

A Sermon
Rev. W. Kevin Holder
Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
March 26, 2023

Restored Hearing

Psalm 40:1-10

At the conclusion of last Sunday's service, Ken Heinbuch spoke to us about God's presence and work in his life, especially God's power giving him deliverance from disease. It was an uplifting testimony to the Lord's faithfulness, and an expression of trust in his steadfast love. What Ken shared sounds similar to what we hear from the psalmist in today's Scripture passage. The psalmist recounts how God came to the rescue in the midst of a life-threatening situation. We don't know the exact circumstances, but we do know that it wasn't a minor life event. The psalmist uses the imagery of a "slimy pit" or "the mud and mire" to describe his situation. There are a number of psalms where these words are used as symbols of death.

But now, the psalmist stands before the people to bear witness to life. This didn't come about because of the psalmist's own strength, but because he had waited on the Lord, who arrived in his strength, bringing salvation and restoration. It's only fitting, then, that the psalmist declare what God has done. God has put a "new song" in his mouth, "a hymn of praise to our God" (v. 3a). So the psalmist isn't here to draw attention to himself, but to summon others to worship God. "Many will see and fear and put their trust in the Lord" (v. 3b). And all God's people say, "Amen."

This doesn't mean that the psalmist has nothing to say about himself. He certainly considers himself "blessed" or "happy," as he indicates at the beginning of verse 4. But there are other ways to translate the Hebrew term. One commentator has suggested "content."¹ In other words, because of his experience of the Lord's faithfulness and deliverance, the psalmist has a deep-seated sense of peace, of feeling settled. This contentedness is generated by his trust in God.

The psalmist says, "Many, O Lord my God, are the wonders you have done. The things you have planned for us no one can recount to you; were I to speak of them, they would be too many to declare" (v. 5). The psalmist knows that given the time and opportunity, he could just go on talking about the many things God has done in his life and among the people. He could even get into the things that lie ahead, things that God intends for his people going forward. But for now, this particular service needs to come to a close, so the psalmist turns things back over to the pastor for the closing prayer. Having listened to one of their own talk *about* God, the congregation, before leaving, talks *to* God.

But what about God's talking? We've heard a lot of speech about the Lord and to the Lord, but what about God's speech to us? Doesn't God want to be heard? Absolutely. And the psalmist would be one of the first to recognize that. In fact, he says that his blessedness, his contentedness, doesn't come primarily from pious acts of worship but from his openness to God's instruction. That's because God prioritizes being heard. Speaking is God's preferred means of getting things done, which means that faithful listening is the response that he wants from us.

But that doesn't come easily. The psalmist himself recognizes and acknowledges his own impaired hearing. In verse 6, he speaks of an "open ear" (NRSV). The NIV translates it,

"my ears you have pierced." The KJV renders it, "mine ears thou hast opened." The phrase literally means "ears you have dug out for me." This could be a reference to ears that are jammed with gunk and wax, which God needs to clear out in order to be heard. Or, as author Eugene Peterson suggests, we could take matters even further and imagine what a human head would look like with no ears. Peterson says the metaphor in our text evokes the image of a blockhead. There are eyes, a nose, and a mouth, but no ears. There's no capacity to hear, no response. So what does God do? According to Peterson, "God gets a pick and shovel and digs through the cranial granite, opening a passage that will give access to the interior depths, into the mind and heart."²

That may sound like an extreme way of putting it, but maybe it reflects God's determination to be heard, as well as the indispensability of the word, God's word, as his means of working in our lives. What's interesting about our text is that this reference to God opening ears is surrounded by four different words related to religious sacrifices. Sacrifices. Offerings. Burnt offerings. Sin offerings. There's no shortage of religious activity in this text. But no amount of religious activity is a substitute for basic attentiveness to God and openness to his teaching. Religious activity is important, but sometimes it can become so familiar to us that it may actually diminish our hearing of God's word.

I came across a story about three friends who went deer hunting together: a lawyer, a doctor, and a preacher. When a big buck appeared, the three of them shot simultaneously. Immediately the buck dropped to the ground, and all three rushed up to see how big it actually was. When they got to it, they couldn't determine whose shot actually killed the deer. As a heated debate ensued, a game officer came by and asked what the problem was. The doctor told him that they were debating who shot the buck. The officer took a look at the deer and within a few seconds, he said with confidence, "The preacher shot the buck!" They all wondered how he knew that so quickly. The officer said, "Easy. The bullet went in one ear and out the other."

