

Plymouth Congregational Church of Fort Wayne, UCC
January 8, 2017

“Listening to Your Life”

“For now this is how it should be, because we
must do all that God wants us to do.”
Matthew 3:15 (Cont. Eng. Version)

PRELUDE

On my bookshelf sits a Frederick Beuchner book, published about 25 years ago, titled *Listening to your Life*. It is a collection of various writings from the author, portioned over the course of year, intended to focus one’s thoughts for daily meditation.

One entry recorded for early January tells of a theologian who, after lecturing on the subject of miracles, was asked to give a specific example of a miracle. The learned divine answered: **“There is only one miracle – it is life.”**

A series of questions then follow –

*Have you wept at anything during the past year?
Has your heart beat faster at the sight of
young beauty?
Have you thought seriously about the fact
that someday you are going to die?
More often than not, do you really listen
when people are speaking to you,
instead of just waiting for your turn
to speak?
Is there anybody you know in whose place,
if one of you had to suffer great pain,
you would volunteer yourself?*

Beuchner then offers this declaration:

“If your answer to all or most of these questions is No, the chances are you’re dead.”

Listening to our lives -
are we aware, attentive, responsive
to the inner Voice within that we
call Conscience?

Listening to our lives -
to those experience we deeply value
and treasure, to those people/places
that touch our hearts, that bring us
joy, that make us sing?

Are we listening to the wise Word
of God, the life of Jesus, and
to the allure of the love of God?
Or are we tuned elsewhere,
to life less ennobling?

Our lesson this morning
recited the baptism of Jesus.
It is a rather hasty fast-forward
from Christmas not so long ago,
with the infant Jesus, in the arms
of Mary, being nursed,
to Jesus come of age,
his taking leave of home,
for an opportune meeting with
cousin John (the Baptist)
at the River Jordan.

We’ve skipped over what some call
“the missing years,” the years when the
holy family was on the run, as refugees,
as an unwanted people, living on hope,
for a place safe, where they could settle

down without neighbors being suspicious. Matthew is the one gospel that suggests there was an unsettledness in the early years of Jesus' life. Joseph, Mary, Jesus - they were a displaced people.

They ran off and had to live for a time in Egypt; there was a time when they thought they might return to Judea, but the window never fully opened; they ended up in Galilee, only after other options failed.

It is hard to settle down when the heart is settled elsewhere. It is hard to adjust to the here and now, when the mind resides in some other place, in another time.

the Baptism(s) in Scripture

There is a tendency to conflate the Jesus story we have received in our scripture, to keep it well packaged and easily accessible, without dwelling too much on divergent points of view.

Yet we have varying accounts of the baptism of Jesus, and it is in the nuances of the story, in the different accounts, that we discover what a particular writer of gospel intends to impress upon us.

The goal of listening to the scripture is not to ensure a harmonization of the various accounts. The goal of our study, the aim of our listening, is to be informed; it is for us to be molded and shaped with the wisdom of the ages, to understand and appreciate a fullness of gospel proclaimed in different ways.

Curious - in John's gospel, no mention is made of Jesus being baptized. John the Baptist points out - Jesus the Lamb of God.

John the Baptist speaks: **"I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained (on Jesus)"** (John 1:32). In John's gospel, this is more than enough.

Mark, Luke, Matthew do speak of Jesus being baptized, and of John being the baptizer. There is consensus and consistency: John baptizes with water; in the Jordan; and there were fireworks. Quite an amazing display.

The "heavens open," which is quite an intriguing thought to ponder. There is a lack of containment, a breaking out, a revealing taking place.

The Spirit - like a dove - makes descent and alights upon Jesus. The **"dove"** gets variously interpreted. I favor connection with the dove that signaled to Noah - the flood, the chaos, the wrath visited upon earth was over. Done with.

The dove gets sent three times by Noah - When first sent, it returns when it can find no place. It is sent a second time, and returns with an olive leaf; it gets sent a third time, and returns not, for seemingly it has found its own place to thrive and flourish in a new creation (Genesis 8:6-12).

There is a voice - The Voice (of God) -
quoting scripture, referencing a psalm employed
in the coronation ceremony when a new king was
enthroned in Israel - Psalm 2:7; The Voice also
alluding to Isaiah 42:1 - **“Here is my servant,
whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul
delights; I have put my spirit upon him;
he will bring forth justice to the nations.”**

So - we have this consistency.
But note the nuance and where
we encounter divergence.

