

## **The Ancient Paths for a Brand New Year** ***Why and How Should We Listen to Preaching***

I know with some of our New Year's goals we often think about adding things to our lives that we feel we're missing. Like exercise or vegetables. That's good but what we're looking at this weekend is something that is already at hand, part of your life that is maybe not being fully utilized. It can be like a light that brightens your life, a source of food for your soul. It is something God wants to use in your life, and it doesn't require a change in your calendar. It just needs an adjustment in your mindset. Next week we get back to the *Story of God and the Struggle of Life* with the story of Moses and the Exodus. We're calling it, *The Struggle To Be Free*. This morning we conclude our New Year's series on the ancient paths, the proven spiritual practices that enrich our lives in God. One of the most ancient paths of spiritual formation, which we are already practicing, but rarely talk about, is listening to preaching. You might wonder what that has to do with the Scripture we just read from **Isaiah 6**.

**Isaiah 6** relates an incredible vision Isaiah was given. And they reveal, for us, the pattern of a meaningful encounter with God that we use to shape our worship services.

- 1.) We begin with a call to worship -- Isaiah saw the Lord, high and lifted up. We're called to lift our eyes to see him as he is.
  - 2.) We praise God for who he is. -- Isaiah heard the seraphim responding to who God is by worshipping him as holy.
  - 3.) We look honestly at ourselves and humbly confess our sins. Isaiah did this. He saw his brokenness in contrast to God's holiness and confessed himself to be sinful.
  - 4.) We receive the assurance of God's grace and forgiveness. -- Isaiah was immediately comforted with the grace of forgiveness.
- What comes next? **Isaiah 6:8** says: *And I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" Then I said, "Here I am! Send me."* So the fifth and sixth movements in our worship are
- 5.) We hear the voice of God – the question is how does that happen?
  - 6.) We respond to the voice of God – how do we do that?
  - 7.) We are dismissed with God's blessing on us.

This weekend our focus is on those fifth and sixth steps: hearing and responding to the voice of God.

*We can put the first point this way...*

## **I. IF YOU ARE A CHILD OF GOD YOU ARE MEANT TO HEAR THE VOICE OF GOD.**

Isaiah says, *"I heard the voice of the Lord...."* When was the last time you heard the voice of the Lord? Do you think it is possible that you could hear the voice of the Lord and not know that it was the voice of the Lord you heard when you heard the voice of the Lord?

*It is not only possible, it is common because*

### **A. God's voice is heard today in Scripture.**

To hear the Lord's voice is not a rare thing only experienced in visions or by prophets. There is a fascinating passage in the book of Hebrews. Twice, in **Hebrews 3:7 & 8** and then again in **verse 14** you read, *The Holy Spirit says, Today, if you hear his voice do not harden your hearts.* Here's what's so interesting. The human author introduces that quote with the words, *"The Holy Spirit says."* And, the words are from **Psalms 95**. So there are four factors that all are converging: 1.) **Psalms 95**, 2.) **Hebrews 3**, 4.) *What the Holy Spirit says* and 4.) *The voice of the Lord*. Here's what it means. When we hear what Scripture says we hear the voice of the Lord. It may not be audible but it is personal.

### **B. Jesus said, His sheep hear his voice and follow him.**

In **John 10:16**. Jesus was speaking to the Jewish people and he said: *And I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd.* Jesus did not simply say that the other sheep, the nations and people yet to be reached with his message, would hear *about* him, he said they would hear *his voice* in the preaching of his word by those who brought the words of Jesus to them. In **John 10:27**, Jesus said: *My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me.* Jesus is saying that hearing his voice is a defining mark of his sheep.

