

“Shhh, listen.” “Are you listening to me!?” “Listen up, people.” We know listening is different than hearing. A comedienne once described “hearing” his wife’s words as sounding like a mosquito’s buzzing. Easy to tune out or fake attention while his mind was elsewhere.

The reading that dominates today is Jesus as the Good Shepherd. As I was reading over John’s passage slowly several times, paying attention to what part resonated, verse 16 stood out: “I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice.” And the one word that kept bouncing around in my head was “listen.” Listening is crucial for Jesus’s message in this parable. He holds a place for us, waiting patiently, listening for us, speaking to us—a voice that brings us out of our fog. For our part we try to pay attention which voice is His; we listen to the direction of the voice which inspires us to act in love, service and mercy in our communities.

This past weekend I was still chewing on the word “listen,” not sure what direction today’s message might take when for their Saturday movie night our 7 yo granddaughter chose “Babe,” the 1995 movie about the pig that thought he was a sheepdog. Loved that movie when it first came out. Loved seeing it again through our granddaughter’s eyes: kind farmer Hoggett; the duck who thought he was a rooster; the sheep who were smarter than their stereotype; the haughty sheepdogs; the villainous wolves; the mocking townspeople. The next morning, by God coincidence a Sunday, I had an epiphany that Babe, the pig, had many qualities like Jesus, the Good Shepherd. I was all proud of my realization until an internet search revealed that in the last 25 years hundreds of writers and preachers had made the same connection. That was a bit humbling. A quick recap may be in order...

Babe is the small humble runt of the litter pig who is raised by competitive sheepdogs. They have a strong-armed method of dealing with the sheep, and the male dog, Rex, frequently mutters about the stupidity of the sheep. While not a bad soul, his methods don’t necessarily bring out the best in the sheep, who do often live up to his low expectations. Babe, the pig turned shepherd, finds his talent for herding the sheep comes with a gentler approach. He doesn’t just hear their mosquito buzzing bleating; Babe takes time to talk to them and listens with his heart. Farmer Hoggett notices that the sheep follow Babe’s gentle, respectful voice requests better than the dogs’ yelling and nipping at heels. Through a series of events the farmer enters Babe in the National Sheepdog Trials. At the competition, Babe meets “other sheep that do not belong to [his] fold” back on the farm. They don’t know how to talk or listen to each other so the sheep ignore his attempts to speak to them. Rex, Babe’s sheepdog dad, runs back to the farm to ask the sheep what to do. They give him a secret password- ‘Bah ram ewe. To your fleece be true.’ He returns in time to convey the password to Babe, and the sheep now follow his instructions flawlessly. Amid the crowd’s acclamation, he unanimously earns a perfect score and goes on to win.

For their relationship to work Babe and the sheep treat each other with mutual respect. By talking honestly and trusting each other they overcome stereotypes like pigs can’t herd sheep or sheep are stupid and dirty. Babe listened with his heart to all the farm animals and accepted their quirks or faults.

Besides today’s quote about reasons to listen to Jesus, there are dozens of other Biblical references such as in Mark, chap. 7 - “Again Jesus called the crowd to him and said, ‘Listen to me, everyone, and understand this.’” We pray in today’s Collect that “when we hear his voice we may know him who calls us each by name, and follow where he leads.”

True listening is hard work. It’s more active than merely hearing. To really listen our hearts have to be in it, that the speaker matters to us. Personally. True listening leaves us open to be touched and changed by the

truth we hear. That's risky. Often the truth, if we hear it, overturns our prejudices, challenges our self-image, shakes up our view of the world. There's also a cacophony of voices out there. Discerning Jesus's voice above the others is often challenging.

But the rewards of listening to Jesus are more than following rules or memorizing Bible verses. When we pray and have quiet conversations with him, when we sit silently, open-hearted, to give space for Jesus's part of the conversation to bubble up, we are practicing listening. When we worship together through the liturgy, scripture & music learning how to follow Jesus's Way of Love, we are practicing listening. By serving in our communities, advocating for those on the fringes of society, and by opening our hearts to those who speak Jesus's Truth, we are practicing listening.. Spending intentional time with Jesus and trying to follow his example teaches us how to live, how to see the world from His perspective: beauty in simple green pastures and still waters; seeing the world in a mustard seed; giving the convicted murderer a third or fourth chance for redemption.

Jesus's resurrection on Easter trumpets out the Truth...that when we follow Jesus we can experience eternal life not only after we leave this life, but here on earth now, today, later this afternoon, each day. By listening to Jesus we experience small bursts and glimpses of eternal life at this moment, at that moment, even while we exist in a broken and needy world. Like short arrows of sunlight shining through sheets of snow on a crazy April spring day.

If we are listening for the Truth Jesus teaches we are compelled to action. The HS draws on our yearning to be near Jesus and we begin to participate in the kind of life only Jesus has to give. We help the poor and underserved, the sick and dying to be near Jesus. We stay near him to discern his voice amid the myriad of false messages around us. He influences us bit by bit. If we practice this day after day we'll want more of what Jesus has to offer—more Truth-discovering lessons, more deep inner peace, more desire to listen quietly. Listening leads to action; action draws us to desire more listening lessons...which lead to additional actions...and the cycle continues into eternity.

Each of us has our own personal Trials & Competitions the minute we step outside these doors this morning. The country is beginning to open up after a year of severe restrictions & we're tip-toeing outside of our homes. We are nervous and wary. Doctors have even given this feeling a name—"Cave Syndrome!" We can either be victims of our circumstances or heroes who rise above. When we listen to Jesus, something wonderful happens. God uses the changes in us to change the world. When chance brought Babe to the farm as a runt piglet he had no idea of his future. He had a trusting open heart; he listened and learned from the other animals. His empathy and concern for their well being laid a foundation that impacted many more people than just the animals on Farmer Hoggett's farm. Babe's actions were unobtrusive; his words were quiet, kind and genuine; yet, his impact was great in his corner of the world. The changes in the barnyard eventually spread to the larger country and changed hundreds of people's stereotypes and prejudices. Our small actions can be as impactful and far reaching. When we provide a meal for a sick neighbor, allow someone to go ahead of us in the checkout line, help someone make a Covid vaccine appt., or call a quarantined friend, a peek at eternal life bubbles up from within us and begins to get a foothold in our messy world.

Listening to Jesus is sooo worth it! And the Good News of Easter is that we don't need a password like between Babe and the sheep to unlock the gate to access Jesus. We already have the divine spark of God in our hearts and the Holy Spirit to fan the flame. When we listen to Jesus, he changes who we are. And who we are through him changes the world.

Every day remember this declaration from Mark's gospel, chapter 9 -"Then a cloud formed, overshadowing them, and a voice came out of the cloud, 'This is My beloved Son, listen to Him!'