In Mark, the Voice is amplified so that all in
attendance get to “Wow ... Did you believe that?”

Luke postpones the magic moment;
all the drama takes place later,
when Jesus is “in prayer.”

And Matthew -
the baptism becomes highly personalized;
it is a God moment for Jesus.

Jesus saw the heavens open,
Jesus saw the Spirit descending,
Jesus hears the Voice - “This is my Beloved,
my Child, with whom I am well pleased.”

Two further highlights are evident in Matthew.
The first is very subtle - whereas in Mark and Luke
Jesus goes to the Jordan and gets baptized,
in Matthew, Jesus goes to the Jordan to be baptized.
Jesus had a plan in mind, a purpose, when
he sought John out. Jesus came to be ... baptized.
He heard God’s Voice at his baptism, but it was
not the first time a Voice was speaking to him.
Jesus was listening to his life long before the still
small voice boomed at his baptism. His baptism

was neither an end nor a beginning; it was an end and a beginning. It is a marker of life, a defining moment, a reminder for Jesus as for us:
of who we are, whose we are, whence we've been,
and with whom we now are pleased to journey.

Second, in Matthew we have an awkward pause. Jesus shows up on John's doorstep ready for the water. But John is not ready for Jesus to be ever so humble. **"John would have prevented him,"** we read. This suggests that at the time Matthew was writing, there was some thought being given to the question, what need has Jesus - God's anointed - of a baptism of repentance, which is the baptism John was offering?

This occasion gives Matthew opportunity to voice the first word Jesus speaks in this gospel:
**"Let it be so now;
for it is proper for us
to fulfill all righteousness"** (Matthew 3:15).

**"... this is how it should be, because we must
do all that God wants us to do"** (Cont. Eng. Version).

Lets stick with this for just a moment.
Let's listen.

"We must do."

We is not me.
We is us.
Together. Community. More than one.
We must do ...
 all that God wants us to do.

We see Jesus aligning himself
 with the law and prophets;
we see Jesus aligning himself
 with the wisdom of the ages;

we see Jesus positioning himself
with his best estimate of
what God would purpose for him.

This is what Matthew offers us –
a portrait of Jesus wherein Jesus
has listened to his life;
he will continue to listen;
in this particular moment of baptism,
the listening is rewarded.
This is an overwhelming affirmation of his life,
an assurance of his connection with
the Source of his life.

It was, I think, Paul Tillich who once said:
“The first duty of love is to listen.”

Listen to your life.

Use prayer time as a listening time.
Still time. To discern, to filter,
the channels and tweets
that pollute our lives.

Listen for the affirmation,
for the “no condemnation”
that is God’s love in Christ.

Listen for the mercy,
always at the heart of God’s desire.

Listen for the Voice always urging
us to advance into greater degrees
of what is good.

There is grave danger is not listening
to your intelligence sources.

There is danger and misery
when listening only to your-self,
for-your-self, and for no other.

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I want to close with a poem from the poet
Czslaw Milosz, "On Angels."

*All was taken away from you: white dresses,
wings, even existence.
Yet I believe you, messengers.*

*There, where the world is turned inside out,
a heavy fabric embroidered with stars and beasts,
you stroll, inspecting the trustworthy seems.*

*Short is your stay here:
now and then at a matinal hour, if the sky is clear,
in a melody repeated by a bird,
or in the smell of apples at close of day
when the light makes the orchards magic.*

*They say somebody has invented you,
but to me this does not sound convincing,
for the humans invented themselves as well.*

*The voice -- no doubt it is a valid proof,
as it can belong only to radiant creatures,
weightless and winged (after all, why not?),
girdled with the lightning.*

*I have heard that voice many a time when asleep
and, what is strange, I understood more or less
an order or an appeal in an unearthly tongue:*

*day draws near
another one
do what you can.*

Listen to your life, my friends.
Listen for the Voice that comes
always for our good.

Day draws near - another one.
Do all you can. Thank God for the Messenger.
And all messengers who keep us on gospel task.

Amen.

*(Sermons are typically composed in haste,
for the demands of the day are many;
so be charitable as you read; and remember:
the contents of this sermon have not been edited
and may or may not have been a part of its public presentation)*