

Are We Listening?

A sermon preached by the Rev. Roger Scott Powers
at St. Andrew Presbyterian Church in Albuquerque,
on Sunday, August 28, 2022.

Jeremiah 2:4-13
Psalm 81:1, 10-16

Our two scripture readings for this morning are quite similar to each other. In both of them we hear God recounting the good things God has done for the people of ancient Israel and then deeply lamenting their subsequent turning away as unfaithful people.

God had freed the Israelites from slavery and brought them up out of the land of Egypt. God had led them through the Sinai wilderness. "In a land of deserts and pits, in a land of drought and deep darkness, in a land that no one passes through, where no one lives," God had enabled them to survive for forty years, providing food and water to sustain them. And finally, at last, God brought them "into a plentiful land to eat its fruits and its good things," just as God had promised their ancestors.

But after all God had done for them, they went their own way. They entered the Promised Land, only to defile it. They began drifting away from God's law and God's commandments. They started worshiping other gods and serving them. They would not listen to God's voice. They would not submit to God.

God singles out for criticism the leaders of the people: their priests and prophets, their lawyers and rulers. After all, the leaders of the people should know better than to forsake God, their Creator and Sustainer, their Liberator and Lord.

God is incredulous. "Where did I go wrong?" God asks: "What wrong did your ancestors find in me that they went far from me, and went after worthless things, and became worthless themselves?" God just can't believe it. Search far and wide, to the ends of the earth, God says, and see if there has ever been such a thing as a nation changing its gods. Who ever heard of such a thing!

From God's perspective, we ought to be shocked and appalled that the people of Israel would forsake God, "the fountain of living water," only to dig out cisterns in the ground that hold only stagnant water until they eventually crack and can hold no water at all. Why would any people be so foolish?

"My people did not listen to my voice; Israel would not submit to me," God says, "so I gave them over to their stubborn hearts, to follow their own counsels." Note here that any tragedy that might befall God's people is not considered to be God's judgment upon them for their unfaithfulness or disobedience. Rather, such a tragedy would simply be a consequence of their own actions, the natural result of following their own counsels.

Fortunately, amid all this divine lamenting, Psalm 81 offers a glimmer of hope. God is still waiting in the wings. God still longs to be in relationship with God's people; God longs for their return. "O that my people would listen to me, that Israel would walk in my ways! Then I would quickly subdue their enemies, and turn my hand against their foes." If only God's people would return to faithfulness, God would feed them once again, not with simple manna, but "with the finest of wheat," and not just with water from a rock but "with honey from the rock." Open your mouths wide and I will fill them, says the Lord. God would satisfy them.

Both of this morning's scripture readings lift up the importance of listening to God. The reading from Jeremiah begins: "**Hear** the word of the LORD, O house of Jacob, and all the families of the house of Israel. Thus says the LORD:" And the reading from Psalm 81 includes both God's lament ("my people did not **listen** to my voice; Israel would not submit to me") and God's deep desire ("that my people would **listen** to me, that Israel would walk in my ways!")

These Bible passages bring to mind one of the most important Bible verses in the Jewish tradition, known as The Shema, which is the Hebrew word for "hear" and is the word that begins the verse. You'll find it in the book of Deuteronomy, chapter 4: "Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might." The Shema is central to the liturgy and life of the Jewish community. Indeed, it is as familiar to the average Jew as the Lord's Prayer is to

the average Christian. Observant Jews recite it twice a day. And many Jews nail it to the doorframe of their home in a small decorative box called a *mezuzah*.

For Christians, this morning's texts may also bring to mind the scene of the Transfiguration, when Jesus and his inner circle of disciples—Peter, James, and John—go up to a mountaintop to pray. Jesus is suddenly transfigured before them in dazzling white light and a voice from heaven says: "This is my Son, my Chosen; **listen to him!**"

"Hear the word of the Lord." "O that my people would listen to me."
"Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone." "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!"

How about us. Are we . . . listening?

God created the earth and all that is in it, and God gives us the responsibility to care for the earth and its creatures. But we have used the earth's precious resources with abandon; polluted its air, water, and soil; and killed and displaced other species to the point of extinction. Even when the dire ecological consequences of our actions are pointed out, all too often we double down for short-term gain, casting a blind eye to the long-term negative consequences for the health of the planet and future generations. Are we listening?

Perhaps you saw the news a couple of weeks ago that the Bernalillo County Board of Commissioners voted 4-0 to approve two sets of plans for the Santolina housing development, over the objections of community members and the county's own planning board. For those of you who don't know, the proposed Santolina development would build new housing for 90,000 new residents on almost 14,000 acres of Albuquerque's far west mesa over the next few decades. It may sound good on the face of it. After all, developers provide much needed housing and jobs on which our economy depends. The problem is that Santolina is receiving approvals to move forward in spite of the fact that there is absolutely no plan for where the water for those homes and residents is going to come from. And the Southwest is currently experiencing a megadrought, the worst in 1,200 years. Are we listening?

Or perhaps you saw the story last month about Valencia County commissioners voting 3-2 to approve a measure that could open the door to oil and gas exploration in the region surrounding Los Lunas and Belen. We are seeing the catastrophic effects of climate change before our very eyes—more severe storms, floods, droughts, wildfires, melting icecaps, dying coral reefs, rising sea levels. There is no question that climate change is being caused largely by greenhouse gases such as carbon dioxide released by the burning of fossil fuels. Nevertheless, oil and gas interests continue to push for fossil fuel development, arguing that the short-term economic benefits, including jobs and tax revenue, will outweigh the long-term environmental consequences. Are we listening?

We human beings are created in the image and likeness of God. We are all children of God, sisters and brothers, members of the one human family. And yet, we seem far more interested in our differences than in what we have in common. We treat one another differently based on sex, gender identity, sexual orientation, skin color, ethnicity, nationality, level of education, economic class, religion, political affiliation. And we have allowed ourselves to be divided, based on our differences, into conflicting camps—which sometimes devolve into warring camps. Are we listening to God?

Jesus calls upon us to love one another as God has loved us. It's not easy to love one another, particularly when it comes to people we are afraid of, people we don't particularly like, or people with whom we vehemently disagree. Think of a drug addict on the street, a white supremacist militiaman, a neighbor you won't speak to, or a family member with whom you don't get along. If you're a Democrat, think of Republicans. If you're a Republican, think of Democrats. Love one another? Sometimes it's all we can do just to stand one another! Are we listening?

Fortunately, all is not lost. There is hope. For God has not given up on us. God still longs to be in relationship with us. "O that my people would listen to me, that [they] would walk in my ways!" God exclaims. God longs for our return.

So, let us open our ears and hear God's word to us. Let us open our ears and listen to the life and teachings of Jesus as well. God has spoken words of wisdom. Let us open our hearts and follow in God's way. Amen.