

Third Sunday after Pentecost, Year B

June 10, 2018

1 Samuel 8:4-20, 11:14-15

2 Corinthians 4:13 – 5:1

Mark 3:20-35

Listening for God

In the name of the living, loving God. Amen.

Do you ever feel like God is silent?

Do you yearn for God's anthropomorphic presence,
even if it's in the form of a burning bush or a voice from the clouds
or maybe even just a feeling?

I think many of us want to experience God, want to hear God,
to see and feel God and yet, sometimes it seems as if God is silent.
And that's hard.

Some people spend their whole lives searching for God.

Others say they don't care.

And I imagine most of us are somewhere in between.

We are here because we have a sense of God's presence.

We are in relationship with God.

We seek out the God who knows us and loves us and calls us beloved.

And still, sometimes, it seems as if God is silent.

The Church Pension Group puts out a calendar each year
with cartoons drawn by Jay Sidebotham.

You may have noticed it hanging in the church office.

Well, the cartoon for June has an image of an overweight guy in sweatpants,
eating a bag of potato chips and talking to the athletic trainer.

The caption across the top reads, "If people treated the gym the way they treat church."

And the guy is saying to the trainer, "Okay. I'm here to get in shape. You've got an hour.
Then I'll be back in six weeks."

It certainly makes the point.

We all know that you can't physically get in shape by exercising, potato chips in hand,
for one hour every six weeks.

And yet, that's the approach we often take with our spiritual lives

and wonder why we don't see results,
wonder why our souls languish,
and can't figure out why God seems to be silent.

The spiritual journey is not a linear path

and it is an existential excursion constantly drawing us nearer to God.

The spiritual journey is one of wandering you might say, this way for a bit,
and then back that way,
bumping into others and then traveling alone for a stretch.

Sometimes the spiritual journey feels like the line for airport security at SEATAC.

You're stuck forever, barely moving, surrounded by all kinds of people,
each weighed down by their own baggage, everyone staring at their cell phones,
while that one impatient toddler screams, and their parents ignore them.

And other times, the spiritual journey is vibrant and alive.

Your soul is flourishing.

You look at roses blooming in a vase on your kitchen table
and see the beauty of God's creation reflected in each bud, each petal,
God's glory and radiance shines forth in the exquisiteness that is each flower.

Faith is a practice like anything else.

You don't just pick up a violin and start playing, you have to practice.
You don't pick up a pencil or paintbrush and create a landscape the first try, it takes practice.
You don't buy new running shoes, step off the couch, and go run a marathon, it takes practice.
Likewise, the spiritual life is a practice.

To hear God, we must practice.

We have to listen.

We have to be present and listen into the silence
for the still small voice of God in whatever shape, form, or fashion it comes to us.

Today, we continue reading a bit from Paul's second letter to the Corinthians
in which he tackles weighty topics such as our mortality, the present age,
the future age, God's new creation, and the Kingdom of God.

The portion read last week talked about the treasure we have in clay jars.

These ordinary, everyday jars we use to carry around the glory of God
which is nothing compared with the glory that is yet to be revealed in God's Kingdom.
It is but a glimpse.

This ordinary clay jar, in our modern day, would be something like a reusable shopping bag,
something super common and ordinary.

And in it, we are carrying around the glory of God.

So, with that in mind,

let us turn to what Paul is trying to say to the community of believers in Corinth
and consequently,
how that might translate to our lives and to our listening for God.

As Paul writes this, he has been through a lot.

He has suffered tremendously and nearly died more than once.
And still, he remains faithful.

Paul speaks in prayer and thanksgiving to the God who raised the Lord Jesus.

Paul speaks the words of his heart into this letter
in the hopes that it will draw more people to praise the living God.

To quote theologian N.T. Wright,

"The more people are praising God,
the more the world is taking the shape it was meant to have,
and the more God's power goes out to save and heal
where those generous blessings are still needed."

Paul takes his sufferings and in them, doesn't perceive God as silent or himself as a failure,
but rather takes his pain, shares it, and turns it into gratitude to God.
This gratitude turns his experience into praise.

I'm not saying that praise and prayer negates suffering. I'm not saying that at all.
But I am saying that praise and gratitude to God
are a key component in our healing process, no matter the nature of the suffering.
Prayer and gratitude are essential in the process of transformation
towards wholeness and health as we make our spiritual journey.

In writing about the suffering and suicides of Kate Spade and Anthony Bourdain this past week,
research professor Brene Brown said,

"Everyone has a story or a struggle that will break your heart.
And, if we're really paying attention,
most people have a story that will bring us to our knees.

You would think the universal nature of struggle
would make it easier for all of us to ask for help,
but in a culture of scarcity and perfectionism,
there can still be so much shame around reaching out,
especially if we're not raised to understand the irreducible nature of human need."

We are hardwired for struggle. I think Brene Brown also said that.

Paul says it this way,
"...as grace abounds through the thanksgiving of more and more people,
it will overflow to God's glory.

For this reason we don't lose heart.

Even if our outer humanity is decaying, our inner humanity is being renewed day by day.
This slight momentary trouble of ours is working to produce a weight of glory,
passing and surpassing everything, lasting forever."

To know pain is human. To need is human. To suffer is human.

And we are where we are when the proverbial stuff hits the fan.

Have we been listening for God? Have we been practicing our faith?

God is always there and still sometimes God seems to be silent
because we haven't been listening.

Eastern orthodox bishop Kallistos Ware says,

"...it is not the task of Christianity to provide easy answers to every question,
but to make us progressively aware of a mystery.

God is not so much the object of our knowledge as the cause of our wonder."

Let us wonder about God. Let us listen for God. Let us travel this spiritual journey together.

God isn't silent. But we have to be listening.