

Listening with the Spirit

Scriptures: Isaiah 43:16-21; Philippians 3:4b-14

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I. Introduction

Over the course of the last couple of weeks, a number of you have come up to me with some level of earnestness and asked me how I was doing, and what that conveyed to me is that how I am doing is probably reflected a little bit more on my face than I like to be the case. Because, by and large, I'm a pretty optimistic person and a hopeful person and I have found myself over the course of the last couple of months a little bit more discouraged than is my wont and a little bit more anxious than is my wont, and I assume that that must play out in my face from the way you all respond to me.

And I'll just tell you in the interest of full disclosure that I have found myself increasingly discouraged about the political dialogue in our country as a whole as we have engaged more deeply in the presidential race. I also have found myself a little bit more discouraged about the state of our denomination as we move towards General Conference and all of the really fierce debates there. And I have found myself a little bit anxious about the next chapter of our congregational life as we move into a phase where Dottie and Kate are both moving on into their own appointments in July and we'd started looking at some of our own restructuring issues. I think all of those factors play out on my face a little bit more than sometimes I hope they will. I am deeply discouraged both in our national dialogue and our denominational dialogue by the incredible polarization that I see and the very sometimes vitriolic and hateful language that gets used, both nationally and within our church, our denomination. And I find myself less hopeful about what the future looks like than I would like to be.

So, as I thought about that, I thought about the fact that in many ways I think our sermon series this Lent has been part of my own processing of some of my anxiety and discouragement, and my own hope that if we brought some better listening skills to some of these dialogues, that maybe they would unfold in some different ways.

II. Trusting the Promise

So, we've been following our lectionary this Lent as we always do, but looking in those scripture passages that the church has set out, at themes that pertain to how we listen to one another and how we engage in dialogue that is up-building and that allows the Holy Spirit to move us to a different place. This wonderful passage from Isaiah was helpful to me this week because this part of Isaiah is written by a prophet that we call Second Isaiah, who lived quite a bit after the original Isaiah lived and lived during the period of the Babylonian captivity when Israel had been conquered by the Babylonians and the Jewish leaders carried off to Babylon. And it was a place of deep discouragement for the children of Israel who had understood themselves to have this unique relationship with God and to have had God's promise that God would be with

them throughout everything, and then to have this sense of God's presence and God's power shattered as the Babylonians conquered Jerusalem and tore their temple down and carried off their leadership. And that put them in this place of an enormous amount of soul-searching about who they were and who God was, because in many ways this threw their very image of God into doubt.

So, Isaiah writes to the people who are feeling frankly a little bit like I have been feeling in terms of how do we go about trusting a God to be faithful even when we don't see where God is? How do we hope that God is still at work in our lives creating a future for us when we don't see what that future could look like? And what the prophet does is fairly common among the prophets which is to remind us in the face of disillusion and discouragement about the way that God has acted in our past. And so, the prophet writing to the people who are in exile and who don't see any way forward reminds them of the time when they were in slavery in Egypt and saw no possibility for new life and hope and in the midst of an uncertain future God raises up Moses to free them from Pharaoh's grasp and lead them through the Red Sea to a new life and a new land. And so, Isaiah writes to these children in exile, "Remember that story, remember our story and God's promise that even in the midst of hopelessness, the Holy Spirit is working."

In our case, when we look at our national elections I am reminded for example of the time when the children of Israel came to Samuel and said, "Make for us a king like the other nations have kings," and Samuel reminds them that God has a different mode of government in store for you and the people didn't listen to Samuel. The people went with what they thought seemed like the most expedient answer to their political problem. And what I am reminded of is even though the people explicitly turn away from who God has called them to be, God remains faithful and active and leading them into a new chapter of their story and choosing to work through the kingship that they wanted established. It was not God's plan to create kings but God uses the people's choice, wrong though it may have been, to continue to work and build up the kingdom.

