

What Door is God Opening?

Scripture: Revelation 3:7-13

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Prayer

Holy, Holy, Holy God Almighty we sit at the feet of your throne to worship you today through the reading and hearing of your Word, but more importantly we worship you by listening to what the Spirit is saying to our church and to your church universal for the sake of your children and for your glory. Wake our ears to ear a new word of hope and redemption this day. In Jesus' name we pray, AMEN.

Read Revelation 3:7-13 Listen....can you hear it?

Listen....what is the Spirit saying to us, the church?

We have been asking this question for 5 weeks through a sermon series on the 7 churches of the book of Revelation, or the revelation of John, the last book in our Bible. I have a confession to make. I don't know about you but the last weeks of my life were busy- too busy, and I don't know how much listening to the Spirit I have really done.

Isn't that true of our current lifestyle...pack as much in, do, do, do?

Our family is a typical 21st century family- 2 working professionals, parents, with two kids and a dog named Jasper. My spouse serves on one Board in the community, not 3. I get to be home most days to spend time parenting my children after-school, my husband covers the nights and weekends when I work. It sounds like a workable plan, but I thought somehow life would be different for us. We had prepared and discussed how we would raise our family...how faith would be central...home would be a center of our faith and worship of God. We would do local mission work together. I have to confess, we have managed most days to keep up with our Dimes for Hunger jar and have one meal together a day, but with the stresses of daily life, we are lucky to say a rote blessing that we all know and not take time to reflect on what God has been doing in our world that day...or even sharing our highs and lows of the day before we pray.... weaving those joys and concerns into a time of family prayer, not just a blessing.

This not how I planned it! It is not what I imagined as we looked forward to making faith central, especially at our family dinner table. In the midst of work life, family life, community involvement, trying to be a good neighbor, and after-school activities and home-work, meetings, we fall exhausted into bed each night and eek out another quick prayer desperately ready for sleep. It is more like we pause for a brief second to merely "report for duty" with God, doing all the talking and not really listening for what God is saying to us.

In the midst of our contemporary lifestyle, how does anyone have time to LISTEN... to our children, our friends, our spouses, our neighbors, let alone to what the Spirit might be saying to our church?

But isn't that why we keep coming back to this Word (Holy Scripture), to this fountain of deliverance in Baptism, this Table which nourishes our souls and our community through the self-giving grace of God. Are we not here to worship the God who longs to be intimately involved with us and on whom we depend for our very life?

LISTEN now....after struggling all week with the anxieties of our current world...do we not long for a word of hope... of help...and to remember that God alone is God and not we ourselves? Revelation reminds us that God is Sovereign above all other powers of this world and we are called to worship this God Almighty, the Alpha and Omega....the first and the last. God is all things...we don't have to be.

When we look back over the churches we have studied in Revelation, we have to take a hard look at ourselves and our church... We are in a time of Discernment- a time of listening as a church. That is the task of the Strategic Planning Committee, but discernment is something each of us needs to be

doing...let's re-cap and see what the SPIRIT might be asking us to consider and LISTEN to what it might reveal to us:

Are we Ephesians who are known for their works, who like to be busy, busy and work hard? It is a, "If we keep busy, people will think we know what we are doing" mentality. Have we walked away from our 1st love, from God?

Are we like Smyrna who were rich, but had a poverty of spirit and were afflicted? In today's society the Church has lost its status. Celebrities like Bono and Oprah get more press for their religious stances than the church. We long for the good ol' days when the Church was strong. And we are an affluent culture and people, but faith is sidelined for the pursuits of wealth, happiness, security, and pleasure.

Pergamum reminds us of the idolatry of practicing an untrue faith. Our Culture has many opportunities that cause us not to worship God. What cultural practices cause us to stray from the worship of Almighty God?

Are we like the people of Thyatira? Are our latest works of love, faith, service and patient endurance better than our earlier works or do we wax nostalgic for a past Oakland Ave. church, the old Rock Hill, and country? Or are we addressing the concerns of today and living faithfully as the church of now? Are we distracted by too many things (or by Jezebel as John writes) that we cannot figure out who we need to be?

We like to think we are strong, like the Laodiceans who played it safe and were lukewarm about their faith- not hot or cold. Are we people who play it safe with our faith?

The Spirit has been saying to these churches and to us:
"Remember what you have heard and received from God...obey...be faithful...repent...spend time practicing the faith through study, worship, prayer and works of mercy..."