### **C. This truth; that believing hearts hear the voice of their God and Savior in the Scriptures is also true in Scriptural preaching.**

I didn't get when I first started preaching. This week I received an email from a couple I hope can be with us next Sunday. They were part of my first church, when I became a pastor forty-one years ago! I remembered this week how I started out thinking sermons were just a way for me to teach people about God and the gospel. But one day I was listening to a

message by a famous preacher from Wales; Dr. Martin Lloyd-Jones. He was preaching on the book of Ephesians and he came **Ephesians 2:17**. It is talking about Christ and it says, *And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near*. Lloyd Jones said this is an awesome and amazing verse. Why? Because Jesus, during his earthly life, never visited Ephesus which is located in modern-day Turkey. Lloyd-Jones said that what this means is that when the first Christian preachers came to Ephesus and preached to the Ephesians Christ himself was preaching, speaking through them and in them.

When and if a faithful preacher clarifies and applies the Scriptures and reveals our broken relationship with God and then offers a Savior who is the true king, it is not just a preacher offering the Savior. It is the voice of God offering his own love and grace. In **2 Corinthians 5:20** the apostle Paul says, *God is making his appeal through us*. Just as clearly as Jesus himself said to men and women in his own day, *“whoever is thirsty, come to me and drink”* in the same way, right now, his voice is heard speaking to believing hearts through imperfect servants whenever his word and his gospel is preached. So the Holy Spirit says to you today, *Today if you hear his voice do not harden your heart*. God wants you to treasure his words like Jesus did.

Here at Christ Community Church family we want what we do in our weekend worship services to support and strengthen you in the ancient path of listening to the voice of God in scripture and in sermons. You may have noticed that in our worship service we’re using some of the same Scriptures for the call to worship and the confession and the benediction. The goal is to help you to begin to treasure and store some important and familiar Scriptures in your heart – to memorize them, because it is *that* important. We're also trying to share some our announcements earlier in the week by videos we post online, on our church app, or by email. The purpose is to allow more space for some honest and thoughtful response to the word of God and to the sermon as part of our worship service. *If you are a child of God, you are meant to be led by the voice of God*.

Now, remember in **Isaiah 6**, when Isaiah hears the word of the LORD asking, *“who will I send and who will go for me.”* He responds immediately and personally. He says, *“Here am I, send me.”*

*Here is the second point...*

## **II. GOD'S VOICE CALLS FOR A RESPONSE FROM YOU.**

To listen responsively, we have to listen differently.

Do you know the poem by Elizabeth Barrett Browning?

*Earth's crammed with heaven,  
And every common bush afire with God;  
But only he who sees, takes off his shoes,  
The rest sit round it and pluck blackberries,*

What if I told you that all of Scripture and many sermons – are crammed with heaven – but only those who listen – who know how to listen – take off their shoes and encounter God?

*How should we listen to respond rightly?*

### **A. We listen prayerfully**

**Ephesians 6:19** The apostle Paul says pray for me, *that words may be given to me in opening my mouth boldly to proclaim the mystery of the gospel.* Paul was gifted and empowered but he needed prayer. Think about what we are up against! We're often up against deep apathy and indifference, tiredness, doubt, wounded hearts, dull minds, deceptive and hard hearts scarred over by years of resistance to the tugs and pulls of God. We're up against the world, the flesh, and the devil. A single sermon empowered by the Spirit of God can pierce the human heart, bring new birth, heal old wounds, reconcile families and change lives. Satan doesn't release captives and yield ground easily. In the end, it is not just for us but also for our mission. Listen prayerfully.

*We listen prayerfully and ...*

### **B. We listen expectantly.**

The Bible itself informs us that preaching is important to God and it invites us to expect to receive insight and even much-needed correction for our lives when God's word is preached. In **2 Timothy 4:1-5**, The apostle Paul writes to a young pastor he is mentoring. He says, *I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: <sup>2</sup>preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching.* 1.) The importance of Scriptural preaching is clear

from the strong words that fill his charge. 2.) *What is proclaimed in preaching is "the Word" which is shorthand for "The word of God."* Here it is not God speaking directly to a prophet in a vision but a young pastor preaching to a congregation in a sermon. But he is to preach *"the Word."* So in faithful preaching, the word of God is proclaimed, and that preaching of the word of God is important for the people of God.

