

If You Have Ears

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Jon M. Fancher
Rocky River Presbyterian Church, Rocky River, Ohio
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Isaiah 6:1-10 (GNT)

¹ In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord. He was sitting on his throne, high and exalted, and his robe filled the whole Temple. ² Around him flaming creatures were standing, each of which had six wings. Each creature covered its face with two wings, and its body with two, and used the other two for flying. ³ They were calling out to each other: "Holy, holy, holy! The LORD Almighty is holy! His glory fills the world."

⁴ The sound of their voices made the foundation of the Temple shake, and the Temple itself became filled with smoke. ⁵ I said, "There is no hope for me! I am doomed because every word that passes my lips is sinful, and I live among a people whose every word is sinful. And yet, with my own eyes I have seen the King, the LORD Almighty."

⁶ Then one of the creatures flew down to me, carrying a burning coal that he had taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. ⁷ He touched my lips with the burning coal and said, "This has touched your lips, and now your guilt is gone, and your sins are forgiven."

⁸ Then I heard the Lord say, "Whom shall I send? Who will be our messenger?" I answered, "I will go! Send me!"

⁹ So he told me to go and give the people this message: "No matter how much you listen, you will not understand. No matter how much you look, you will not know what is happening." ¹⁰ Then he said to me, "Make the minds of these people dull, their ears deaf, and their eyes blind, so that they cannot see or hear or understand. If they did, they might turn to me and be healed."

Mark 4:21-23 (GNT)

21 Jesus continued, "Does anyone ever bring in a lamp and put it under a bowl or under the bed? Isn't it put on the lampstand? **22** Whatever is hidden away will be brought out into the open, and whatever is covered up will be uncovered. **23** Listen, then, if you have ears!"

An essayist in the *New York Times* once asked readers to consider their setting wherever they were and then posed this question, "What do you hear right now?" Let's do that—let's take a few seconds right now....

What did you hear? Maybe traffic. The fidgeting of someone nearby. A jet overhead. Chirping. Barking. Coughing. A fan circulating air. A device in another room.

That essayist, Seth Horowitz, was an auditory neuroscientist at Brown University. Because of his study of the sense of hearing, Horowitz pointed out that asking, "What do you hear right now?" is actually a trick question. Before being asked that question, your sense of hearing was mindlessly processing many background auditory stimuli. Your brain subconsciously noted that none of the things you were hearing signaled any sort of threat to you, so your brain allowed your auditory surroundings to be heard and ignored.

But then I *asked* you "What do you hear right now?" and your brain took "control of the sensory experience—and made you listen rather than just hear." You *paid attention* to your auditory surroundings. You elevated your game: your physical sense of hearing was no longer merely monitoring your surroundings. You elected to employ

the skill of listening. Listening is not the same as hearing. Listening is hearing that pays attention.¹

God's prophet Isaiah paid attention. Isaiah sensed God was claiming his life for God's service. The sixth chapter of the book of Isaiah begins with Isaiah's recollection of that experience when he sensed God calling him to be God's messenger, God's spokesperson, God's prophet. That's the familiar passage describing Isaiah's vision of God surrounded by six-winged angels, and a burning coal from the altar purifying Isaiah's lips, and Isaiah responding to God saying, "Here I am. Send me."

Normally that's where we tend to stop reading the passage. But in the next paragraph, God told Isaiah what to say to the formerly loyal Israelites. I never noticed it before, but God actually employed a measure of irony in his instructions to Isaiah.

God told Isaiah to say this to the disengaged believers: "No matter how much you listen, you will not understand." God then added an ironic explanation to Isaiah: "Because if they *did* listen, they would understand, and they would turn to me and be healed."²

In other words, the blessing of acceptance is God's gift to the world, if... if we would only listen. Listen to God's promises revealed in scripture. Promises of divine forgiveness and gracious acceptance and calling to serve God's will. The good news—the truth—is that God longs to be gracious and loving to us. We would know this truth... if we would listen for God's word. Listen with attention. Listen with expectation.

Several times in the gospels when Jesus addressed the crowds, he would conclude a lesson by telling them, "Listen, then, if you have ears." That seems to capture the distinction that the auditory neuroscientist Horowitz pointed out: the distinction between merely hearing and actively listening.

