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LISTENERS
DARE

Hearing God in the Sermon

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Pieter Bruegel, "The Preaching of Saint John the Baptist"
Szépművészeti Múzeum / Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest, 2021

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Happy are your ears because they hear. I assure you that many prophets and righteous people wanted to see what you see and hear what you hear, but they didn't.
—Matt 13:15-17

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INTRODUCTION

Here's my celebration of my fiftieth anniversary of working with a God who (unlike other gods) dares to speak (even from a burning bush) to folk who (like Moses), even though they (like I) had not asked God to speak, dared (like you and I) to listen anyway.

“Reveal yourself!” we cried to God down through the ages. God spoke Jesus, The Word tenting among us (John 1:1). Jesus's main occupation? Jesus came preaching (Mark 1:14).

The gospel is news that passes from the lips of one who has heard to the ears of one who may not yet have heard, then (God willing) burrows into the soul, energizing heart and hands in daring response to news received. Preaching is instigated by an astounding claim: *Good news: God has spoken to us*. The Christian life is what you get when ordinary folk respond: *Keep talking, I'm all ears*.

At least sixty-five million Americans (20.4 percent of us) heard a sermon last week.¹ Any preacher who complains that listeners are oblivious to sermons must reckon with the survey that showed that for 83 percent of Christians, the sermon is the top reason for choosing and staying in a congregation.²

Listeners are more interesting than we who preach to them. I open my class at Duke by showing students “The Preaching of Saint John the Baptist,” by Pieter Bruegel the Elder. A throng of sixteenth-century Flemish people congregate in the woods. A Dutch town with its church stands at a distance. See? Here, in

Holland, it's Luke 3:1-18 all over again. Bruegel has done what preachers do most every Sunday—take an ancient biblical story, plop it into our place and time, saying “Speak!”



“The Preaching of Saint John the Baptist,” Pieter Bruegel

You wouldn't know it's a depiction of a preacher at work had I not told you. There is no single focal point. Listeners—some attentive, many distracted, looking down from perches in trees or gawking up while squatting on the ground, in animated conversation, gossiping, buying and selling, showing off their purchases, gambling, flirting with one another, or posing in their fine clothing—jam-pack the painting.

“Listeners—A Few Listening, Many Not—to a Sermon by John the Baptist” would be a more telling title.

It takes some searching to find the preacher—unarmed, undistinguished, oddly and insignificantly dressed, gesturing, confronting, connecting with the crowd with nothing but words.

How right of the painter to spotlight the listeners rather than the speaker. It's not a sermon until it's heard. Listeners crowd around and push into a sermon, focus or ignore, climb up to it

or look down upon it, perk up their ears, or willfully, dumbly gaze out into the world, thinking thoughts other than those the preacher begs them to think. Rather than listen to the preacher, many intended hearers continue their worldly conversation, barely eavesdropping upon the preacher's words. Distractions are manifold.



Detail of St. John the Baptist

And yet, for all the reasons why people fail to listen, much less to hear, Luke says multitudes braved the discomforting wilderness and dared venture out to listen to John preach, hoping for news they couldn't hear any other way, yearning for a good sermon as if their lives depended upon it.

What does it say about me as a preacher that when I look at Bruegel's painting I focus on those who're not listening rather than on the hopeful, upturned faces of those who—despite all the perfectly good reasons they shouldn't—listen?

Even King Herod—nasty piece of work though he was—"respected John" and "regarded him as a righteous and holy person." While "John's words greatly confused Herod," something about John's preaching made the king enjoy "listening to him" (Mark 6:20). God only knows why Herod listened to John's sermons even though he was clueless as to their meaning. (Preachers

note: Herod's adoration of John's incomprehensible sermons didn't deter Herod from serving up John's head on a platter.)

Preachers Dare: Speaking for God was based on my Yale lectures on preaching.³ No sooner had I finished than I realized that in my attempt to encourage fellow preachers I had neglected you listeners. Though God must give us preachers chutzpa and courage, a speech isn't a sermon until God produces you daring hearers. News, particularly gospel Good News, is meant to be heard as good news for all. The world is quite right in judging the Christian faith by its exemplification in the lives of its hearers. Or as Jesus put it, "Happy rather are those who hear God's word and put it into practice" (Luke 11:28).

