel Miller in NYTimes Book Review, Feb 21, 2021; p. 16)

For the man Jesus encounters, the savagery was unfolding *on* his skin, and was, therefore visible to everyone. That made the suffering *double*. The leprosy forced him to live, literally, on the margins of community, unaccepted by his own people. Feared as a pariah. Left to fend for himself. Cut off from the living.

“The cords of death encompassed me,” the psalmist writes, sounding like the man with leprosy.

“The torrents of perdition assailed me; the cords of Sheol entangled me; the snares of death confronted me.” (Psalm 18:4-5)

Even from the distance of 3000 years, it’s not hard to imagine the distress of the ancient Hebrew poet. That lament lifted back then is not that different from what we hear today:

“I can’t go on living like this.”

“Don’t do this to me: I’m innocent.”

“My parents didn’t need to die of Covid.”

“You’ve taken my child from me.”

“The world has closed in and there’s no hope.”

“I can’t breathe.”

Anguish is ageless.

Perhaps some of us have felt deep torment in our own lives...A diagnosis that terrifies us with finality...Mental illness that will not loosen its grip on us...Loss of employment and meaning and purpose in life...A relationship suddenly torn apart...A nation or perhaps a family smothered by a pandemic...Attitudes and systems that relentlessly dehumanize.

The psalmist of old crying out in pain is said to be King David, surrounded by enemies, facing the impending collapse of everything. *The impending collapse of everything.* Haven't we all felt that at times over these past 12 months of pandemic, and economic freefall, and racial injustice? *The impending collapse of everything.*

In the Hebrew poet's affliction, thousands of years ago, he turns to forces beyond the control of a world causing so much grief.

"In my distress I called upon the Lord; to my God I cried for help. From the Lord's temple God heard my voice, and my cry to the Lord reached God's ears."  
(Psalm 18:6)

We utter our most elemental prayer in moments of great despair: *Help me, O God*. Howard Rice called that the “natural prayer of every human being.” It rises up in moments of terrible distress – even those who have no faith. When all is lost, where else can we turn but to a *power beyond*, a power we trust cannot be defeated?

*In my distress*, the psalmist says, *I called for help*. The man with leprosy is in the same place. He longs for someone to listen.

“He bowed with his face to the ground,” Luke says, “And begged Jesus, ‘Lord, if you choose, you can make me clean.’” (Luke 5:12)

Our God is a listening God, especially when voices have not been heard.

There’s a line in the Presbyterian Church’s Brief Statement of Faith, adopted in 1991, that says, “The Spirit gives us courage...to hear the voices of peoples long silenced.” There was quite a bit of discussion in the writing committee about that proposed line. To whom is it referring? people wondered. Especially for those whose

voices are typically *heard*, the line raised questions that needed answers.

A theologian who helped draft the statement later said that those whose voices had not ever been heard knew right away to whom that line referred. Native Americans saw it as describing their experience. Black folk said their voices had not ever been seriously listened to. Women said they were tired of being discounted when they spoke up. People with life circumstances that had left them excluded – whether through differing abilities, or their immigrant status, or their poverty, or their sexual orientation – whatever the reason for their exclusion, all heard in that line the church confessing that it had ignored them for too long, and was finally prepared to listen

*The Spirit gives us courage to hear the voices of peoples long silenced.*

Thirty years after the church wrote that line, we might ask, “What’s so courageous about that?” If anyone needs courage, it’s someone whose voice has been silenced, especially over a long time, *not* those who have refused to listen. It takes courage to speak up if you’re shut out from the mainstream, it takes courage to speak up if you’ve

been unjustly imprisoned, it takes courage to speak up if you're suffering from mental illness, it takes courage to speak up if you've been shunted aside by social norms. *That* takes courage. In the account of the man covered with leprosy *he's* the one who's courageous, not Jesus.

