

Straight from the "Hart"

Worship Service from January 3, 2021



Opening Prayer Lord, as we consider how your Son Jesus, your great light has broken into our world. We have gathered to gain new insights as to how to respond to your ever-increasing revelation of yourself. Guide us, inspire us to rise up and give you our all as we follow you, just as you gave your all for us. Amen.

Call to Worship (R1 - Reader 1, R2 - Reader 2)

R1: The person who enters a sheep pen over or through the fence rather than through the gate is a sheep rustler. The shepherd walks right up to the gate.

R2: The gatekeeper opens the gate for him.

R1: The shepherd calls his sheep by name. They recognize and listen to his voice, because he cares for them. He leads them in for protection and out for pasture. They follow him because they know his voice.

R2: But they will run away from the unfamiliar voice of strangers.

R1: Strangers and thieves come only to steal and kill and destroy. But Jesus, the good shepherd, has come to give life in all its fullness.

R2: Hired hands are not like the shepherd who owns them. They don't care for the sheep and abandon them to be ravaged and scattered by the wolf.

R1: Jesus knows his sheep and his sheep know him, and he puts the sheep before himself, sacrificing himself for them.

R2: He has more sheep to gather, and they too will recognize and listen to his voice, and there will be one flock and one shepherd.

(Inspired by John 10:1-16) (NIV, MSG, ICB))

Special Music

Shepherd of My Heart

Maker of this heart of mine
You know me very well
You understand my deepest part
More than I know myself
So when I face the darkness
When I need to find my way
I'll trust in You
Shepherd of my heart

Keeper of this heart of mine
Your patience has no end
You've loved me back
into Your arms
Time and time again
So when I start to wander
Like a lamb that's gone astray
I'll trust in You
Shepherd of my heart

You're the beacon of my nights
 You're the sunlight of my days
 I can rest within Your arms
 I can know Your loving ways
 So let the cold winds blow
 Let the storms rage all around
 I'll trust in You
 Shepherd of my heart

 Giver of this life in me
 You're what I'm living for
 For all my deepest gratuities
 You love me even more

So as I walk through valleys
 Listening for the Master's call
 I'll trust in you
 Shepherd of my heart

 You're the beacon of my nights
 You're the sunlight of my days
 I can rest within Your arms
 I can know Your loving ways
 So as I walk through valleys
 Listening for the Master's call
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Theme We trust in the shepherd, who makes, cares for, and dwells in our hearts as we live for him and listen to his call. Today, we look at the calling of an ancient disciple – an early prophet of Israel, who, like in the call to worship and song, reminds us that an important part of following Jesus is learning to distinguish Christ's voice and to be willing to do what he says.

Tony Hillerman, anthropologist and mystery writer, describes the necessary attitude in one of his novels. A policeman, unaware of the intricacies of the Navajo culture, investigates a crime by jumping right into asking questions of a tribe elder. The response is icy and uncooperative and the officer leaves in frustration. A Navajo policeman visits later. He sits silently in the presence of the elder who is standing before him. For two hours the elder talks about the Navaho nation and their families, and his concerns about their future. Then there is a pause and the elder sits. It is only then that the policeman asks permission to ask questions about the crime and the elder tells the officer everything he needs to know. It is only after the officer shows proper respect by listening carefully, that the host sits and pauses -- a silent signal that communicates: "You have respected me, now I will help you."

Modern day communication venues (such as social media, comment sections and review platforms) have created a culture that discourages respectful listening and careful researching and encourages people to instantly form opinions and rush to judgment with complaints, and demands, and simplistic solutions. Yet our faith calls us to stop and silently, respectfully listen to the Lord and to each other. Proverbs 1:5 says that even: The wise will hear and increase their learning, And the person of understanding will acquire wise counsel *and* the skill [to steer his course wisely...] (AMP). Our prayer song today asks us to set our hearts on

heaven as we journey into unknown territory (in our case, a new year and a new future). And it is our focused hearts that enable us to rise up to serve God.

Prayer Music

Bear the Fruit (to tune of *Come Ye Thankful Come*)

Bear the fruit repentance shows,
lives of justice truth and love.
Trust no other claim than those;
set your heart on things above.