In his classic *How to Read a Book*, philosopher Mortimer Adler said, "Theoretic books teach you that something is the case. Practical books teach you how to do something which you should do."⁴ This book attempts a bit of both. However, be warned: this can't be a do-it-yourself handbook on "How to listen to a sermon" because hearing—really hearing—a sermon occurs only with miraculous divine aid. Just like Moses standing before a bush that speaks, you can't tell God's word to yourself.

My hope is to help preachers to deliver the news about Christ and to enable all listeners—clergy and lay—to dare to get more out of sermons in light of Christ's daring determination to get more out of us.⁵

Will Willimon

Chapter 1

GOD IN CONVERSATION

The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart (that is, the message of faith that we preach). . . . The scripture says, All who have faith in him won't be put to shame. . . . All who call on the Lord's name will be saved. So how can they call on someone they don't have faith in? And how can they have faith in someone they haven't heard of? And how can they hear without a preacher? . . . So, faith comes from listening, but it's listening by means of Christ's message. But I ask you, didn't they hear it? Definitely! Their voice has gone out into the entire earth, and their message has gone out to the corners of the inhabited world. . . . And Isaiah even dares to say, I was found by those who didn't look for me; I revealed myself to those who didn't ask for me.
(Rom 10:8, 11, 13, 15, 17-20)

Faith comes from listening (Rom 10:17). A Christian is somebody who has dared listen to and then live the Good News. The major difference between a Christian and a not-yet-Christian? The Christian has received news the non-Christian has yet to hear.

We are as we hear. "Tell me who you listen to for your daily news," said the pollster, "and I can predict your stand on a dozen issues."

Acoustically generated, Christianity is training in empty-handed receptivity. "We have heard it, God, with our own ears; our ancestors told us about it: about the deeds you did in their

days, in days long past” (Ps 44:1). Nobody is born knowing either chemistry or Christ. Want to be a chemist? Find somebody to speak the mysteries of the periodic table until you hear and assimilate what you’ve heard. Teachers of chemistry must hand over their stuff with skill, but receivers also bear responsibility to be receptive to the truths of chemistry, submitting to the practices of chemists, internalizing the moves. To claim with credibility, “I’m a chemist” is also to say, “I’ve been a good listener.”

So it is with Christianity: hearing of the faith precedes believing and performing the faith.

Not sure what to think about Jesus? Don’t worry. He makes relationship with you his self-assignment, loves to talk, can’t be shut up, even by a crucifixion, and promises in the end to have his say. The last word on your status with God is his. Your best hope is that he’ll keep talking, refusing to be stumped by lousy listening.

That sermon is “good,” which spurs performance as listeners become hearers who turn out to be actors. In all times and places, notwithstanding the many impediments for reception of the gospel, millions have shamelessly stepped on stage and assumed their role in Christ’s drama of salvation, with no other justification for their risky performance than the news they have heard.

Jesus took preaching as his main job, then turned around and made proclamation the vocation of all disciples (Matt 10:5-7), commanding us to tell the world news that the world can’t tell itself. Sometimes with a self-effacing whisper, occasionally with a defiant, exuberant shout (Matt 10:27), all Christians must hand over what we’ve heard. “Tell the next generation all about the praise due the Lord and his strength—the wondrous works God has done” (Ps 78:4). “You are witnesses of these things,” Christ

preaching to you so that you'll be a witness who proclaims Christ to others (1 John 1:1-3), speaking out, acting up in Jesus's name when God gives you the chance.

Somebody at work says, "You're an intelligent person, so how can you fall for all that Jesus stuff?" Or, "I used to go to church every now and again, but then I realized that the church is full of homophobic, racist people, and I just don't believe in that."

You buy time saying, "I'd like to hear more," as you pray, *Lord, thanks for the thousand sermons I've sat through that prepared me for this moment.*

Don't want to be a preacher? Jesus doesn't care; all who sign on with Jesus are commissioned to speak the news they have received to others who've heard and to those who haven't. Sorry, if that wasn't made clear at your baptism.

Though we preachers love to blame our failures upon our lousy listeners, truth to tell, many listeners report frustration at their preacher's failure to help them move from listening to hearing, really hearing, and then doing the Word. Listeners help God craft better preachers.

He owned a hardware store. . . . Someone had warned me about him when I moved there. "He's usually quiet," they said, "but be careful." People still recalled the Sunday in 1970 when, in the middle of the sermon (the previous preacher's weekly diatribe against Nixon and the Vietnam War), he had stood up from where he was sitting, shook his head, and walked right out. So, I always preached with one eye on my notes and the other on him. He hadn't walked out on a sermon in years. Still, a preacher can never be too safe.

