

Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost

August 25, 2013

Jeremiah 1: 4-10; Luke 13: 10-17

Hearing God's Voice

This week is the 50th Anniversary of Martin Luther King Jr's. *I Have a Dream* speech given August 28, 1963 from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial during the *March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom*.

This past week, guest columnist in Sojourners, Lisa Sharon Harper remarked:

“In our collective memory, we see black-and-white images of immaculately dressed men and women wearing hats, ties, and dresses, marching in dress shoes.

We see a sea of people stretching from the Lincoln Memorial to the Washington Monument.

And we see Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., frozen in time, smiling and waving to the crowd of a quarter million people.

We see King's passion, mouth open as he bellows words that sear the conscience of a nation and ignite its imagination.

His arm is outstretched over the podium.

He is surrounded by men and women who are also there to plead with a nation to ‘let freedom ring!’”

Maya Angelou reflecting on this in *Time* magazine expresses that “there is still hope.”

“There is still hope. If there were not, there would be no reason to get up in the morning.

There is hope. Sometimes you need to be jarred into finding it, jarred into sharing it.

I remember, [she says,] a statement of the Rev. King's that you ought to believe something in life, believe in something so fervently that you will stand up with it until the end of your days.

I think we all have to believe that the day will come that we not have to be saddled; we will not be crippled with all this idiocy [of undergirded hate and racism, prejudices and sexism and ageism]. I hope for that. I am still working for it. I am still writing for that. I speak of that, I sing about that. I pray about that” (*Time*, August 26/September 2, p. 99).

Harper continues, “Jesus will be standing in the crowd this Saturday as the nation celebrates the 50th Anniversary of the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. He will be present as we celebrate Dr. King's “I Have a Dream” speech on Wednesday. And Jesus will be standing in solidarity with all “the least” in America. He will call them his family, as he did in Matthew 25:40.

And Christ will be moved with compassion, and that compassion will be made manifest through the work of his people to make a more just world.

My prayer is that the whole church would be standing with him.”

No matter how difficult it is to sometimes hear God's voice,

God's voice is always a voice of hope.

God's voice is always a voice of reconciliation.

God's voice is always a voice of inclusion, of acceptance.

I pray that we hear God's voice.

Today as in Jeremiah's day – we are all called to hear God's voice!

During my study leave I was reminded of what my role, my calling is among you, as I walk alongside you, walk with you, yoked together with you, as we are yoked together with Christ Jesus.

I was reminded of this very poignantly as I was reading Larry's friend, Bob Ekblad's book, *Reading the Bible with the Damned*. Bob, a Presbyterian pastor, who leads Bible studies for those who are imprisoned, those who are oppressed and marginalized

– helping them to hear Scripture not as a word upholding the powerful and privileged – often how people who are oppressed read and hear Scripture

– but as a healing word expressed specifically to the weak, the dispossessed, the alienated, the despised, the marginalized, the ones whom society damns.

Bob was leading a Bible study on Genesis 12 in which Abram hears God's voice.

He stated, "Abram did in fact go in response to the Lord's word. He heard the voice, and this voice made a difference in his life.

"So how do you think God spoke to Abram?" Ekblad asked the inmates.

"Do you think it was a loud voice or a soft voice?"

People look down at their Bibles, searching in vain for an answer. "Here it does not tell us. It could have been a loud voice. We do not know," a man responds.

"OK, so how do you think you would know if God was calling you? Ekblad asked.

Nobody can think of an answer.

"Do any of you sense that God is with you in any way? Do you hear God's voice to you here in jail?" Ekblad asked.

Most of the people look down humbly. Some are shaking their heads back and forth.

"Nada," one of the men says, "No, I don't hear God's voice," he continues" (Ekblad, 67).

When I read that,

imagining myself in the room with these men

– and hearing that they do not hear God's voice

– I am moved to compassion

– and I asked myself

– how is it that people all around us, people we know, even us (perhaps more than we dare to admit) do not hear God's voice?

It's true of me as well in my life – there was a time when I did not hear God's voice, and there are far too many times when I still struggle to hear God's voice.

But in those times when I have heard and hear God's voice, when I experienced God's embrace – and I have learned to respond.

And over the years I have become more sensitive to hearing God's voice – and learning to respond to God's voice.

During my reading and reflecting time, I was reminded of my call within our community
– to help each one of us hear God's voice, to hear God speaking to us in the moments of our days, in our experiences, in our situations, in our relationships
– and for us to hear God's voice together as a community.

The word for *God's word* in the Hebrew Scriptures is *dabar*.

It refers not only to the spoken word, but also to the actions of God.

As one commentator expresses: “For the ancient Israelite, ‘word’ and ‘event’ were part of the same experience. What a person thinks or plans, what they say and what they do are all part of the same event” (Thompson, *Jeremiah*, 145).

And also, the way the word for *hearing* is translated in Scripture, it is not merely a hearing, it is a heeding, a responding.