**Illustration:** I once had a man from Texas tell me I am a teacher not a preacher because I don't stomp my feet and slap the pulpit, spin and spit. That was well meant but a total misunderstanding. The word, *preach*, has come to suggest a certain style of speaking. That is not at all what is at the heart of it. When **2 Timothy 4:2** says: *"Preach the Word..."*. The Greek word translated "preach," here is *Kerusso*. This is the word for a herald. In the ancient world when a king had an important message for the people they would send servants who would go throughout the land and proclaim the message of the king. The original word "preaching", what God commands, has nothing at all to do with the style of speech that is loud or emotional. And **2 Timothy 4:2** says; true preaching far from being the opposite of teaching, it is specifically to be done *"with complete patience and teaching."* It is not about style. It has everything to do with the mindset of a spokesman and a servant. The influential German Theologian Karl Barth did a study of preaching and wrote; *"Proclamation is human speech in and by which God Himself speaks like a king through the mouth of his herald, and which is meant to be heard and accepted as speech in and by which God himself speaks and therefore heard and accepted in faith."*<sup>1</sup> So as listeners we have to come with this expectation: God who commanded his servants to preach to us will faithfully use that preaching to teach and shape us.

*We listen prayerfully, expectantly and*

### **C. We listen carefully.**

In **Luke 8:18** Jesus says: *"Take care then how you hear, for to the one who has, more will be given, and from the one who has not, even what he thinks that he has will be taken away."* This statement comes after the parable of the sower where Jesus says that the seed is the word of God and preachers are like men sowing good seed, but it falls on many different kinds of soil. Some people are too busy, too hard, too shallow, too conflicted with other passions. The seed falls right into their life, but it never bears fruit so even the seed that thought they had -- they lose. But those who receive the word as the word -- they really receive the seed, and it takes root in their lives and bears much fruit, and they are given more and more. Jesus says *Therefore consider carefully how you listen.*

## CONCLUSION

Dr. Hugh Litchfield is a retired pastor and seminary professor. He tells how one day he heard his name called from across the lobby at a hospital where he was visiting. A man walked up who had visited his church 10 years earlier. At that time the man was facing possible jail time over tax violations. This had led to alcohol addiction, which had in turn jeopardized his marriage and his relationship with his children. His life was in desperate shape. Ten years later he walks up and says, *"Thank you, you preached a sermon on taking responsibility for our lives, not blaming others. And God used that sermon to speak to me. That afternoon I got down on my knees and prayed to God and promised to take responsibility for my life. With God's help, I did and it changed my life."* He was able to resolve his difficulties with the IRS, overcome his addiction and save his marriage and family life. Dr. Litchfield said he was so encouraged and moved by the impact of that sermon in that man's life and his gratitude for it that when he got back to his office he dug down into his files to look at it again. He used to keep files on his sermon and on Mondays he would jot down a phrase or two that reflected on what he thought about it. For that sermon, he said he saw that he had written. *"Dead in the water! No one listened! A waste of time!"* When I read that story I thought, as a preacher, we are always like the boy with the few loaves and fishes. It's not much but if we faithfully give it to the Lord he will use it. But I also thought about you, the listener. How many people heard that sermon and maybe because they were not desperate, didn't listen well. Maybe the help it gave them wouldn't have been as dramatic but it would have been encouraging, sustaining.

Jesus wants you to hear his voice in Scripture *and* in Scriptural sermons. He wants you to hear with a responsive heart. Jesus deserves to be heard because he is not only a preacher but more than that he is a Savior. He is the good shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep. When you are lost he comes after you. We have all strayed far from God. But he came after us and in love went all the way to the cross to suffer for our sins, to pay our debt to God's righteous laws: to save us he died for us. And he rose again to be the Lord who leads us. The risen Savior calls us, speaks to us inwardly and silently and calls us to faith. We do not earn his saving grace. We receive it when we admit we need it and trust in Him. So listen to him. Come to him. Trust in him. And then, keep listening and following.

**Amen.**

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<sup>1</sup> Karl Barth, Church Dogmatics, 1/1.52).