According to the psalmist, the word of God can have trouble just getting in one ear, much less out the other. But you get the point. Sometimes our religious activity, especially our congregational worship, can become so routine to us that it may actually hinder, rather than help, our receptiveness to God's speaking into our lives. While the life of faith certainly includes what we do, it isn't primarily about what we do. It's about what God does. And what God does most of all, and above all, is speak. No wonder that what he wants and desires is an open ear.

Jesus echoes this reality in today's Scripture reading from Mark. After his parable about a farmer who scatters seed onto various types of soil, with varying results, Jesus concludes, just as he began, with a warning to "Listen!" (v. 3). So while there's certainly an emphasis here on the power and effectiveness of the word of the kingdom, there's also a stress on our responsibility to be receptive and responsive to the proclamation of God's good news. "He who has ears to hear, let him hear" (v. 9).

But we run into problems because our ears get clogged with all sorts of what Eugene Peterson calls "audio junk."³ This includes the sights and sounds with which we're flooded on a daily basis. But it also goes beyond these things. Sometimes, from a spiritual standpoint, our ears get clogged with fear, with anxiety, with busyness, with work, with exhaustion, with complacency, with anger, with self-righteousness, with discouragement, or with some other attitude, emotion, or habit that's interfering with our capacity to hear what God is trying to say to us. God is speaking, but what good is a speaking God if our human ears are stopped up, or tuned in elsewhere?

George Bernard Shaw wrote a play called *Saint Joan*. In one scene, the king is angered by the fact that Joan is always hearing voices from God. He complains to her, "Oh, your voices! Your voices! Why don't your voices come to me? I'm the king, not you." "They do come," she replies. "But you do not hear them. You've not sat in the field in the evening listening for them. When the Angelus rings, you cross yourself and have done with it. But if you prayed from your heart and listened to the trilling of the bells in the air after they stopped ringing, you would hear the voices as well as I do."⁴

Sometimes our spiritual hearing is impaired by our unwillingness to devote the time and patient attention needed to discern God's voice, especially when he's speaking in more subtle and undramatic ways. We want clear and immediate communication from God. We want quick answers, direct from heaven, spoken in clear and booming tones. One mother tells about an occasion when her five-year-old daughter had disobeyed and had been sent to her room. After a few minutes, the mother went in to talk to her about what she had done. Teary-eyed, she asked, "Why do we do wrong things, Mommy?" "Sometimes the devil tells us to do something wrong," replied the mother, "and we listen to him. We need to listen to God instead." And the little girl sobbed, "But God doesn't talk loud enough!"⁵

With time and experience, we often learn how to attune our spiritual hearing, recognizing that God doesn't speak into our lives in exactly the same ways in all circumstances. We listen as he addresses us through Scripture, particularly in the preaching and teaching of the word. We listen as he addresses us through prayer. We listen as he addresses us through worship, individually and corporately. We listen as he addresses us through stories of faith and the testimonies of fellow believers. We listen as he addresses us through the creation. We listen as he addresses us through experiences and events in our lives. We listen as he addresses us through other people. Sometimes the message may be loud and clear. Sometimes it may be more subtle. Sometimes it may be right there in the moment. Sometimes it may unfold over time. All of this points to the importance of living in daily openness to and receptiveness to the Lord's instruction in our lives, as he reveals his will to us.

The psalmist says, "I desire to do your will O my God; your law is within my heart" (v. 8). With so much we've noted about the psalmist speaking and the Lord speaking, it all comes down to the doing of what is spoken. It's one thing to receive the word of God and internalize the word of God. But this is inseparable from externalizing the word of God through obedience, embodying the will of God in practice.

Remember that the psalmist is reflecting on what God desires and requires. And the thing that God desires is our responsiveness to his word, the offering of ourselves, our whole lives, in obedient attentiveness. The hearing and the doing are two sides of the same coin of faithfulness. In fact, obedience is part of what improves your spiritual hearing. When you close yourself off to the voice of God, reject his instruction, or disobey his guidance, your heart can become hardened and your ears can become dull. That's because the hearing feeds into the doing, and the doing feeds into the hearing. They need one another. They rely on one another. They strengthen one another. This is what it means to worship and serve a God who wants, above all, an open ear and a delight in doing his will.

¹ Nancy deClaisse-Walford, Commentary on Psalm 40:1-11. Working Preacher. January 16, 2011. <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revise-common-lectionary/second-sunday-after-epiphany/commentary-on-psalm-401-11> (March 22, 2023).

² Eugene Peterson, *Living the Message: Daily Help for Living the God-Centered Life* (New York: HarperCollins, 1996) 93.

³ Peterson, *Living the Message*, 93.

⁴ Ben Patterson, "A Faith Like Mary's." Preaching Today, Tape No. 87.

⁵ Jo M. Guerrero, *Christian Reader* (September/October 1996).