You can imagine my fear when one Sunday, having waited until everyone had shaken my hand and left the narthex, he approached me, gritting his teeth and muttering, "I just don't see things your way, preacher."

I moved into my best mode of non-defensive defensiveness, assuring him that my sermon was just one way of looking at things,

and that perhaps he had misinterpreted what I said, and even if he had not, I could very well be wrong and er, uh . . .

“Don’t you back off with me,” he snapped. “I just said that your sermon shook me up. I didn’t ask you to take it back. Stick by your guns—if you’re a real preacher.”

Then he said to me, with an almost desperate tone, “Preacher, I run a hardware store. Since you’ve never had a real job, let me explain it to you. Now, you can learn to run a hardware store in about six months. I’ve been there *fifteen years*. That means that all week, nobody talks to me like I know anything. I’m not like you, don’t get to sit around and read books and talk about important things. It’s just me and that hardware store. Sunday morning and your sermons are all I’ve got. Please, don’t you dare take it back.”¹

Good preachers must have well-tuned ears; we’re able to preach only what we have been enabled to hear. Just like you listeners, preachers are Christian on the basis of news we have heard. Discipleship is not self-sustainable; only through doggedly persistent, patient, prolonged, Sunday-after-Sunday listening do any of us stay Christian.

That’s why this book is for both preachers and listeners, listeners all.

And God Said

According to my reading of Genesis, God created humanity because God loves conversation.² Everything begins with something said and then heard. Before time and creation, God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—were one in constant, harmonious colloquy, one God in three ways of continual, conversational communion. The genesis of the world is a sermon God preached to the formless, silent void, “Let there be light” (Gen 1:3). All God needed to do was say “Light,” and there was light. God’s

word is performative; God says the word and creation is as good as done (Ps 33:9).

Humanity is generated by majestic, sovereign speech: “Let there be people . . .” and there were. The conversation that is the rest of scripture suggests to me that “created in the image of God” (Gen 1:27) means we were made for listening, hearing, and responding to a God who loves to talk.

Before the first humanoids got around to gardening or procreation, they engaged in conversation (Gen 3:1-7). Alas, speaking and hearing as gifts of God can also be means for rebellion against God. The snake interlocutor wants to talk theology, raising questions like: “Are you sure you heard God say . . . ?”

The man and woman repeat what they heard. The snake tells them that they heard wrong (Gen 3:4). The result of this skeptical conversation? They saw, desired, took, and ate the forbidden fruit (Gen 3:6). Shortly thereafter, when bad turned to worse, people began to call upon God (Gen 4:26), but not before God called us out, telling us tough truths we would never have told ourselves (Gen. 3:13-19). Through words, we met the God we could not have found on our own.

That’s the God of Israel and the church for you, addressing us before we talk to God, refusing to allow us to determine the limits of divine-human communication, rejecting our attempts to hear only what we want, God willing to talk to rebellious listeners who push back, distort, and doubt what they hear.

While there’s much we don’t know about God, we do know this from scripture: God prefers colloquy to soliloquy, thank God. Millions have tried to shut their ears to God and have failed, so determined is God to draw all into conversation. Though we often complain of hearing too little from God, there’s a good chance

that over a lifetime of listening to sermons, God will tell you more than you'll ever be able to handle.

Thus, in speaking about his own preaching, Paul wrote: "For God, who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of God's glory displayed in the face of Christ" (2 Cor 4:6). Get it? Whenever a preacher is heard, it's light-out-of-darkness new creation all over again, this time in someone's life.

Listening for the God Who Listens

Atop the Mount of Transfiguration, Peter exclaimed, "Let's get busy and build three booths each for Jesus, Elijah, and Moses." Let's set up permanent housing for this mysterious vision. No. The heavenly voice told Peter to shut up and listen (Matt 17:5). If Jesus is indeed the "beloved Son" should we build a substantial, protective encasement for him? No. "Listen to him."³

Take the Transfiguration as a parable of what it means to be the church.

As challenging as preaching can be, you listeners have your hands full, daring a transfiguring Jesus to give you an ear full. What does God expect? "Listen" and after daunting listening, dare to go back down the mountain and tell what we've heard:

Israel, listen! Our God is the Lord! Only the Lord! Love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your being, and all your strength. These words that I am commanding you today must always be on your minds. Recite them to your children. Talk about them when you are sitting around your house and when you are out and about, when you are lying down and when you are getting up. Tie them on your hand as a sign. They should be on your forehead as a symbol.

