

“He Listened”

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Luke 2:41-52 ~ Colossians 3:12-17

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was imprisoned by Hitler during World War II, and while he was in jail he wrote the following to his fiancée Maria: “A prison cell, in which one waits, hopes, does various unessential things, and is completely dependent on the fact that the door of freedom has to be opened from the outside is not a bad picture of Advent”.

My friends, the waiting is over, the door of freedom, as Bonhoeffer so eloquently stated, has been opened. After a season of waiting and preparation, the baby Jesus has arrived. He arrived vulnerably and humbly in a stable, to parents of limited means, surrounded by shepherds and farm animals.

The lectionary today, just two days after we celebrated the birth of Jesus, has brought us to Luke’s account of Jesus in the temple at twelve years old. Mary and Joseph have traveled with family and friends to Jerusalem for the Passover feast, but on the way home realize after traveling for a full day that Jesus is missing.

Because Jesus was twelve, he would have been considered almost an adult, and would have fit in traveling with the women and children at the front of the caravan, or with the men and his father bringing up the rear. Before we ridicule Mary and Joseph for not noticing their child was missing for an entire day, it is perfectly logical for them both to have assumed he was with the other one during their first day of travel. It is what happened when they find him in the temple that is most intriguing; Luke tells us they find him sitting among the teachers, listening to them. The son of God, is listening to other men, learning from them and absorbing their knowledge, their wisdom.

After reading those lines; that Jesus was listening to the teachers, and that they were impressed with his wisdom and knowledge, not his age, I began to think about the gospel message of Advent and Christmas. We normally associate Advent, as Bonhoeffer reminded us, with waiting for something to happen; waiting for the birth of the savior. There is, though, an incredible amount of listening happening during Advent. The angel Gabriel appears to Mary to proclaim she is carrying the Son of God. No matter how many times I hear this story, I still marvel at her reaction. She does say, “How is that possible; I am a virgin?” For the most part however, the accounts of this visit have Gabriel sharing the news with Mary responding, “I am the Lord’s servant, may it be to me as you have said.”

Similarly, Elizabeth’s husband Zechariah was visited by Gabriel to announce that Elizabeth would bear a son, even though she and Zechariah were well beyond their child-bearing years. Joseph, the shepherds, and the Wise Men also listen to messengers from God through visits from angels and dreams. In Joseph’s case, an angel urges him to believe Mary’s account of her visit with the angel Gabriel; the shepherds receive a personal announcement of Jesus’ birth, and the Wise Men follow a star to find Jesus, and then heed a dream urging them to avoid King Herod on their return home. Listening to their dream of warning saved the lives of Mary, Joseph and Jesus from Herod.

They all listened, and this was not at all routine news. A virgin birth, angels descending upon shepherds; it is all rather unbelievable. Yet, when presented with messages from God, they all listened and believed. Even Jesus sitting in the temple at twelve was listening; rapt with attention, to the teachers. A twelve year old listening, for what we can assume was four days

according to the account in Luke. I believe there is a message here for us; we are terrible listeners. Our digital culture bombards us with information, and we are in constant communication with one another, but statistics show that we are rarely listening to one another. If we can't actively listen to one another, when we are in one another's physical presence, how can we possibly expect to hear God's word for us in this time and place? The first step to listening for God is creating the space to hear the whispers of the Holy Spirit, and then (and this is the hardest part), not dismissing it.

Beverly Casey from Savannah, Tennessee tells this story about listening to the urging of the Holy Spirit: One day last December, a young couple new to our congregation sat two pews in front of me in church. I'd heard that they had just moved to our area and were having a hard time. The young woman was wearing only a light sweater, and I saw her shivering as she listened to the sermon. "Where is her coat?" I thought. Just then a voice spoke in my head: GIVE HER YOUR COAT! My long black coat was one of the nicest things that I owned, yet I couldn't help but notice the young woman folding her arms tightly around herself for the rest of the service. After church I found myself asking her how they were liking the area. "We're from Florida," she said, "and we haven't had time to buy the right clothes." "Here," I said suddenly, unable to resist the urge. "Have my coat." I took it off and draped it around her. A short time after this happened, the young couple started going to another church and weren't heard from again, until the next winter when the woman wrote to Beverly and told her how much that gift had meant to her, and how much she had really needed it. She also told Beverly, that now that they were back on their feet she planned to find someone else who needed the warmth of the coat as badly as she had, and pass it on to them.