So we dare to journey on,
led by faith through ways untrod
till at last we rise to be,
servants of the living God.

Prayers

Lord, as we remember the magi coming to seek you out and lay their meaning laden gifts before you; we too, as we start this new year, look to once again offer ourselves to you. The most we can do is offer back to you the gifts you have supplied for us to carry out your will. And you have gifted us just as we need because, as our good shepherd who so wonderfully created us and so deeply cares for us that you came to seek us out, you know what we think, what we are going to say, and you lay your hands on us, and when needed carry us in your strong arms. No matter where we go -- where we wander -- there no height or depth in which your Spirit cannot remain with us to guide us and lift us up. So search us God. You know how anxious we are. But when you are with us, even what seems dark and dreary is light. And it is because we trust in your goodness that is why we present our needs and joys to you. We pray for Darla Jackson and the family and friends of her brother who has passed away, for Kathy's mother Carol and husband Mike who are both sick. And surely there are others that are on our hearts and minds that we lift to you as you lay them on our hearts, and now in this moment of **SILENCE**.

Lord, we are encouraged and inspired -- even awed when we consider how lovingly and how often you think of us. That is why we when listen for and hear you call we are so willing to place our own lives in your hands, to listen gratefully to the nudges in the directions you want us to go, that we may continue to mature as disciples who follow you with trusting hearts, and who pray together what Jesus taught us to pray. **Lord's Prayer**

Music (vv 1,3,5) *Jesus Calls Us*

Bible Reading James 1:19b-25

The hymn reminds us of the challenges and distractions that get in the way of our desire to hear Jesus' voice. James presents one of the clearest statements on the need to follow through on what we hear when he writes,

... be quick to listen but slow to speak, slow to get angry; for a person's anger does not accomplish God's righteousness! So rid yourselves of all vulgarity and obvious evil, and receive meekly the Word implanted in you that can save your lives. Don't deceive yourselves by only hearing what the Word says, but do it! For whoever hears the Word but doesn't do what it says is like someone who looks at his face in a mirror, who looks at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. But if a person looks closely into the perfect Torah, which gives freedom, and continues, becoming not a forgetful hearer but a doer of the work it requires, then he will be blessed in what he does. (CJB)

Message

"Rise Up to Listen"

1 Samuel 1-3, James 1:19b-25

As I mentioned earlier, we are going to look at the call of an early Bible prophet. He played a key role in the Hebrews' transition into an organized kingdom. His back story begins with his mother Hannah. She had no children, which was a really big deal in those days. She went to the Lord's house and prayed that if God would bless her with a son, she would give the son back to God for service to him. God listened, and she gave birth to Samuel; literally meaning "heard by God", because she asked the Lord for him.

Leap forward in time. Samuel is a young boy who lived with and served the Lord under the priest Eli. He continued to grow in stature and in favor with the Lord and with people. The Bible records that in these days, God's word was rare. This silent treatment is seen as judgment, absence, punishment -- which would be seen as the nation's undoing, for no nation can prosper without God's intervention and protection.

But was it that God was not speaking, or that the people were not listening? We cannot hear another if we do all the talking, or if when they are talking, we are only thinking of the next line we want to say, or we drown it out with background noise. Listening requires attentive silence. Are we listening?

Hannah's prayer was heard in the Lord's house during worship, but the Bible makes it clear that God's consistent nature is to seek us out and be with us and give and teach us what we need to know. Just to name a few, he did it with Adam and Eve in the garden, through Moses in Egypt, through an ongoing line of priests and prophets and kings in the homeland and in exile, and by sending Jesus at Christmastime and by his calling the disciples, and by sending the Spirit after Jesus ascended. No place is too far, too humble, too dark, no circumstance too secular. The real question is not whether God is hearing and speaking to us, but whether

we are listening to him. The Bible made it clear that Eli's sons had gotten so caught up in doing wicked things, even in the administration of sacred things and worshipers and servants in the Lord's house, that they could not hear God. He was drowned out by the noise of their evil culture. Can we filter out the noise of our culture to hear God?