In terms of our church, I am reminded of that wonderful story in the book of Acts when this budding Jewish-Christian community was wrestling hard with how to incorporate the gentiles who were starting to come to them and wanting to be part of the community. And they had a very vicious fight about the authority of scripture, the role of circumcision, and how this group of people who were on the outside could have room at the table.

III. A New Thing

And in the midst of this hard, rough polarized conversation about the authority of scripture and who was holy and sacred and who was not, God creates a new way. Which is, of course, the next interesting thing that Isaiah says in this beautiful passage today. Because he does the standard thing which is reminds the people about their story, but then he turns right around in a really interesting phrase and he says, "But don't pay attention to that story anymore. I'm about to do something new."

Well, that's interesting because again prophets tend to hearken back to where God has been active in the past and Isaiah here says, "You know what, maybe the old models are not going to work for us anymore and we need to be looking at a different way that God is calling us into the future." "I am about to do a new thing," says God, "can you not perceive it?" In other words, don't get so hung up on the way that you've always done things. Look for where the Holy Spirit may be leading you to some place you don't know."

Now, that's anxiety producing, right, because we are in a place where we don't know necessarily what the future is going to look like. Denominationally I read an interesting article this week that talked about our United Methodist Church being in a period of interregnum. In other words, we had a model for how we were organized and how we related to one another that for 150 years, through the 19th and the early part of the 20th Century, made us the fastest growing, most dynamic Protestant denomination in the world and we were the largest Protestant church in the world in the first part of our century because those models worked so well for us. But for the last 50, 60 years, we've been declining. Those models are not working as well and we don't know what the new models are going to look like yet.

Well, that's a scary place to be as we move to a General Conference where we're trying to organize our church life. And in the midst of that uncertainty Isaiah gives voice to God's heart saying that, "I'm about to do something new with you. Pay attention. Don't get hung up on the way we did things in the past. They were great, they brought us to this place, but I'm doing something new now." We're in a little bit of that same situation as a congregation, as Kate and Dottie move to new appointments and we have to look at how we're organizing our staff. Some of you know that we're looking at how we organize our Sunday morning, are there things that we could be doing differently and maybe better in terms of how we organize our worship life together? That's hugely anxiety producing. And I don't have the answers to that.

I have people come up to me every week saying, "How are we going to do all of our service outreach ministry if Dottie's not here?" And, dear friends, I don't know the answer to that. I don't know. Now you don't want to hear that from me because you hope that I have some vision for what this looks like and I don't. I mean, I have some ideas but I think we're going to live into that and discern where the Holy Spirit is moving because again God's voice is always saying to us, "I'm doing something new. Pay attention and follow."

IV. Inviting the Spirit

This, of course, is also very much at the heart of this wonderful passage from Philipians. In this letter, Paul is actually responding again to that Jerusalem debate about circumcision and he is arguing against those parts of the church that have said all gentiles need to be circumcised and need to obey all of the old rules if they're going to be Christians. In other words, they've got to be Jews first and then Christians. And

Paul falls very much on the other side of that debate that says God is doing a new thing and we need to be paying attention to it if we're going to be faithful to who God is calling us to be. And so, Paul starts off in a wonderful and somewhat uncharacteristic way bragging about his own background. And he says, "You know what, if you're fond of the old ways of doing things, nobody knows those better than I do. I was circumcised on the eighth day. I was a member of the tribe of Benjamin. I was raised in the faith. I became a Pharisee, the most strict adherent of the Jewish laws. I studied under the best teachers. I was zealous like nobody was zealous. I had all of the credentials on the old system. And you know what, I met Jesus and realized that God was doing a new thing and that all of those things that I spent my life valuing and adhering to didn't have the same significance anymore." They're not bad. They're not wrong. I don't regret doing things the way I did them, but God is doing a new thing now and it's not about making sure all of the letter of the law is carried out. It's about living out of the grace and freedom that the power of the resurrection has released into the life of the church. It's a new thing. Pay attention to it. We're doing things differently now.