II. Today's Scripture is written to the church at Philadelphia....

The Spirit reminds us that through the weakness of Philadelphia and their long-suffering or "patient endurance" God will be their strength. They have fought the good fight and kept the faith. God will KEEP them.

While their rulers and culture have asked them to deny God's name- or God's sovereignty- they have not denied God's name. In other words, they have not bowed down to the things of this world to ignore and dishonor God.

And while they lack the energy or the power to "open the door", God will do it for them. "God will make a way where there is no way," as my friend Adolphus used to say.

And just like Jesus says, the weakest will be made strong. The last will be first. Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of heaven. It is an upside-down kingdom. Blessed are you who weep now, for you shall laugh. Blessed are you who hunger and thirst for you shall be filled. The blind will see. The lame will walk. It is in weakness that God's strength is revealed. And when people of faith have no other options...God will open that door.

Speaking of options. I think some of us are people with too many options:

- Our church has a number of very committed people who will make things happen that need to happen.
- We have a large number of people with lots of interests and lots of options.
- We have the largest budget ever and truth be told, we have the funds to do what we choose to do.
- We have people with access in this community who hold positions of influence in local government, schools, and community organizations.

- And all of us live in a 24/7 world where thanks to the invention of the light bulb and electricity, we can work, play video games, and buy anything from Walmart at 3:00AM. Lots of options...

And we are more sleep deprived, more stressed out, less fulfilled in our relationships, and more in debt than any other group of people in the world! Yet, many folks in our community are not doing too well. Perhaps we are weaker than we thought. When one of us suffers, we all suffer. Maybe having too many options is our greatest weakness.

Come on, preacher, you say, that's just the way things are.

But do they have to be this way? (I remember reading in my Brother's 1976 High School Yearbook that quote, "Most people look at the world and ask 'why?' I look at the world and ask, 'Why not? Why do we have to be this way?")

III. But ultimately the Spirit says,

LISTEN...Pay attention....I am God, and the Emperor is not, the culture is not and your works will not save you...I can save you....not just in the afterlife, but in all those things that weigh you down, afflict you, and cause you suffering.

As *The Message* says, "**Are your ears awake? Listen. Listen to the Wind Words, the Spirit blowing through the churches.**" (repeated in chapter 2 and 3)

Listening requires something that we don't have much of...quiet, time to reflect and hear, time to not just hear but to understand. Our ears are not awake, they are tuning out everything because there is too much noise. They are dulled and overwhelmed.

Stephen Covey in his famed books on the habits of effective people says that it is more important for effective people to listen than to talk. Covey notes that "empathetic communication" that rests on listening to and understanding the other, is one of the central habits of effective people. He summarizes, "Seek first to understand, then to be understood." (Rendle quotes in *Leading Change*, p.120)

We have nearly lost our attention span for listening because there is too much noise and too little time. God desires that we worship God first and not worship all those things that distract us and are detrimental to our well-being as a community.

Have you Paid Attention to your surroundings lately??

Have you ever noticed what buildings dominate a town's skyline and what it says about what we worship? In **Ancient Egypt**, it was the great Pyramids which were connected to the worship of the Ruler, Pharaoh as King.

In Europe the great Cathedrals of the Middle Ages dominate the skyline- in that day and time the Church had more importance. But then the church was connected to the power of the State.

A hundred years ago the most beautiful structures in a town or city were the Train stations and the Post Offices...we started valuing travel, commerce, and communications. Roads and industry began to dominate as we left the farms.

Today, what buildings dominate a skyline? Think of Charlotte...**Skyscrapers representing business, banking, and money alongside huge, very nice sports arenas.** What is it that our culture values/worships? Money? Entertainment? Celebrity? Power?

The Spirit is saying to the Church that even those things cannot save us....

My Mission Professor in Seminary, Carlos Cardoza- Orlandi, pointed out to me that going to a Braves' game is a religious worship experience. It starts with an opening Hymn (national anthem), People stand and say what they believe (the Pledge of Allegiance), and watch, listen, and respond at the appropriate times in the service with the wave or cheers or a rousing round of Fogarty's song, *Centerfield* "Put me in coach, I'm ready to Play. Today."

The closing line-up to shake hands and say "Good Game" is our equivalent of the Passing the Peace.

God is who we are to Worship- not celebrity, not excess. Am I saying do not go to Baseball games or sports events?

NO- but pay attention to the excess of money athletes are paid in a world where people are hungry. Remember when the cheap seats were CHEAP?

- pay attention to how much of our time and money we spend on sports and entertainment
- pay attention to what you are worshiping with your time, money and energy in general.