CS Lewis, in his book "The Screwtape Letters", a creative novel describing how anti-Christian forces fight Christianity – he wrote that one of the strategies to get us separated from God is to fill everything with noise – noise that prevents us from hearing pangs of conscience, nudges of moral, ethical scruples, and preventing us from striving for pure desires; by shouting down and drowning out the melodies and silences of heaven. And the characters in these letters are clamoring for more and more noise that will fill every moment of every day with more and more volume – drowning out sacred music and holy silence – two wonderful ways we get our souls in tune with God.

Our Bible reading said to "rid yourselves of all *vulgarity* and obvious evil". (emphasis added) The modern connotation of vulgar is indecent, uncivilized, or in bad taste. But an older connotation, a connotation being used here- simply means "characteristic of or belonging to the masses". Our technological culture has now made it possible to bombard our life with sounds and distractions around the clock. At times, noise is not only an affliction, it is an addiction. Even if we manage to still the external voices, we still struggle with evicting the ceaseless noises of our own minds.

As our story moves forward, God now wants to speak, and he chooses Samuel. But before Samuel can speak for God, he needs to be able to listen to God. It is not surprising that it was in the silence of the wee hours of the night that Samuel begins to hear God's voice. But he is young, and as I said, God's voice was rare in those days. Samuel hears God's voice – but he doesn't understand. He thought Eli was calling him.

It is not enough to hear the calling, we must be able to distinguish it from all others, we must be able to filter out the noise that prevents us from really listening to God's good news and understanding who Jesus is – which is why Jesus said to his own disciples in Mark 8:18, "You have ears, but you don't really listen" (Mark 8:18b (ICB)) and our call to worship reminded us the importance of distinguishing the voice of our shepherd from the voice of thieves, and strangers, and hired hands.

Luckily, after several rounds of Samuel answering God's call by going to Eli, Eli realized what was happening and helped Samuel tune in to who is talking, distinguishing the Lord's voice from Eli's and any other noises in Samuel's head. The next morning, Samuel, on Eli's determined insistence, told him everything God told him that night, and he learned that morning to overcome his fear and he continued to listen and speak everything that God said to him. Then the Bible says, *The LORD was with Samuel as he grew up, and he let none of Samuel's words fall to the ground* (meaning, nothing he said failed to come true). *And all Israel ... recognized that Samuel was ... a prophet of the LORD.* (From 1 Sam 3:19-20 (NIV))

And while we may not hear an audible voice like Samuel did, at least on that first night; what are our options when it comes to listening attentively?

Option one is that we don't listen in the first place. Naomi Tannen, after many years of experience in human services,

1) We don't listen

hears the same complaint over and over – the thing people need most is what they get the least – someone that will listen to them. A person is wounded, hurting, afraid, or lonely finally gets the energy and courage to call for help and they don't get a helpful response if they get any response at all. Not being heard makes us feel condemned, judged, and defensive. It keeps wounds fresh, bleeding, and painful, and over time leads to deeper confusion, anger, even spiraling into errant living, and sometimes crisis to crisis survival. One of early Methodism's strengths was that it gave voice to people who were never heard in normal society.

Be responsive and sensitive to each other's needs including the need to be heard. Compassionate listening may have the potential to contribute toward healing each other -- and our world.

Listening option two. We think we already know

2) We don't listen carefully

what God is going to say, or what we want him to say, at least; and so we don't listen very carefully, and we end up being cross purposes from what God really wants to tell us.

Aer Lingus Flight 101 was flying to Dublin one night. (I should warn you that this is a long joke made short). As they approached the airport, Paddy the pilot looked out the front window and said to Jerry the co-pilot, "Gracious, this is one of the shortest runways I've ever seen". Jerry replied, "Yep, that is going to be one tricky landing." Paddy continued, "When I give the signal, throw the engines in reverse, put down the flaps, and stamp on the brakes as hard as you can, and pray with all your soul." "Yep, I'll be doing all that" Jerry replied.

They approached the runway full of nerves and sweaty palms. As the wheels touched the ground, Jerry slammed the engines in reverse, threw down the flaps, stood on the brakes and they both prayed with all they had. With roaring engines, squealing tires, and lots of smoke; the plane screeched to a halt, centimeters from the end of the runway, much to the relief of the pilots and the passengers. As the pilots regained their composure, Paddy looked out the front window, “That has got to be one of the shortest runways I have ever seen in my whole life.” Gerry looked out the side window and said, “Yeah, Paddy, and one of the *widest* ones too!”