Write them on your house's doorframes and on your city's gates.
(Deut 6:4-8)

In the Bible, the “ear” is synonymous with the “heart” or the “mind” as the organ of cognition and understanding (Prov 2:2). While human hearing is a gift of God (Ps 94:9; Prov 20:12), God’s listening is among God’s greatest gifts (Pss 18:6; 40:1). “The one who made the ear, can’t he hear?” (Ps 94:9). A fake god (aka, “idol”) has no ear for prayer (Deut 4:28; Pss 115:6; 135:17). Much biblical supplication begins with a plea to God to listen (2 Kgs 19:16; Neh 1:6; Ps 5:1). Such pleas are unnecessary; God’s hearing is so sharp that God hears even before we speak (Ps 139:4).

God’s ears are always open to the cries of the righteous and the needy (Pss 10:17-18; 34:15). Hearing the groans of the enslaved, God initiates the Exodus (Exod 2:24; 3:7). Needy ones ask on the presumption that they’ll be heard (1 John 5:14).

God is such a good listener that God’s ears are not solely attuned to Israel. At the dedication of the temple in Jerusalem, Solomon prays: “Listen also to the immigrant who isn’t from your people Israel but who comes from a distant country” so that “they will hear of your great reputation, your great power, and your outstretched arm.” The immigrant who hears will come to the temple, speak to Israel’s God and then God will “listen from heaven . . . and do everything the immigrant asks” (1 Kgs 8:41-43).

Still, God is free not to hear. Sometimes human sin hinders God’s hearing (Isa 59:1-2; Job 27:8-9; 35:12-13). Human refusal to hear the cries of the needy results in God’s refusal to hear prayer (Prov 21:13). God turned a deaf ear to Jeremiah’s prayer on behalf of sinful Israel (Jer 7:16; 14:11-12). God hears, but not at our command. Job complains for thirty-eight chapters before there’s

any indication that God is listening; God hears, but not always on our schedule.

When one of his disciples whips out a sword—stand your ground, self-defense in action—and severs the ear of one of those arresting Jesus, Jesus rebukes him and restores his enemy’s hearing (Luke 22:50-51). I heard a great sermon by Dr. James Forbes on that text: we use our swords to silence others whereas God wants all, especially those who would harm God, to hear.

The command, “Israel listen!” (Deut 6:4), precedes many prophetic pronouncements. Whereas God could command us to work or to fight, God asks us to listen. “Hear the Lord” is repeated thirty times among the prophets, more often than “obey” or “do.”

Each generation must listen carefully so that it can speak to the young about the Lord’s goodness (Pss 44:1; 78:3-4). God’s people are to attend to the reading of the sacred texts (Deut 31:1-12; Neh 8:3; Rev 1:3). A “child of God” is someone who hears the words of God (John 8:47). The sheep of God’s pasture hear the voice of the Shepherd (John 10:3, 16, 27). Our first duty to God? *Listen.*

Lack of hearing is occasionally attributed to divine judgment upon human sin, as in Isaiah 6:10 or Deuteronomy 29:4. Amos predicts there’ll be a day when there’s a famine in the land, not of bread but of “hearing the Lord’s words” (Amos 8:11). Yet the day will come when God shall restore Israel’s auditory ability (Isa 32:3).

Sometimes listeners hear God speaking distinctly, as when God called to Moses from the burning bush, gave Moses the Ten Commandments (Deut 5:22; Isa 6:8), or ordered Peter directly to let go of his prejudices and receive even the Gentiles for baptism (Acts 10:13). God’s word is spoken straightforwardly into the prophet’s ears and then passed to the people so that listening

to a prophet is hearing straight from God (Isa 22:14; Ezek 3:10-11, 17; Deut 18:19). Harriet Tubman read Exodus and thought it was talking about her and her enslaved people. Tubman's nickname? Moses.

The Israelites, in terror at the thought of actually hearing God, ask Moses, "You go and listen to all that the LORD our God says. Then tell us all that the LORD our God speaks to you. We'll listen and we'll do it" (Deut 5:27). Moses's intermediary prophetic role will be reprised next Sunday when your preacher rises to preach, though unaccompanied by a gutsy congregational pledge to listen and to do.