So, for us to hear and see God's word and God's actions, is for us to hear, to heed, to respond to God, so that we might be participators of bringing about God's hope of a new creation
– in which the oppressed are set free, the sick comforted and healed, the blind seeing, the marginalized embraced.

What kind of people does God need to accomplish God's mission?

Those who hear God and respond to God

– not ones who have their lives together, but ones whose lives are still in need of healing, who admit to our brokenness

– we are the ones who more readily are open to hear God and respond to God

– God can work in you and through you when we are like that. . . (cf. Ekblad, 122, 123)

The passion of my conviction is that **I know**

That if we learn to hear God's voice more clearly,

That if we see God's actions more visibly,

We will respond;

And in responding, we become participators in living out God's will being done on earth as it is wherever God reigns.

We hear about hearing God's voice in Jeremiah 1: 4-10

Jeremiah was a timid young man when he first heard God's voice, when he first heard God's call upon his life.

Throughout his life, as he developed a passion for God and the ways of God, he lamented not in silence but became very vocal in his outcry in Israel's rejection of God and God's ways.

As a result he found himself alienated, alone, persecuted, suffering for being a mouthpiece of God, he received death threats.

We too are often timid when we first hear God's voice, see God's actions.

We are frightened by what God is doing and saying and **we are unable to see how we have the ability to become involved in what God is doing.**

We conclude that is beyond our capability of being engaged

– responding to ones who are homeless, caring for ones suffering with HIV/AIDS, walking with people struggling with addictions, speaking out and acting on the behalf of the marginalized, the oppressed, the immigrant.

Reaching out to such as these is so outside our comfort zones.

“Lord, do not ask me to be such a follower or disciple of yours,” becomes our prayer.

But we pray this way because our eyes are on ourselves and not on God.

Jeremiah was as timid as he was because he knew he was incapable of speaking; he did not have the courage to speak out, to stand his ground, to know what to do in uncertain situations – “Alas, Sovereign LORD,” I said, “I do not know how to speak; I am too young.”

But hear God's response to his complaint, our complaints, our rationales which keep us from being courageous in Christ-like ways:

“Do not say, ‘I am too young.’ “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations.” [And so] you must go to everyone I send you to and say whatever I command you. Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you and will rescue you,” declares the LORD.

What God says to Jeremiah, God also says to each one of us – as Christ's disciples –

“It's not about you, it's about me and what I am doing and capable of doing.

Yes, I may lead you into uncomfortable situations – well, not maybe, **for sure** I will lead you into uncomfortable situations – with people with whom you have no idea how to relate to, **but remember, it's not about you, it's about me.**

I know you better than you know yourselves.

I know what you can do better than you know what you can do when you hear my voice and respond to me.

I know you do not know what to say, or what to do – but I do!

I am with you, I am connected to you, you are mine
– I knew you from the moment of your conception and I know you now.

Let me lead you, let me put my voice in you, let my actions be your actions.”

Hearing God’s voice in our lives will always be uncomfortable, even untenable, if we choose to follow God **on our terms**.

God’s voice can only bring comfort within our lives, even in midst of suffering, persecution, being alienated and marginalized, **when we respond to God’s active presence within us**.

It is only in responding to God that we become courageous as Jeremiah was courageous,

As Jesus was courageous, as we aspire to live with Christ-led courage.

In the OT, prophets were primarily ones who heard the call of God
– for the Spirit was only poured out on a few.

But, since Jesus left and the Spirit came,

Since the Spirit was poured out without measure during Pentecost,

Since the Gospel went out from Jerusalem to all the world,
The Spirit has been poured out upon all humanity
– the Spirit is at work in all human beings
– we all receive God’s call upon our lives
– each one of us.

Prophets saw themselves as messengers of God “commissioned to convey to the people of their own day the word that God had given to them” (Thompson, Jeremiah, 9).

The question to us is:

What is the word God gives us that we are to convey?

What are the actions God gives to us to live out?

This is not a calling which we are capable of living out on our own
– we need God’s presence to be active in us

So, are we open to receive God’s presence?

“Then the LORD reached out his hand and touched my mouth and said to me, “I have put my words in your mouth. See, today I appoint you over nations and kingdoms to uproot and tear down, to destroy and overthrow, to build and to plant.”

As we receive from God what God desires to pour out into us
– we, in living lives which listen to God, in lives which are open to God
– **will live lives which live out God’s purposes no matter where God leads us.**

Jesus continually expresses this purpose of God – as we see in our Lucan Gospel text.

“Then should not this woman, a daughter of Abraham, whom Satan has kept bound for eighteen long years, be set free on the Sabbath day from what bound her?”

I know I want to have the courage to say this, to do this.

For my life to live out this reality, a reality of a new creation

What I hear in today’s text is this:

If this is how we want to live?

If this is the reality we want our lives to convey, to demonstrate, give witness to?

Then God alone gives us the courage,

Only God gives us the words,

Only God gives us the actions to set people free.

So, my community, if we have ears to hear – “Listen and respond to God’s voice!”