Where is God in this moment doing something differently with us? As individuals maybe it's a life change like Paul experienced. And my old life was great but I'm being called in a new direction. Maybe it's a church issue. How do we as a Metropolitan family with a rich, rich history celebrate that history and move into a future that God is calling us to, that may look a little bit different than it has before? Where do we as a United Methodist denomination need to change how we are organized and structured so that we can continue to spread the gospel and build God's kingdom of justice and peace in this place and around the world? Where do we as Americans need to celebrate our past and honor that and yet look to a future that may be different for us? All of those places, God is doing something new and invites us to be aware of it. Which, of course, comes back to this whole question of listening. How do we engage with one another in a way that allows the Holy Spirit to move? How do we listen to each other and listen for where God is calling us in this time?

Paul starts to talk about in this wonderful letter how encountering Jesus and allowing Christ to enter fully into his life changed everything about how he lived and who he was. And I think what we have there is an invitation to ourselves to allow the power of the Holy Spirit, the presence of the resurrected Christ into all of our listening and relationships in a way that we don't always. And what I want to suggest there is not complicated or esoteric particularly. It is simply to say are there places in our conversations, in our listening with one another that we could be explicit and intentional about inviting in the power of the Holy Spirit?

We do this on some sort of *pro forma* way every time we open up a church meeting, right? We always start off with a prayer in which we invite God's presence into that meeting. Now, that can get a little *pro forma* frankly and I'm not sure we always pay attention to those words, but that's what's happening in those prayers. We're stopping for a moment from what our agenda is, from what the written agenda is, and saying, "God, the agenda is important but you may have something else on your agenda that we may need to pay attention to." How do we absorb that and be open to where God

may lead us in some new ways? Are there places in our personal conversations with one another when we get heated and at each other and locking horns and increasingly antagonistic, can we take a moment and say, "You know what, let's step back and take a breath, maybe offer a word of prayer, and then move into the conversation again."

Janet Craswell and I have a chance to experience this on a fairly regular basis in our work on the Board of Ordained Ministry, because some of those debates on the board get very heated and very contentious. We have regular occasions where whoever is chairing the committee, which has been me for a while, says, as many of my predecessors did, "Let's take a moment to stop what we're talking about and all just pray together." And you know what, every time we do that, something different happens. There is something about that process of inviting in the movement of the Holy Spirit right in the midst of a conflictual situation that changes the situation.

We experienced this just last month where we were having a fairly energetic debate about how to move forward on a particular issue and we had voted one side of the proposal and that had been voted down, we voted the other side and that had been voted down. We were at loggerheads. And I said, "Let's take a few moments and pray." And we just had some silence to listen a little bit. And as I was praying, I all of a sudden had a thought that had not been on the table before. It felt to me like a third way. So, when we came out of our prayer time, I said to the board, "I just had this interesting thought." Now I didn't say, "I had a revelation that Jesus wants us to do X." Because sometimes it feels that way, like the Holy Spirit gave me this insight and now let me share with you what the Holy Spirit said and you should probably do that. What I said was I had this idea that came to my mind when we were praying.

Now interestingly I don't think it was the right thing. I mean, what happened was it started a different dialogue and the right thing came out of the dialogue. And again, that's the way holy conferencing works. Not that I have received an inspiration from the Holy Spirit, but as we listen more carefully new ideas start to arise as we allow ourselves to be led by the spirit. And part of that happens when we can step back, quiet ourselves, listen a little bit, invite the Holy Spirit to be part of the dialogue, and then re-engage in the conversation. So, we remember how God has acted in the past. We hear God's promise that something new is being birthed even in this moment, and then we invite the Holy Spirit to help us in that birthing process as we listen to one another and the voice of God more carefully.

V. Conclusion

So, in the midst of a time that I find in many respects deeply discouraging, I am grateful for Isaiah's word of promise and hope that in the midst of situations that seem intractable and polarized and angry and divisive, the Holy Spirit is at work and inviting us into a new future that is full of life and hope and power for us as individuals, for our congregation, for our church, for our nation. The spirit is working. A new thing is being born. Pay attention.

Amen.