We need to listen so that we aren't landing cross ways of God's direction.

Closely related to not listening carefully is selfishly listening. It is treated as an end in itself -- the end of the spiritual journey rather than its beginning. Or listening is treated as some sort of ticket of admission -- paying the price for personal gain. In other words, selfish listeners see the ability to listen as a declaration of privilege and status or as a means of getting something in return. Many people listened/followed Jesus to get their bellies filled (John 6:26), their ears tingled (2 Timothy 4:3-4, Matthew 12:37b), to see him do great things (John 2:23-25), or to receive knowledge and gifts that make us feel better or more important than others (1 Corinthians 4:18, 8:1-3, 12:21ff). The faith becomes more about us and our experience of faith than about the God in whom we are to put our faith.

3) Listening Selfishly

Basil Pennington in “Centering Prayer” wrote that if we are longing for an experience of some sort – to find peace, or quiet, or concerned about getting it right, or getting the right result – [and it is not that these things are wrong, but it *may* be a sign that] we have stopped seeking God, and seek only the things that we want from him.

Many exercise clubs have mirrors on the wall. The mirrors help the members ensure they are using the correct form in their exercises, so they don't hurt themselves. Some people using the mirrors that way. But every once in a while, you might observe people using the mirrors to admire themselves – even more than they are actually exercising. When we listen to God, are we listening to listen? or are we listening to admire our spiritual acuity?

Eli's advice to Samuel was not to feel privileged because he heard God speaking. He did not tell him to enjoy God's voice and savor the experience. He didn't tell Samuel to focus on what was happening to Samuel. He told Samuel to respond by inviting God to speak to him, as God's servant -- and to be open to all God was telling him.

4) Listening so that we can respond

As powerful as listening is, that epiphany, that enlightenment, it is rarely

the end of the experience, it is only the beginning -- the foundation that leads to action. That is what our last option of listening -- listening so that we can respond.

Someone suggested that this is how we tell if our experience is a true faith experience (if it creates an active response). It is a simplistic overstatement, but this illustration may help us picture the idea. If I listen to a Mozart symphony and leave the concert joyfully whistling, I've had an inspiring experience, and that is good, but that is all it is. But if I leave the concert and have determined I am going to, from this day forward, put all my efforts into becoming a violinist [or some other related job that helps express my passion for this music]; then that is, on some level, a faith experience. If I am deeply inspired by a worship service, but it doesn't fuel any movement in my life, I just go back to how I was before that worship, then it isn't *necessarily* a faith listening event.

As a positive example, I saved a part of Samuel's backstory. Hannah's original passionate heart-felt prayer made her lips move. But Eli the priest who was watching her heard no words come out. He assumed she was drunk and confronted her. Hannah explained she was praying out of great anguish and grief from her heart, and Eli told her to go in peace and that may God grant her request. Then Hannah ate and was no longer downcast in spirit, she was inspired, she felt better. But that wasn't the end of the story -- she acted on what she prayed -- after Samuel was born and weaned, she brought him back to Eli and left him to his service and care. Thereafter, each year when she came for the annual sacrifice, she brought Samuel a new robe. Eli blessed her and she had 5 more children. She acted on what she was given by God.

As a negative example, on that morning after the Lord came to Samuel, Eli was eager to hear (from Samuel) what the Lord told him. It was not good news for Eli and his family, especially his wicked sons. But instead of responding with repentance and a change to renewed commitment and service; (which if we understand the character of God, is what would have been hoped for in this setting). Instead, Eli saw the "writing on the wall" as the end of the story rather than a potential new beginning. He negatively and fatalistically resigned himself, "Let the Lord do what is good in his eyes". (1 Samuel 3:18)

In the Bible Reading, James doesn't say we look in a mirror to admire ourselves, but to "fix what is wrong". We do not listen to the word so we can boast that we heard, meanwhile doing what we want even if it is cross purposes to God's will.

