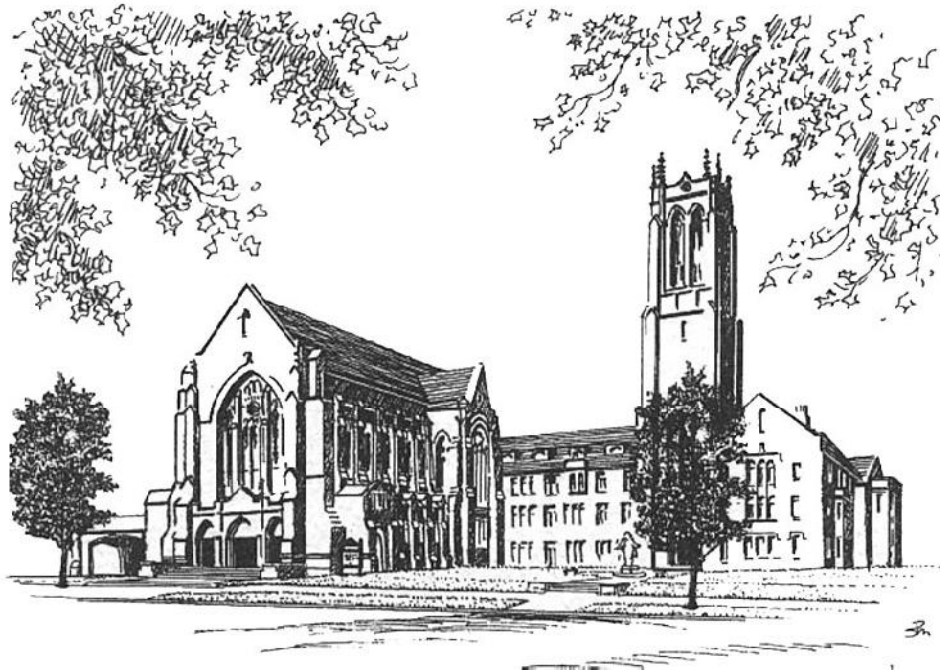


**CAN YOU HEAR ME NOW?**  
by  
**Rev. Shelli Williams**  
**January 29, 2012**  
*(Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany)*  
9:45 a.m.



**ST. PAUL'S**

UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

5501 Main Street

Houston, Texas 77004-6917

713-528-0527

[www.stpaulshouston.org](http://www.stpaulshouston.org)

**Texts:** Deuteronomy 18:15-20; Psalm 111; 1 Corinthians 8:1-13; and Mark 1:21-28

## **Deuteronomy 18:15-20**

<sup>15</sup>The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people; you shall heed such a prophet. <sup>16</sup>This is what you requested of the Lord your God at Horeb on the day of the assembly when you said: “If I hear the voice of the Lord my God any more, or ever again see this great fire, I will die.”

<sup>17</sup>Then the Lord replied to me: “They are right in what they have said. <sup>18</sup>I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their own people; I will put my words in the mouth of the prophet, who shall speak to them everything that I command. <sup>19</sup>Anyone who does not heed the words that the prophet shall speak in my name, I myself will hold accountable. <sup>20</sup>But any prophet who speaks in the name of other gods, or who presumes to speak in my name a word that I have not commanded the prophet to speak—that prophet shall die.”

## **Mark 1:21-28**

<sup>21</sup>They went to Capernaum; and when the sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught. <sup>22</sup>They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. <sup>23</sup>Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, <sup>24</sup>and he cried out, “What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God.”

<sup>25</sup>But Jesus rebuked him, saying, “Be silent, and come out of him!”

<sup>26</sup>And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. <sup>27</sup>They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, “What is this? A new teaching – with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.”

<sup>28</sup>At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.

## **I. Testing Reception**

Can you hear me now?...Can you hear me now?...Can you hear me now?...I know that you remember the Verizon advertising campaign with that now-famous slogan. It lasted for nine years and always showed a guy going to different places with his cell phone to show what fabulous network reception Verizon had. He'd be out in a field or down in a hole or in some sort of tunnel and with those words would test out how well his phone worked.

