

John 11:1-45  
March 26, 2023

## Sounds

Last week the text from John's gospel was about the healing of a man who had been blind since birth, and the healing was interpreted as a sign that pointed from the idea of physical sight restored to spiritual sight and the enhanced understanding of divine things. The title of the message was, "sight."

If in the bible, sight represents understanding, what may we say about sound? There are all kinds of sounds that accompany us on life's journey; the sounds of nature: of the wind in the trees or the relentless pounding of ocean waves against the shoreline, the rain on the roof, the sounds of toads clamoring for their mates in springtime and geese honking.

There are human sounds; music playing on the radio at work, children playing anywhere, a great crowd in a stadium. There are the sounds of thousands of years of the human *mastery* of nature, such as it is; cars passing on roads and planes overhead, trains blowing whistles at crossings; the sound of the furnace, the television, and the computer. Sounds that people lived without until the 20th century but now seem always on, and from which few escape. The sound of bells ringing in the distance, marking time.

Sound calls us to a different kind of knowledge, perhaps less technical and more relational because they must be heard, and thus require listening . . .

listening and hearing often without the benefit of sight. One thinks of the great text from Deuteronomy about the command to love God with all the heart and soul and mind, which begins, "Hear, O Israel . . ."

Ezekiel was a prophet of exile. Life's framework had crumbled, the foundations had been shaken, the walls had fallen. Any person in such a situation would be vulnerable to despair; a pessimism about life resulted. Reading the prophets of Israel is risky because they did not spin reality to suit their optimistic needs. They set it forth truthfully.

Hope for them was not so much something they held onto stubbornly in the face of contrary evidence, rather a discovery they made while enduring the tragedy. It was not a pre-supposed theological conviction, but a conclusion at the end of a long struggle. That is why we must listen to them. Who knows what point in Ezekiel's journey hope began to intervene and disrupt the despair.

One place where he pressed it is in the 37th chapter, known to bible readers as the Valley of Dry Bones. In it he envisions a place once vibrant with life, that had become a graveyard without tombs and caskets, just the remnants of the dead, the skeletal remains.

He was asked to speak to the bones, calling them to be re-constituted as bodies and then re-invigorated as living, breathing beings, "So I prophesied as I was commanded," he wrote, "there was a noise, a rattling sound, and the bones came together, bone-to-bone."

The long reading from the Gospel of John offers us the seventh of the seven signs, and we know it as the Raising of Lazarus. Jesus and his companions were on their way to Jerusalem for what would turn out to be his final Passover. On the way, they planned to stop in Bethany, a little town where friends resided. He had received word about the illness of his friend.

But he delayed, at first because he said the sickness was not unto death, and later because he said the death became an opportunity for a demonstration of God's power. But there was more to it than that. When he arrived both of the sisters accosted him with the sound of a veiled criticism, "If you had been there," they said, "our brother needn't have died."

He met them at the tomb where Lazarus had been already four days, and then something happened. As Jesus approaches and hears the sound of their weeping, he *also* was brought to tears. Familiarly, this is represented as the shortest verse in all the bible, "Jesus wept." John 11:35

The story lingers there, though very often its readers do not. One is brought to this moment and asked to consider it without other words. There are many sounds in the bible; the sound of God responding to Job out of the whirlwind, "who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge," the sound of the whirlwind itself, the storms of Noah, of Elijah, the sound the approach of Nebuchadnezzar's armies, of the animals at the manger and the sound of the

heavenly host singing praise to God. The sound of the hammer on the nails.

Surely the sound that stands out most in this episode is the sound of tears, even the sound of Jesus weeping. It is easy to wonder about it. Jesus was the only one who knew what was going to happen, that he was going to resuscitate Lazarus, calling him forth from the grave; that there would be a rattling of the bones from within that tomb.

Beyond that, he is the one who knew that shortly it would be his own death that people would mourn and over which they would weep. And he is the one who had spoken to them about resurrection, which would sound among them astonishment and joy. It is easy to understand why they wept, given who they were and what they knew and what their experience of life had been. There was a failure to believe his hopeful message.

But why did *he* weep, in view of his perspective? It seems the cause of his tears may lie elsewhere. Here is a deeply human moment, the kind of moment most seek to avoid when possible. One might suppose that Jesus wept because he understood and identified with the grief of Martha and Mary and their friends, their failure of faith in the moment.

One might suppose that he wept because he knew about the situation of his own life, the death he must shortly die, and the tragedy that all life ends in death, and even he could not bring about redemption without

suffering it. The sadness of that, just because it is real and we all experience it, could have been the source of his tears even though he knew everything would come out right in the end.

Perhaps it is best if we do not ask why, but just listen to the sound of Jesus' tears, just like we listen to all the other sounds life is filled up with. And listen to the tragic sounds, because without listening to the tragic sounds, our ears will be closed to the glorious sounds, the sounds of the words that came next, "take away the stone . . . did I not tell you that if you believe . . . you would see God's glory? . . . Lazarus, come out."

Much of what Lent is, and Holy Week . . . is a re-enactment, a form of memorialized participation in the descent to the grave which is our salvation, so that we might also participate in the ascent towards the resurrection, which is foreshadowed by the raising of Lazarus, the seventh sign, which points beyond itself from physical to eternal life.

Let the sound of *tears* . . . and *rattling of bones* coming back to life, along with the sound of gospel words, be the sound track of our lives. And in them may we hear the kindness of God to all life, to human life, our lives, and in the hearing of that kindness may we become more kind ourselves, less selfish and less afraid, more empathetic, and more alive, to the glory of God.

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