Elijah expected to hear God in wind, earthquake, and fire but heard nothing. Only after a "Thin. Quiet" did the prophet hear (1 Kgs 19:11-12). God's word is often subtle, gentle, like falling snow or rain (Isa 55:10). When Jesus, deeply troubled, cried out to the Father, there was a sound from heaven. Three out of five listeners said, "It's thunder," but the rest thought, "An angel spoke to him." None recognized the voice of God (John 12:27-29). In my experience, rarely is God's word obvious.

Disciples are blessed because they have heard the message of the coming kingdom that God's people have longed to hear (Matt 13:16-17). Jesus repeatedly urges those who hear to act upon what he says (Mark 4:9, 23, etc.). The heavenly voice of Revelation says that listening is the key to understanding what God is up to in God's climactic restoration of creation (Rev 2:7, 11, etc.). Christ promises that even the dead will "hear the voice of the son of God" and come to life (John 5:25). "Untie him and let him go" shouts Jesus, and his once-dead friend Lazarus strides forth from the tomb (John 11:1-44).

Though God is unheeded by rulers of the world (1 Cor 2:6), the lowly and foolish hear good news.

Listen!

There may be faiths that arise from your sweet subjectivity, accompany your birth, secluded meditation, silent walks in the woods, discoveries from human experience (good and bad), or what you've learned from licking your wounds. Christianity isn't one of them.

“Listen to this! A farmer went out to scatter seed. As he was scattering seed, some fell on the path; and the birds came and ate it. Other seed fell on rocky ground where the soil was shallow. They sprouted immediately because the soil wasn't deep. When the sun came up, it scorched the plants; and they dried up because they had no roots. Other seed fell among thorny plants. The thorny plants grew and choked the seeds, and they produced nothing. Other seed fell into good soil and bore fruit. Upon growing and increasing, the seed produced in one case a yield of thirty to one, in another case a yield of sixty to one, and in another case a yield of one hundred to one.” He said, “Whoever has ears to listen should pay attention!” (Mark 4:3-9)

Listen to this! Nobody is born believing that God is a Jew from Nazareth who lived briefly, died violently, rose unexpectedly, and resumed speaking to those who betrayed him. Somebody must give us words that open doors into the faith called Christianity. All we must do is listen. Without submitting to God's address, we're unable to love without first being loved, incapable of discovering without being found, inept to speak to without being addressed. Through conversation, God gets through to us. While we were struggling to get our minds around God, surprise: God already had us in mind. Striving to be spiritual—to heft ourselves out of hemmed-in humanity—God turned toward us, asking, “Where are you?” (Gen 3:9).⁴

A farmer went out to scatter seed. Divine/human conversation is at God's instigation, God's initiative, that is, grace: unmerited, unearned, the gift of testimony of the saints both living and dead, a God-breathed ancient book that speaks today, a Sunday sermon that the Holy Spirit commandeered to speak to you especially.

Other seed fell on rocky ground where the soil was shallow. Hearing what God says is not self-determined. We are subject to a cacophony of voices. Every sermon, even the most eloquent, risks refusal. Incomprehension is ubiquitous.

Other seed fell into good soil and bore fruit. Still, we do hear. Only God talks us into God and, surprise, in Jesus Christ, God does. The God afforded in scripture is loquacious, lavish, a revealing, determined conversationalist who revels not only in being God but also in telling us all about it. God's word is fruitful; God helps us hear.

Whoever has ears to listen should pay attention!

The church dares to be attentive to the God who is determined to be in conversation with us, the God we would never have made up for ourselves, the God who is known nonviolently, primarily through hearing the good news that God has turned toward us.

Through the ages we asked, "Is God really with us or not?" (Exod 17:1-7). In response, God comes alongside us through words: the Word Made Flesh; Moses called to by a talking bush; Mary announcing the beginning of God's revolution through a song (Luke 1:46-55); the preacher John the Baptist, precursor to John's cousin; the paradigmatic preacher, Jesus.

Sermon listeners regularly reenact this odd, old story: Moses has murdered a man back in Egypt. He's not thinking about conversation with God; he's on the lam in Midian, keeping his

head down, working for his pagan priest father-in-law (Exod 3:1-12).

Moses evaded his Egyptian pursuers, but not the Lord. On Mount Horeb, Moses is astounded—a bush bursts into flame!

“Moses said to himself, ‘Let me check out this amazing sight and find out why the bush isn’t burning up.’”