I suppose it was a fairly clever advertising campaign for the phone itself. But it also acknowledged that there are other factors in play when it comes to trying to hear someone. There's the instrument of hearing itself. There's the distance between the hearer and what he or she is trying to hear. And then there are those things that get in the way, whether they are physical impediments that stop the sound or other sounds and voices that interfere. As we know, hearing is not that easy. It involves listening and sometimes that's not as clear as it sounds. Sometimes we, too, have to hone our reception capabilities.

## **II. The Voice of a Prophet**

Our Old Testament passage for this week sort of introduces the whole notion of prophets and the idea of listening to the message that they were speaking. At this point, the Israelites had become accustomed to Moses' style of leadership, which was almost a fatherly image. But this was coming to an end. The world was changing. And so this text introduces these new public leaders, those who for a specific time in history would emerge with a new message, a new direction to which the people and the society should shift so that they could truly give expression to the Word of God even in the changing times in which they lived. Essentially, the prophets effected change – change for the world, the whole world. They not only spoke to religious issues, but also social and political ones. The prophet's mission was to give the people a new way of hearing and a new direction to walk.

So, where have all the prophets gone?

Who are the ones calling for total and complete change in the world?

Who are the ones calling for justice and peace and righteousness for all?

Who are the ones who are calling us to a new way of hearing God?

To be honest, in both Old Testament times and now, prophets are never that popular. Their message is too harsh, too biting, to close to home. Their message calls us to change our lives.

But, contrary to the way perhaps I try to imagine God, God is not a perfectionist. I don't think there's some static master plan of what the world should someday be. Instead, it's about listening. It's about the Creator and the Creation growing into each other and striking up a conversation of petition and response, response and petition. It's not about keeping up with God. It's about following wherever God goes. Our faith informs our lives and our lives inform our faith.

William Sloane Coffin said that *the final end of life lies not in politics, but the final end of life is concerned with the proper ordering of power to the end that it may enhance and not destroy human life. Only a fool hasn't learned in [today's time] that the political order in which people live deeply affects the personal lives they lead...The separation of church and state is a sound doctrine, but it points to an organizational separation. It is not designed to separate Christians from their politics. For our faith certainly should inform our common life, as well as our personal, more private lives.*

You see, we are not called to separate ourselves from the world but rather to listen to how we are called to change the world. We are called to listen to the voice of God in the world.

Hmm! Can you hear me now?

### **III. Clearing Demons**

But how do you hear the voice of God?

Jesus...Jesus showed us that. If we just pay attention, Jesus taught us how to listen to the voice of God. At first reading, our Gospel passage today seems to be about some sort of exorcism of demons or some sort of evil spirits. Now, admittedly, that's just downright odd for us. But before we relegate it to the status of a B-rated horror

flick, let us look at it from the standpoint of the one who Jesus healed rather than the demons themselves.

In this first-century setting, the whole idea of someone with unclean spirits, someone who was considered unholy or impure, entering the synagogue was against the law as it existed. This person was an interruption. He didn't fit. He didn't belong. He was in the way of proper society and right religion. But not only did Jesus acknowledge him but he also healed him. The world as it was known was ending. Everything was changing. Even that which doesn't "belong" is being broken and redeemed. The point is that God is bringing everything into the Kingdom of God. All of earth, with everything that is wrong, and all of the earthly power structures are being recreated and made new.

So, really, was it a demonic possession or just a voice competing with the one to which the demoniac should have been listening?

And if that's the case, then where are we in this story?

To what voices do we listen? What voices direct and control our lives – the voice of fear? The voice of desire? The voice of insecurity or worry? The voice that wants us to preserve the life we've built?

Jesus brought an unquestioned authority to his teaching. What was that?

