

Sunday December 31st, 2023

Christmas I

Luke 2:22-40

“Enjoying the Company”

I heard recently about a man who was complaining to his friends that his neighbour would come almost every night around 2 AM and bang on his door. It was one of the most annoying things you could imagine. “Luckily”, the man said, “He usually comes around at the same time I’m up practicing my bag pipes. But still how inconsiderate of him.” Are you a good listener? I have been accused over the years of not listening very well, and you can guess by who.

I’ve noticed that when you are listening to music it doesn’t get you many admirers, not like playing does, and yet as we all know, listening is essential for our relationships, our work, and for learning. It is also, I’ve discovered, essential for our life in the Holy Spirit. This week of the “Company’s Coming” series, we get to hear the story of a professional listener, a man who dedicated his life to listening. And then when the time came, he played. He sang the song he’d been listening to. He sat down to play the tune he had learned by ear.

It’s a long story, but worth reading all the way through —because we need to listen for a while. We needed to catch the tune; we needed to follow the rhythms. Simeon learned how to listen. His name means “heard,” believe it or not. It was what he was born to do. So, he did. He listened; day and night, he listened. He was listening, for the future. He was listening for hope, the consolation of Israel, Luke tells us. He was listening for that which would bring peace, that which would bring light.

He listened. day after day, he went to the temple to listen. He heard the cries of the people. He heard the songs of the prayers, the loud happy celebratory ones that seemed so loud and brash, but good hearted anyway. He heard the ritual ones, spoken sometimes as though they had lost their meaning, and sometimes as though the meaning was so deep it resonated through the souls of those who prayed. He heard the wordless prayers that were wept from swollen and reddened eyes, wrung out of twisted scraps of cloth between hands gnarled with pain and fear.

He heard the proud and grateful prayers of people who knew how blessed they were. He heard them and wept and laughed with them. He heard them all. But he heard more because he listened deeper. He heard the responses. He heard the sighs of the Spirit as it flowed like wisps of comfort into the hearts of the hopeless and broken. He heard the soothing song of blessing as it played on hearts less in tune than his, but aware nonetheless somehow.

He heard the invitation of the God he loved, to follow, to obey, to keep close and stay awake, to watch and listen. He heard the commandment not as a hammer on a cymbal, but as a finger plucking a string. He heard; somehow, he heard. Then, that day came, when he heard the music shift into a higher key, a note of anticipation fulfilled, a baton pointed, a new singer taking the stage. And he followed the director’s gaze and welcomed the one who came.

Then Simeon, who lived a life of listening, became a teacher of the song he knew. He sang into the hearts of those who came carrying more than they knew. His song was a gift to the church. Called the “*Nunc Dimittis*” from the first words of the song in Latin, “*Now let your servant depart in peace.*” We’ve always thought that he was saying it was time to die.

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Because Luke told us that he was promised that he wouldn't die until he heard what he was listening for. But maybe he is simply saying, "I'm done listening. I've heard all I need to hear. I've heard the voice of the one who sings a song of salvation, who chants the chorus of redemption. My ears are full."

He may be done listening, but he isn't done singing. He must teach the song to those who will sing it. And his colleague, Anna, teaches it to all who are around them, running from one to another to make sure they sing. You can't stand silent in this worship service; you can't have closed lips for this hymn. It doesn't matter whether you think you can sing or not. We need to learn the tune—the falling and the rising, the major and the minor key, that which makes us smile and that which evokes a tear. We need to sing.

We might as well; our inner thoughts are revealed anyway, Simeon says so, and he ought to know. He has been listening to those inner thoughts his whole life. And now he sings the song he learned by ear. It takes time to learn to listen, but it is worth the effort. The Spirit rested on Simeon, Luke says, *rested*. Not stirred up, not agitated or poked or prodded, but rested. Maybe if we listen more to the Spirit, the voice of God, then we might know rest, as Jesus promised. But we can also learn to sing, to play by ear.

True, singing is problematic these days. Maybe in your church, you're not singing at all, just listening. Or maybe you are singing through a mask, trying not to share those droplets. That is understandable; and good for you. But the Spirit needs to be shared. The song needs to be sung, if only in our hearts and our heads.

