

“Listen!!!”
4 Easter C
Revelation 7:9-17
May 3, 1998

Grace, mercy and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ! Amen. The texts for this morning’s message are the lessons and Psalm for today.

Back in the days when the telegraph was the fastest means of long-distance communication, a young man applied for a job as a Morse code operator. A sign on the receptionist’s desk instructed all job applicants to fill out a form and then sit down and wait until each one was summoned to an inner office for an interview.

So the young man did as he had been told. He filled out the form and then sat down with 7 other applicants in the waiting room that was filled with the clicking and clacking of the telegraph and the noise of busy workers. Then, with a strange look on his face, the young man stood up, crossed the room opened the door to the inner office and walked right in.

The other applicants were stunned. What impertinence! Then, just minutes later the young man they’d thought so rude reappeared with the boss at his side, who said, “thank you very much. But the job has just been filled by the young man next to me.”

“But that’s not fair!” a voice cried out “I didn’t even get to interview!”

“That’s true,” the boss agreed. “But all the while you’ve been sitting here, the telegraph has been ticking out the words, ‘If you understand this message, then come right on in. The job is yours.’ He is the only one who heard, understood, and followed the message. The rest of you neither heard the call, nor answered it.”

Listening – a lost art in the cacophony of our modern world. But today let’s examine this cultural oddity – everything from the ordinary kind of listening - “in one ear and out the other,” or the “multi-tasking” listening students do in class as they check e-mail, instant message, play cards and take notes on the lecture, as well as being “all ears” and paying complete attention.

Whether it was walking to church and hearing the busy birds of spring, the radio in your car, or the hissing sound of the coffee pot when it’s finally ready we have all been blessed to listen to many sounds already this morning. Here in worship we have used our ears to follow the guitar/organ singing familiar songs or, perhaps, learning some new ones. We have heard God’s Word. Gathering as God’s people we have invoked God’s name – that most precious name, to acknowledge God in our midst humbly coming into God’s presence. Not that every syllable spoken is heard and absorbed – I’ve sat in those pews. When you come into God’s presence in worship there are so many things to listen to - so much so that we often hear but to which we do not listen.

Scanning the Scripture lessons for this morning all three of them key in on this very point –hear and listening to the powerful voice of God. It was only through the power of God – the Word and Spirit at

work in him that Peter could say, “Tabitha get up!” and she rose from the dead. God’s command at work through his human voice!

“My sheep hear my voice and I know them and they follow me!” is what we heard in the Gospel. All who are connected to Christ by grace through faith listen to His voice. We don’t just hear it. We listen to it and we listen for it.

In Revelation the vivid visual images elicit a longing for, provoke an echo of that which we are about to see and hear perhaps in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, as John grants us a glimpse of the glory that awaits us in heaven. Glory that none of us has seen, and sounds that none of us have physically heard. And yet, because we belong to Christ, even without hearing, we already wait expectantly and “Listen!”

. One of our liturgies says when we gather in worship, we are not alone. We are linked by the Spirit with angels and archangels and all the company of Heaven, with the saints and martyrs that have gone before us and with millions of other sheep of the Good Shepherd, with whom we currently share this planet.

And like that young man who not only heard that telegraph, but more important, actually listened to it, when we gather with one another in the company of God, we become tuned into a reality more real than what we usually only see on the surface. All week long we live as slaves to a schedule, hemmed in by time and space, watching the days and hours go by and wishing there were more of them or that the week would hurry up and get over. We get caught up in the mundane and the ordinary. In this place, gathered around Word and Sacrament in worship, time and space are joined to eternity - to God’s dimension, God’s home and our ultimate destination. Here in this place is our foretaste of the feast to come as we share the Word, we taste and receive God’s goodness at the altar, and echo words of eternal hope and love to one another. The age old question of whether one can be a Christian or not without going to church is not even relevant. It is like asking whether one can cook without a stove or cut the grass without a lawnmower. Of course you can - not well, perhaps. In theory it can be done, but why settle for less than the best?

When people cut themselves off from the gathering of God’s saints in worship, when they do not seek God often in the Scriptures, when they do not meet God at the Lord’s Table, there is the risk of a hearing loss. It becomes easy to tune out the Spirit. Or like a radio stuck between stations, there is so much static you cannot hear what God has to say.

And the message is meant to be heard in clarity and in community! Jesus’ sheep hear, listen, trust the voice and follow – the whole flock on their way to all that God will provide each day and forever. Note that this listening leads to action. Whether it is those white-robed saints and martyrs that John saw before the throne, or those people who were drawn to the Gospel by Tabitha’s resurrection, or you and me - when we listen to Jesus, our Good Shepherd leads us somewhere to something for someone. Perhaps to a commitment to be a kinder spouse, a more patient parent, a better neighbor, a more faithful witness to Jesus in our life and among our friends.

It wasn’t by accident that Jesus chose the image of a sheep and their shepherd. Unlike other animals, sheep cannot be herded - that is, driven from behind. They must be led. They cannot and will not go

anywhere except when their Shepherd is among them as their leader calling out to them to remind them he is present. If the shepherd is not there to lead the sheep will, ultimately, scatter.

Sheep are like that – short memory – skittish, fearful, easily distracted and finicky about their rest, their food, and their water. Did you know that sheep die of “ovine ineptitude” at one thousand times the rate they are killed by wolves? Put simply “Ovine ineptitude” is when a sheep falls over and can’t get up. If they are close to the Shepherd so their cries can be heard the shepherd can help them to find their footing again – to stand on solid ground. Alone, off on their own – who will help them stand, who will hear their cries.

So we follow Jesus, closely and confidently (though I admit to being a bit wobbly and frightened at times, myself). We are promised that our Shepherd will not ask us to go alone into places no one has ever gone before. We will be led through valleys and shadows and into green pastures already in mind – known because the Shepherd has been there and knows the places to which we are being led. And even though we have not heard the Shepherd’s voice with our own ears, still, the voice of Jesus is the only one that we will recognize immediately, with great comfort, joy, and in awe on that one day – that day that will end all of time when we do hear Jesus call us by name.

Amen.

Now may the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus Christ, the Good Shepherd, complete us in every good way to do God’s will and God’s work in this world.