Well of course, it was the word of God. But what does that mean?

It was not an overpowering; it was not a violent overtaking. It was a silencing, a silencing of the powers and voices of this world that are not part of that vision that God holds. The Greek word is the same one used to depict the way Jesus calmed the storm, created order out of chaos.

Maybe that where we're called to be.

Maybe that's how God speaks – in the silences, when we're listening.

You see, Jesus' teaching was not just about words; it was about transformation. It was about taking that which did not belong and speaking Creation once again. It was about silencing those voices that were in the way of hearing the voice that we're called to hear. It's about clearing those things from our lives that are so loud that we can't listen to that which we're supposed to be listening.

Shhh! Can you hear me now?

## IV. Learning to Hear

Maybe that's the point of our faith journey. It's not a collecting of knowledge or a summing up of data. It's about listening to our life and hearing something new. It's about listening not just to the words of those prophetic voices but rather hearing the spirit from which they come and the vision to which they point. And it's about silencing the other voices that interfere with the reception of the one to which we should be listening. It's about learning to hear by listening with the heart.

Listening is about more than just words. A listening faith affirms that God sees more than we see, imagines more than we imagine, and believes in us more than we believe in ourselves. We'd like this voice to which we're called to listen to be clear and concise and controllable. If we're honest, we'd like to be able to turn it off once in a while when it's uncomfortable or inconvenient. But that's not how it works.

Changing the world is sometimes messy and wild and even dangerous. Living into God's vision might sometimes mean that we have to speak the voice of God and, probably more likely, that we will actually be called to silence our own perceptions and desires and fears that the world might not be what we think it should look like so that we can hear God speaking our Creation once again. Our main work is listening, rather than speaking. In fact, on some level, we have neglected to perfect the language of listening. We have not learned to empty our filled-up lives so that God can speak them into being.

We need to remember that faith is not about affirming our old shopworn lives. As hard as it is to stomach, it's not about putting leaders in place that make our individual lives better at the expense of others.

It's about newness; it's about re-creation; it's about following God down pathways that we've never walked before.

Faith is drifting off a little in a sermon and then finding yourself in a new land.

Faith is about singing a song that you've never heard before and realizing that in the deepest part of you, you already know the tune.

Faith is about hearing unexpected voices say things that we never thought we'd hear.

Faith is listening and learning when to speak and when to hear.

And the more faithfully we listen to the voice within us, the better we will hear what the world is trying to tell us.

So maybe that Verizon ad wasn't that far off. We don't have to stand in this sanctuary to hear the voice of God. It's everywhere. The reception is great if we will just clear out those things that are standing in the way.

So, can you hear me now?

There's a hymn in our hymnal that we very seldom sing that's based on our Gospel text. It was written in 1984 by hymn writer, Tom Troeger and is #264 in your hymnal. Now, don't worry, I'm not going to sing it, but I invite you to listen to his powerful words:

*"Silence! frenzied, unclean spirit," cried God's healing, holy One.*

*"Cease your ranting! Flesh can't bear it. Flee as night before the sun."*

*At Christ's voice the demon trembled, from its victim madly rushed,  
while the crowd that was assembled stood in wonder, stunned and hushed.*

*Lord, the demons still are thriving in the grey cells of the mind:  
tyrant voices, shrill and driving, twisted thoughts that grip and bind,  
doubts that stir the heart to panic, fears distorting reason's sight,  
guilt that makes our loving frantic, dreams that cloud the soul with fright.*

*Silence, Lord, the unclean spirit, in our mind and in our heart.*

*Speak your word that when we hear it all our demons shall depart.*

*Clear our thought and calm our feeling, still the fractured, warring soul.*

*By the power of your healing make us faithful, true and whole.*

(Thomas H. Troeger, 1984, *The United Methodist Hymnal* # 264.)

Well, can you hear me now?

In the name of the One who spoke us into being, gave us words to hear, and gives us the Spirit to say ourselves into being once again. Amen.