Beverly listened to the urging of the Holy Spirit, and parted with one of her nicest material possessions for a stranger. Listening to that guidance, being open to the lead of the Spirit, changed that young woman's life, and I am sure by now has changed many others she will never even know about. Beverly's story reminds us to listen for the whispers and urgings of God, and not be afraid we are not good enough, or qualified enough to do the work of God. A good friend often reminds me, that God does not call the equipped; he equips the called. It is often during these unexpected calls that spiritual growth happens. Beverly's story also shows us what I believe the message of Christmas is for us, especially this year, when so many people are having a difficult time making ends meet.

Our bulletin on Christmas Eve noted that Christmas is only the beginning. Now is the time we need to start listening for God in our lives, listening for God in the lives of those around us who are marginalized, that we normally don't see. There is always a flux of charitable donations and volunteerism around Christmas. This surge of goodwill and charity is honorable, but as Christians, it is our calling to be aware of concerns of social justice, peace and equity all year long. As Jesus sat in the temple listening to the rabbis, we need to heed the example of Christ coming as a vulnerable baby. In the passage from Colossians that Valerie read, we are implored to, "Clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience". Compassion and kindness... where is God calling you this week? Where is the Holy Spirit whispering in your life, urging you to give up your coat, or give someone a hug, or be completely radical for Christ? Just when I think God is not speaking to me, I see a news story about a family who is losing their home, or children in another country who have no access to clean water, or people all over the world living in the midst of war. God is telling us this Christmas that being Christians is not a sidelines job. Being a Christian is about getting out of our comfortable living rooms and doing the uncomfortable work of Christ.

Two of my youth group members at a former church, summed this concept up for me in just a few words. We were constantly re-evaluating the program and asking the youth what was

working, what they wanted to do, etc. Some of the other teenagers were talking about going somewhere fun on a summer trip (as opposed to a mission trip, which was our tradition) and two of my freshmen guys, said “Well we probably wouldn’t go with you if you did that, we really prefer to be doing something or helping someone for our youth group trips”. They were saying that for them, mission was the most important part of their faith, and they realized that it was the true expression of Christ to the world.

Robert F. Kennedy had a personal and political conversion between the early 1960s while serving as a hard-hitting Attorney General and advisor to his brother, and the run-up to fighting for the Democratic nomination in 1968. On a congressional tour of the Mississippi Delta in, Kennedy sat with people in their homes, ate with them, and witnessed poverty on a scale he hadn’t previously realized even existed.

In their book, Bobby Kennedy: The Making of a Folk Hero, Lester and Irene David provide the following anecdote that encapsulates his transformation: “On a hot spring day in 1968, Bobby Kennedy, fighting for the Democratic nomination for the presidency, crisscrossed streets in some of the poorest neighborhoods in Spanish Harlem. After five hours, Kennedy was caked with dirt and soaked in perspiration. His guide that day was former boxing champion Jose Torres. “Torres wondered why the rich man’s son came to the ghettos and worked so hard and long, often sixteen hours a day. At the car, Torres asked, ‘Why are you doing this? Why are you running?’ “Bobby replied in a very low voice, ‘Because I found out that my world wasn’t the real world.’”

Brothers and Sisters in Christ, let us strive this week, as we enter a New Year fresh with the message of Christmas, to listen for the ways God is calling us to do the work of the Holy Spirit in the REAL WORLD. Amen.