The bush speaks! “God called to him out of the bush, ‘Moses, Moses!’

“Moses said, ‘I’m here’” (Exod 3:3-4).

The God of Moses’s ancestors—with whom Israel had fallen out of conversation for centuries—has heard the cry of the enslaved and has come to deliver the Hebrews. And guess who’ll help God do that?

“So get going. I’m sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt.”

But Moses said to God, “Who am I to go to Pharaoh and to bring the Israelites out of Egypt?” (Exod 3:10-12).

“Get going.”

Moses won’t have to come up with sermons on his own: “I will be with you,” says the God whom Moses hears. Still, Pharaoh reacts with hardened heart to Moses’s preaching (Exod 8:15, 32). Hearing from then speaking up for God is no guarantee of listener assent.

The story of Moses and the talking bush is a story of anybody who dares to listen, and in listening hears, and after hearing steps forth (albeit kicking and screaming in Moses’s case), serving God on the basis of what has been heard. Daring divine speaking and intrepid human listening are at the heart of the faith of Israel and of the church. Luke says Jesus’s first assault upon the world-as-it-is was from a synagogue pulpit, quoting his favorite preacher,

Isaiah: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me . . . to preach good news” (Luke 4:18). Revolution, regime change initiated by words. Spoiler alert: though the Nazareth congregation responded with “Let’s kill him,” Jesus kept preaching. Still does.

Jesus came preaching. Announcing the whole truth and nothing but the truth about who God is and what God is up to, a declaration of independence from the old world and an invitation to citizenship in the new, a call to repent, to be rehabilitated, born again, and join the revolution named Jesus, God Saves (Luke 1:31).

Christian preaching is the peculiar public speaking that is evoked by the nature of the God who creates a world just by saying the word and by a Savior who never retires from speaking a new world into being. Jesus preached, commanded his followers to preach, and throughout the ages uniquely, decisively reveals himself through preaching. The God who became human flesh continues to be bodily present among us through the words of frail, finite, utterly human envoys entrusted with “the message of reconciliation” (1 Cor 5:19). These preachers speak about Jesus to frail, finite, utterly human listeners. Though their preacher is no Sojourner Truth or Billy Graham, God is so intent on conversation that some listeners hear anyhow.

Listening to Good News

To make hearing possible, our brains refuse most of the sound that enters our ears, discriminating, allowing our minds to go to work only after filtering out what the brain considers to be inconsequential. Trouble is, what our brains discard as unimportant could be just what we’ve been dying to hear.

Hourly we are bombarded with news. Much that passes for news is just advertising: good news! Buy this, wear that, smear this on your face and thereby get your best life now. Or most is just mere information: The Yankees won the World Series. The President has fled to Camp David for the weekend. Data we file away or else discard as soon as we've heard it.

But other news engages, makes a claim, and anticipates response. When someone shouts "Fire!" it's more than information. It's persuasive, demanding, and imperative truth. The gospel—Greek, *euangellion*, good news—is not just reported and received but is news that begs a reaction. Say to a group of famished children, "Hey, I've got bread enough for everybody!" or to the incarcerated, "Here's how to get out of jail," and you'll get a hearing.

If you've got news that could save someone's life, you'd be cold-hearted to keep it to yourself or to mumble so that the message is inaudible. A good, life-changing, world-naming message creates messengers and finds its intended audience, though you may be shocked by God's choice of both messenger and hearer.⁵

Thus, when I asked a young woman in one of my early congregations, "Carolyn, what possessed you to drop out of college—with your 3.0 GPA—and barge off to be a nurse in a clinic in Honduras?" She answered: "Because of what I heard you say in your sermon last Sunday. That bit about 'most of us are living just for ourselves.'"

Look, Carolyn, I was just preaching.

How was I—frail, fallen, finite preacher—to know that I would be the medium whereby someone heard a disruptive summons from God Almighty?

I was about to say that the trouble starts, in most Christians' lives, when somebody like me stands up, reads from scripture, and

then dares to preach, “Thus sayeth the Lord . . .” No, holy discom-bobulation begins when someone like you dares to listen for God.

You become the young Isaiah:

Then I heard the Lord’s voice saying, “Whom should I send, and who will go for us?”