We don't listen to the word for the experience of experiencing the word, or as a way of getting something from God, or admiring our own devotion -- or to fatalistically give up in defeat -- but to change our life to line up with what God wants. Or perhaps better to say it -- continuing to change our lives to keep lining up with what God wants, for as James makes clear -- in rather awkward grammar in this translation -- we don't look in the mirror once and never look again -- we look and then we look again, and again and again. We look at God's will, and we don't forget it, but continue to look and continue to adjust and continue to do what God asks -- that is the person who will be blessed in what they do.

Watch life change as we continue to listen and continue to do what he says.

A big part of listening is a commitment to commune with God through Jesus Christ, he's already put his life on the line to commune with us. Choose to make the Word of God mean something more than words on paper or a screen. Allow the Spirit to use the Word to create meaning and direction for your life. Allow the bread and cup of communion to mean more than the simple re-enactment of a mini-drama of God's actions in Jesus on this earth – communion is a means of connecting with the living God who seeks to wrap you up in his arms of comfort and lead you into ways, (sometimes difficult ways) but it is a way of bringing the light of his hope to a world in which the night has fallen.

Invitation All who trust in Christ are welcome to participate. Through it, we renew our commitment to Christ who has raised us, to the Spirit who has sealed us as God's, and the Creator who promises to make all things new... Let's prepare our hearts by singing Loving Spirit.

Loving Spirit

Loving Spirit, loving Spirit,
you have chosen me to be --
you have drawn me to your wonder,
you have set your sign on me.

Friend and lover, in your closeness
I am known and held and blessed:
In your promise is my comfort,
in your presence I may rest.

Confession Let's continue with a time of confession. Lord, we confess that we have not always lived up to our covenant vows. We haven't listened, or we've listened badly, or we've listened for the wrong reasons. We haven't always completely rejected the powers of sin and death, our repentance is in constant need of renewal. We don't accept your help to resist evil, injustice and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves. We confess Jesus as our Savior, but fail to put our trust in his grace. We promise to serve you as Lord in union with the church you open to all peoples, but at times we fail to live up to these promises.

Even so, Jesus, come to us, resurrect the life that you have birthed in us by your grace that never fails. Let your healing streams flow over us. Let your Spirit lead us where you will. Forgive us when we block the impulses of your Spirit; when we lose hope or take it away from others, when we forget about your power and parch ourselves. We are dry and thirsty, O God. Come and refresh us.

Assurance of Forgiveness God's Spirit is poured out on us in streams of his saving power and justice, bringing hope to all who thirst for God, flowing freely for all who will receive it, immersing us, refreshing us, nurturing us, and offering new birth and sustaining new life. He speaks once more the good news of his forgiveness. His life pours into us his love which is stronger than death, until we can all rise up and proclaim: We are forgiven children of God. He fills us with hope because Christ has died, and risen, and will come again.

Thanksgiving Pour out your holy Spirit upon us gathered here or watching online, and on this bread and cup or whatever elements we are using for this service. Make them be for us the body and blood of Christ that we may rise up to meet the Lord who is rising over us. We come to him to bring the gift of our best selves so that we can be the body of Christ for the world. Unite us as one with each under Christ so that we may be one in ministry to all the world until Christ comes in final victory.

It is Christ himself who invites us to an upper room, where he took the bread, and he lifted it up and he broke it, and he said, This is my body which is broken for you, as often as you eat it, eat it in remembrance of me. Eat.

And likewise, when the supper was over, he took the cup, and he lifted it up and gave thanks for it, saying, This is the blood of the new covenant, my blood, which is shed for the forgiveness of your sins, and the sins of many, as often as you drink it, drink it in remembrance of me. Drink.

And so, heavenly Father, you have spoken to us through the Communion table and in many ways, but ultimately in your Son, Jesus Christ who calls us to faith in the midst of living, and to work out that faith in the midst of living, answering your call to meet the cries of others, bringing hope and encouragement, by bringing them to you. For all glory and honor is yours, Father Almighty, now and forever. Amen.

Music *Here I Am, Lord*

Closing Blessing As we go, remember that you are called to act with justice, to love tenderly, to show mercy, to serve one another, and to walk humbly with your Lord. Abide in his radiance. Shine with the joy and love of the Spirit. Be light for Christ's kingdom. Live united in the freedom of God. Amen.