Have you Paid Attention and listened to your Community? Your Church?

One of the books your leadership read this summer for the Sabbatical was called *Leading Change in the Congregation*, and Listening is one of the main steps in leading change or as I think, for coping with what is going on. Rendle gives two examples of listening to understand and learn.

In the first, a group of mid-size urban congregations were trying to lead in providing an emergency shelter for men. (Sound familiar?) This coalition had developed programs for providing food and clothing, supported a community medical clinic, carried out an active outreach of visitation to the elderly, and advocated with the city government and local hospital for people who did not speak English as a first language. They had even helped open a shelter for women and children, but could not get this shelter for men off the ground.

Finally after being stuck, they decided to ask questions and LISTEN. What they learned was that the resistance had lots to do with the fact that

- Insurance coverage is difficult for such a venture
- People were concerned about the upkeep and care of the facility
- People believed that according to the Protestant work ethic, men should take care of themselves and be able to pull themselves up by their bootstraps.
- And finally, people were afraid of the reaction of the community.

They did not need to DO something different, they needed to LEARN something different first about the resistance, and secondly about homeless men. When talking to individuals they heard stories of a man who struggled with the disease of alcoholism that had a demonic grip on his life. They discovered another man who was mentally ill for whom the Mental Health system had failed, and he had no other options. Another man separated from his wife and chose to give the apartment to the wife and children. They could only afford one rent payment. He was living under an overpass.

They learned to listen to one another's fears and to the strangers who became people who needed food and shelter, not their judgment. God opened doors when they LISTENED.

Another example Rendle shares is about a Church community who takes time to pay attention and Listen

This church struggled with New Members. Rendle consulted with this church's board. He noticed that they did have lots of new members. He was shocked when one of the officers said, "but they aren't GOOD members." A good member to this group of 40-65 year old officers was "one who attended worship regularly, participated in adult education classes, volunteered on at least one committee, showed up at most social functions of the congregation, participated in special programs and projects, and supported the budget through regular giving."

Sound funny? They had just described themselves!!!

When they looked at the last 100 members who had joined the board discovered that most were 21-35 year olds. In most cases both parents were employed and many were single parents. They soon realized that these folks were not “good members” because their lifestyle did not allow that high level of activity. Instead of the church continuing to do the same old thing and being frustrated, the leadership began to adapt by cutting back on meetings and choosing priorities. God opened a door and their ears were awake and ready to listen to what the Spirit was saying to that church.

(see Rendle’s discussion of Force Field Analysis, pp. 143-149)

Many of us do not want to pay attention or listen because it might be too hard, it might take time which we have little of, or it might cause us to change- which is painful. But it is harder to ignore issues and struggle through.

Hear this word of Good News from Revelation Chapter1 (again from the Message).
When John sees his vision of revelation...that vision of God, he, “fainted dead at His feet.”
But God’s right hand (the hand of strength) pulled me upright, his voice reassured me,
‘Don’t fear. (I know you are afraid, and I know it is hard)
I am first. I am Last. I am Alive. (I am God and not these other things. Even you are not God)

I died, but I came to life, and my life now is forever. See these keys in my hand? They open and lock Death’s doors. They open and lock Hell’s gates.’ (In other words, I bring new life)

God opens doors that lead to life. God says, even in your weakness (Church at Philadelphia, Oakland Ave. Pres., Protestant Mainline church, single-mother, single-father, lonely, hurting child, confused adolescent, under-valued worker, poor, addicted father, fragile in mind and body, older woman...)
Don’t fear. I am God and you are not and...

“My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.”- 2 Cor. 12:9

As the Message says, **“Are your ears awake? Listen. Listen to the Wind Words, the Spirit blowing through the churches.”** (repeated in chapter 2 and 3)

Old Testament Scholar, Walter Brueggeman, speaks of the church, the faith community, as people lost in exile, for whom everything familiar has been yanked out from under us...people who are wandering in the wilderness, a searching people. He says that the most important thing for God’s people is **Communion with God.**
...”these displaced people for whom almost everything was out of control set out to reorder and recover life through an intentional resolve about communion with God.” (Rendle quotes in *Leading Change*, p.122)

Maybe the best way to listen is to first pay attention to our worship, study and prayer lives, from which everything else flows and which helps us see the priorities, the open doors that God has before us...

What door is God opening for Oakland Avenue Presbyterian Church?

LISTEN.....

...listen to the Wind Words

...listen...as we pray...

(Silent prayer)