I knew a college choir director who was well aware of that distinction between merely hearing and actively listening. In his choir's printed programs he always included a note about how a performance is made complete not merely by the choir singing but by the audience actively engaged in listening. It's in the *making* and the *receiving* that music becomes music.

Years ago I remember hearing a sermon called "How to Listen to a Sermon." In a nutshell, the preacher said to listen *with expectation* that you're going to hear something that speaks to you. He also said that if you ever become distracted (which we all do from time to time), just acknowledge that your mind wandered off for a moment, don't beat yourself up about it, and then reengage with the preacher, like "joining a program already in progress."

An old science-fiction TV program called "The X-Files" used to have a tag line, "The truth is out there." That's kind of what Jesus meant by "Listen, then, if you have ears." Jesus told a parable about the wisdom of putting a lamp where it will cast light—which is what it's meant to do—rather than the futility of placing the lamp under a bed

¹ Seth S. Horowitz, "Gray Matter: The Science and Art of Listening." [Opinion | Why Listening Is So Much More Than Hearing - The New York Times \(nytimes.com\)](https://www.nytimes.com/2012/11/09/opinion/why-listening-is-so-much-more-than-hearing.html), published November 9, 2012, accessed 5/24/2022

² See Isaiah 6:9-10 Good News Translation; emphasis added

or in a closet where its light will be blocked and hidden. He meant that the good news, the gospel of God's loving-kindness and mercy is made available to everyone. But if we don't listen for it, the good news may be lost, crowded out, drowned out amid the background noise of daily life—the schedule of doctor appointments, the rush of summer activities, the pressures of the work world, the demands of family life, the cycle of the news day.

Although it's easy for us to be distracted from listening for God in the course of our daily lives, it's also not that difficult to fend off distractions by making a deliberate effort to listen... to listen with intention, to listen with expectation. I've told you before that when I'm in the car running errands or making calls or going on a trip, I tend to have the radio playing, listening to classical music or public radio, sports talk or a ballgame, or my guilty pleasure of old-time radio comedies. If I'm in the car, there's noise. Except I've learned that sometimes I need to make use of the "Off" button. Maybe I'm on my way to a difficult hospital call, or sermon ideas are swirling in my head without finding any particular order or focus. And I've discovered that if I stop the noise and drive in relative silence, invariably a thought comes to mind, an idea begins to present itself that I'm convinced I would not have encountered if I were listening to a Guardians game or a Gershwin concerto. Making a deliberate effort to listen with intention, to listen with expectation can be fruitful.

In his book Directions, author James Hamilton shares this insight about listening to God: "Before refrigerators, people used icehouses to preserve their food. Icehouses had thick walls, no windows and a tightly fitted door. In winter, when streams and lakes were frozen, large blocks of ice were cut, hauled to the icehouses and covered with sawdust. Often the ice would last well into the summer.

One man lost a valuable watch while working in an icehouse. He searched diligently for it, carefully raking through the sawdust, but didn't find it. His fellow workers also looked, but their efforts, too, proved futile. A small boy who heard about the fruitless search slipped into the icehouse during the noon hour and soon emerged with the watch.

Amazed, the men asked him how he found it.

"I closed the door," the boy replied, "lay down in the sawdust, and kept very still. Soon I heard the watch ticking."

Often the question is not whether God is speaking, but whether we are being still enough and quiet enough to hear. Yes, Jesus assures us that our heavenly Father always listens to us, but do we really listen to God?³

In the Forty-Sixth Psalm, the psalmist assures the people of God's presence even in times of turmoil and struggle. In such periods of chaos and strife, when your future is uncertain and your safety is in question, the crisis at hand can be overwhelming, distracting. It's in midst of that moment that the psalmist presents God's reassuring voice urging, "Be still, and know that I am God."⁴

³ Eric S. Ritz, Sermons.com,

⁴ Psalm 46:10a NRSVUE

Yes, our physical sense of *hearing* may diminish across the years, but we can always develop our skill in *listening* for the guidance of God's Holy Spirit as we seek to more closely follow the way of Jesus.

When you get home, I encourage you to practice – sometime this afternoon, or tonight, or maybe tomorrow. Allow yourself, say, even just one full minute of calm, of silence, of stillness, before you move on to your next activity. Give yourself a minute of silence: not merely to hear, but to notice, to listen, to turn your focus to God. “Listen, then, if you have ears.”

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