I said, “I’m here; send me.” (Isa 6:8)

Your active response to sermons is Genesis 1 all over again, a new world created out of nothing on the basis of God just saying the Word through a preacher. The dying-and-rising event at the heart of the gospel is recapitulated in you. So, when a student emerged after an Easter service in Duke Chapel saying, “I get it! It’s all come together,” I responded, “So, the women who ran from the tomb told the truth; he’s loose!” (see Luke 24:10). The risen Christ, first day of his resurrected life, seeking out those who betrayed and deserted him in order to resume the conversation, one more time.

“The time is coming—and is here!—when the dead will hear the voice of God’s Son, and those who hear it will live . . . the time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice” (John 5:25, 28). Somebody—dead or living—unbound, crawls out of some tomb and says after a sermon, “I heard . . .,” a reprise of Christ’s resurrection.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer spoke up for the church against the Nazis and paid dearly for it. Yet Bonhoeffer urged his seminar-ians in exile first to be listeners: “Our love for God begins with listening to God’s Word, . . . God’s love for us is shown by the fact that God not only gives us God’s Word, but also lends us God’s ear.”

Chiding us preachers for thinking that we must always have something to say, Bonhoeffer says:

Listening can be a greater service than speaking. Many people seek a sympathetic ear and do not find it among Christians, because these Christians are talking even when they should be listening. But Christians who can no longer listen to one another will soon no longer be listening to God either; they will always be talking even in the presence of God . . . Christians have forgotten that the ministry of listening has been entrusted to them by the one who is indeed the greater listener.⁶

Christians, “be quick to listen, slow to speak . . .” (Jas 1:19).

Listening for God in a Sermon

The greatest challenge to the aural capacities of both preachers and laity is the Trinity. God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—makes unique demands upon those who would dare divine-human conversation. After listening to Jesus, one day John says, “Many of his disciples who heard him said, ‘This message is harsh. Who can hear it?’” (John 6:60). To their grumbling, Jesus replied: “Does this offend you?”

In the face of listeners’ complaints about the sermon’s abrasiveness, Jesus replied: “None can come to me unless the Father enables them to do so” (John 6:44). After this conversation on the limits of listeners’ comprehension without divine help, “many of his disciples turned away and no longer accompanied him” (John 6:60-61, 65-66). Jesus wants us to hear, yes, but what Jesus wants us to hear can be hard to hear because it’s true, whereas we eagerly lap up the lies we love.

“Does this offend you?” (John 6:61). Well, yes, sometimes. And yet, there you’ll be next Sunday, still daring to be part of the Jesus-Church conversation in spite of Jesus’s frequent offense.

When Jesus preached his very first sermon in Capernaum, demons were unleashed: “Get out of here, Jesus! Why are you

messing with us? I know you!” (Mark 1:24, paraphrased). Curious. The demon knew Jesus, whereas the congregation didn’t. The preacher in me wonders if the test of a sermon as God’s Word is the degree of demonic resistance that it elicits.

Not all refusals of a sermon are due to sorry preaching. “The light came into the world, and people loved darkness more than the light” (John 3:19). Anybody who dares to preach with Jesus must not chicken out from declaring, “Listen up! Here’s truth that you have spent all week avoiding.” If listeners reject what we preach, let it not be because of our jargon-ridden speech, our corny attempts at forced colloquial comradery, or our distasteful personalities; let their rejection be due to Jesus.

Still, Jesus promised his preacher-in-training disciples, “Whoever listens to you, listens to me” (Luke 10:16). What preacher doesn’t get the shakes hearing Jesus say that? And yet, Jesus said it, and after five decades of preaching, most Sundays, I believe it.

Note that Jesus didn’t say, “Whoever preaches correct doctrine, preaches for me,” though maybe that’s implied. In declaring, “Whoever listens to you, listens to me,” Jesus wasn’t puffing up preachers. His stress was upon you, the listener. In preaching, God enables even untalented listeners, addressed by maladroit preachers, to listen to God.

Go ahead. Live dangerously. Throw caution to the wind. Listen.

The gospel is news that passes from the lips of one who has heard to the ears of one who has not yet heard, then (God willing) it burrows in the soul, energizing the hands in daring response to a word received. Preaching is instigated by an astounding claim: *Good news; God has spoken to us.* The Christian life is what you get when ordinary folk respond: *I have heard.*

The book (a companion to *Preachers Dare*) is for anyone who listens to sermons—which includes preachers, since there’s no way to preach without gaining skills as a listener. Listening is a human skill, but as God’s word is proclaimed, the hearer experiences a vocal mix of preacher, listener, and God.

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