Isaiah doesn't talk about singing, though he could have. He talks about celebrating; he talks about rejoicing; he talks about shouting. Lots of droplets there, it would seem. "I will not keep silent," he proclaims, for Zion's sake. And what brings about all this noise, all this celebrating and shouting? Well, it's the new growth, Isaiah claims. It is what is happening in the community of faith by God's action.

When we enjoy the company that God has brought into our midst, we spend part of the time listening. Whether we are talking about the Christ who was born among us, or the guests who came because we put out the welcome mat, we need to listen first. To hear their story, to learn their song, so that we can sing with them. And then we need to teach our songs, Christ's songs, so that together we can wear the diadem.

What's a diadem? It's a crown. No wait, we sing not so we wear a diadem but so that we can be the diadem, that's what Isaiah says. So that we can be the sign that God is in our midst, and we are listening and singing and enjoying the company. Maybe what we need to do is consider ourselves Korahites. What in the world is a Korahite? Simply put. God thinks singing is so important that he commissioned groups in Israel to ministries of music. For example, the Korahites' sole job description was to sing to the Lord.

The Sons of Korah were the sons of Moses' cousin Korah. The story of Korah is found in Numbers 16. Korah led a revolt against Moses; he died, along with all his co-conspirators, when God caused "the earth to open her mouth and swallow him and all that pertained to them" (Numbers 16:31–33).

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The second time they are mentioned is immediately after this event, when the Lord's anger burned, and a plague struck killing another 14,700 Israelites. However, "the children of Korah died not" (Numbers 26:11). Fast forward in the bible and we learn that several Psalms are described in their opening verses as being by the Sons of Korah: numbers 42, 44–49, 84, 85, 87 and 88. According to the genealogies in 1 Chronicles, the prophet Samuel was descended from Korah.

In 2 Chronicles 20:19, they “stood up to praise the Lord, the God of Israel, with a very loud voice.” The Korahites’ singing wasn’t just for show; their ministry had a purpose. Singing serves to refresh and reorient our souls in ways that other forms of instruction simply don’t. Singing helps us love God not only with our minds, but also with our hearts and souls and strength (Mark 12:30).

The point is our souls need song. Simeon showed us that. So, God ordained a ministry of singers to drive theological teaching deep into the hearts of his people. As believers indwelt with the Holy Spirit, we now possess this gift of singing for our own and others’ benefit.

No one knows the souls of people like Jesus does. And no one knows the remedy for the challenges of life like the Savior of humanity himself. Everything Jesus does matters, and that includes his singing. Yes, I said singing.

Jesus sang. He sang with people and to people. Once I month I mention his most famous time of singing. At the Last Supper, Jesus and his disciples sang a hymn together (Matthew 26:30). This was most likely a portion of what’s known as the *Hallel* Psalms — Psalms 113–118. Jesus, the Word, led these men in singing the very words of Scripture he embodied. The very next day, Jesus died with a Psalm on his lips.

It matters that the Savior of souls was a singer to souls, and a singing soul himself. It matters that the one who turns hearts of stone into hearts of flesh gave us the gift of song to drive that gospel reality and its instructive implications deep into our souls. Music often provokes a reaction in us. Like the following joke reveals. Jack: I stood under my girlfriend's window and sang a love song to her. She threw me a flower. Danny: then why is there a wound on your head? Jack: she forgot to take the flowers out of the pot.

I mention love songs because if we did a brief survey among the congregation assembled today and I asked you if you and your spouse or romantic partner have a special song. I suspect many would say, “yes they do”. Mind you, in some couples there may be a disagreement as to what the song is. So, you have said or heard someone say, “Listen dear they are playing our song.” A song that brings back pleasant memories, and maybe hints at more adventures to come.

Dare I suggest that the song Simeon is singing, is “our song”. Do the words tug on your heart strings, bring back wonderful remembrances of what God has done in relationship to us. “For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.” That’s our song. A song meant to resonate deeply within us. A song that should be an “earworm” for us.”

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What in the world is an earworm? Well, it's a slang term referring to those songs that stick in our minds playing repeatedly. You know when you say that you have a song stuck in your head. Sometimes these songs drive us crazy, but Simeon's song is meant to restore our souls. Why do you think Psalms are so important. What were the Korahites trying to do? What was David trying to do with his words?

They were helping us enjoy the company that has come at Christmas and will remain with us for eternity. "This is my story; this is my song. Praising my Saviour all the day long." Come and sing with Simeon, with Jesus and with all you have seen our salvation in Christ.