But maybe those of us in places of privilege *do* need *courage to listen* because it can be risky. It can break taboos or push beyond the "rules" of cultural or political engagement. It challenges us to dismantle the circles we have so carefully constructed in our lives. It might even *transform us*. It could be dangerous that way.

It should be simple, but each of us knows listening to those beyond our circles is not easy.

Professor Margaret Aymer of Austin Seminary in Texas, taught an adult education class at Westminster last fall. As a Black woman she spoke about how hard it can be to do what we know is right, especially when the odds are long and the task is huge – like changing systems. She quoted the song from the movie *Frozen II*, where Anna sings:

*"I won't look too far ahead  
It's too much for me to take*

*But break it down to this next breath, this next step  
This next choice  
Is one that I can make  
So I'll walk through this night  
Stumbling blindly toward the light  
And do the next right thing."*

Do the next right thing.

We should notice how the man with leprosy speaks out. He doesn't play the victim. He doesn't whine and groan and lay out a list of grievances. He simply acknowledges he needs help, and *points out that Jesus has the power to offer it, the power to do the next right thing.* "Lord, if you choose," he pleads in the midst of his torment, "You can make me clean."

The man knows he's been locked out of places of power, but he also knows that the one with power can share it – and he tells him so.

*Listening to those whose voices have been ignored is the next right thing.* Jesus *learns that* in the encounter with the man living with leprosy. Can we learn that same lesson in our time? Whose lives have been crushed and closed down

and crashed in upon by the weight of circumstances about which we could do something, if only we listened?

Whatever we may think of the news this week of the \$27m settlement of the civil lawsuit brought against our city by the family of George Floyd, the community saw it as those in power finally listening. It was not about only one family and their suffering as awful as it is; it was about many lives devalued and dismissed as without worth. It was about *voices long silenced* being heard.

The poem sung as the offertory this morning is written by a former Voices of Hope singer, Valarie Stein. Voices of Hope is the choir in the women's prison in Shakopee, led by Amanda Weber, Westminster's Minister of Music and the Arts. The song goes like this:

Lift me up, I'm drowning in the shame and the pain  
of my past.

Darkness is my reality.

I can't count how many times I pray that there will be  
a day

when I open my eyes and the imprisonment  
in my own mind would disappear and Hope  
would shine down on my face

and I would feel no more fear.  
So lift me up – I want to smile again,  
I want to feel again.  
I'm lost – I don't know what to do.  
So lift me up – all I know, what was working for me  
isn't working anymore.  
I'm lost – I don't know what to do.  
So lift me up.

It's a psalm of anguish. It could be the man with leprosy crying out. It could be the bleeding woman reaching out to Jesus. It could be the frightened children locked away from their families at the border. It could be any one of us when life has collapsed in on us. The cry goes up in the night and rises to the heavens above. People need to be heard.

*Lift me up, I'm drowning in the shame and the pain of my past.*

“God reached down from on high,” the Hebrew poet says after lifting the lament. “God reached down from on high. God took me; God drew me out of the mighty waters.”

*God listened.*

The ministry of the church, like that of Jesus, begins with listening – especially in places and to people whose voices have long been silenced, whose voices the church has long ignored. And if we can pay attention closely enough, we will find a light there, the light that burns in the night, the spark of hope that will not go out.

Listen to Jan Richardson's poem, *Blessed Are You Who Bear the Light*:

Blessed are you  
who bear the light  
in unbearable times, who testify  
to its endurance  
amid the unendurable, who bear witness  
to its persistence  
when everything seems  
in shadow and grief.  
Blessed are you in whom  
the light lives, in whom  
the brightness blazes – your heart  
a chapel,  
an altar where  
in the deepest night  
can be seen

the fire that  
shines forth in you  
in unaccountable faith, in stubborn hope,  
in love that illumines every broken thing  
it finds.

Our God is a listening God, and, you and I, *we need to be a listening church.*

Thanks be to God.

Amen.