

Listen to Me!

Isaiah 51:1-6

Psalm 124

Rod and I live in Telford, one block off Main Street. We live **in** town. Living in town has its benefits – we can walk to Landis Market, the library, several playgrounds where our grandchildren can play, and perhaps our favorite perk, we live within walking distance of the Towne Restaurant. But living in town does have some drawbacks and perhaps the biggest one is noise. Living in town we hear every fire whistle that blows. When the train, which runs in front of our house by the way, comes through town it blows its whistle when it crosses the streets to the east **and** the west of us. We have a neighbor with a propensity for swearing, loudly, at all times of the day or night. And it seems that the population of dogs in our neighborhood is on the rise, given the amount of barking we can hear from our front porch. There's more, but I think you get the idea – living in town can be very noisy.

We can try to shut out some of the town noise by shutting the front door, but noise still finds us. The dishwasher is loud, the washer and dryer do a very noisy sort of jig every time they are run. There are times that ice dropping in the ice maker will make me jump. And although I love my dogs to pieces, they tend to bark at random times for no apparent reason. Did I forget to mention all the noise that comes from our various electronics, too?

The world is a noisy place! There are times we find it difficult to even hear ourselves think! So, it's not surprising that in the midst of all this noise we find ourselves straining to hear that still small voice, you know the one that said, "Be still and know that I am God"? Guess what, that is not a new condition in the

history of the world. Humanity has been here before. Just check the verses from Isaiah that were read.

Isaiah was writing to the exiles in Babylon. There was a lot of moaning and groaning going on after 70 years of exile, especially among those who remembered how they got there. Even if someone had been born in Babylon and were not among the people ripped from their homeland by the Babylonians, surely, they had heard the stories told by their parents and grandparents. Stories of how their king was tortured and killed, about the deaths of all the prominent citizens of their nation. Stories of how the Temple of the Lord was destroyed, about the march made by the remaining citizens from Jerusalem to Babylon, of how their captors demanded that they, “Sing us one of the songs of Zion!” Psalm 137:3 (NIV2011) and how they couldn’t imagine singing at all remembering all that was lost.

After so many years in exile, years of unanswered prayers, the people no doubt had asked repeatedly, “Where is God? Does he still care for us?” In the absence of clear answers, they could easily give in to despair. That despair would cloud their vision of God, leading them to focus only on their suffering and sorrow. That still small voice of God would be stifled by the anger, anxiety, discouragement, and bitterness felt by his people in their exile.

Added to their spiritual “noise” there was the noise of the false prophets who brought words of hope that fell flat repeatedly, the noise of their captors taunting them, and the noise of their own nay-sayers saying all hope was lost, they would never be a nation again.

It is into this noise that Isaiah brings a word from God and the very first words are, “Listen to me”. For so long these people, a people of faith, had been listening to

their own lament and it had brought them no comfort. God reached out to His people saying, remember where you came from and who you belong to.

“Although Abraham was only one person, and married to a barren wife, yet I made a great nation from him. Just as I made a garden in the desert and a nation from just one man, so I will restore you. There will be joy and thanksgiving once again among my people,” This is the message Isaiah brings to the exiles.

Hope is instilled as Isaiah reminds the people to think about their history. There was a time when the nation of Israel had not existed, yet through the most unexpected of circumstances God created what was to become a great nation. Whoever would have expected a man approaching the age of 100 and his equally aged and barren wife to become parents, let alone great-grandparents of the 12 tribes that would become that great nation of Israel?

Although life in Babylon seemed bleak, God reminded the people that what he had done in the past He could do again. Their current circumstances could not drown out God’s plans even if it seemed like his voice was stilled. This is in spite of the fact that their actions are what sent them into exile in the first place. Had they “listened” to God in past, they would not need to “listen” to the prophet now.

They had reaped the consequences of their actions with exile in Babylon, yet the Lord was still on their side. Perhaps after so many years, the words of Psalm 124 had escaped their memory. Surely, if the Lord had not been on their side they would have been erased from the face of the earth. But that didn’t happen. They had not been consumed by their enemies.

The God of second chances was about to restore his people. Just as he had made a garden in the desert, beauty out of barrenness, so he would restore the nation of

Israel. With the rise of King Cyrus, the exiles saw the first glimmers of hope that they could return to their homeland.

Again, the Lord says, “Listen to me!” This time instead of looking back at where they have come from, the Lord directs them to look forward to what will be. His teaching will go out to all nations, to all peoples, beyond the Jews to the Gentiles as well. His Word will be a light to all.

It would be several hundred years before Jesus, the light of the world, would arrive on the scene. His early followers would sound the same laments as those early exiles. Although they walked familiar roads, the scenery had changed. No longer welcome in Jewish religious circles, the newly-branded Christians had to overcome a culture of persecution that threatened to stop them before they even got started.

How were they able to persevere under those circumstances? They listened to Jesus, God’s own son. By learning his teachings and following his instructions, they were able to shut out the noise of their friends and families telling them they were wrong to follow Jesus. They could envision that garden springing forth in the desert, just as Isaiah had promised so long ago.

In 21st century USA, we are finding ourselves under a deluge of noise – the noise of opposing political parties pointing fingers and calling names, the noise of protests over injustice and inequality in a country that has long prided itself on the ideals of “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” and where all men are created equal. We are living with the noise that fear makes in our heads as we watch our world fall prey to a virus that we don’t know how to control, as we see our economy struggle as a result of the virus’ impact, and as we hear about friends and loved ones who have died as a result of the virus. Into this noise, God is again speaking, and he is saying “Listen to me.” Hear his words:

Isaiah 51:6 (NIV2011)

⁶ Lift up your eyes to the heavens, look at the earth beneath; the heavens will vanish like smoke, the earth will wear out like a garment and its inhabitants die like flies. But my salvation will last forever, my righteousness will never fail.

God is saying, “I’ve got this! We’ve been here before. The world may seem like it is teetering on the edge, but no matter which way the tides turn, I’ve got the world situation in my hands. I’ve got your country in my hands. I’ve got your personal circumstances in my hands. I have given you the gift of eternal salvation through faith in my Son. My salvation offered to you through Jesus lasts forever. Because I am righteous my promise will never fall. Have no fear. I have been able to bring beauty from ashes in the past and I will do so now and in the future. Remember the rock from which you were hewn!”

This morning and as we go through the coming week, let us remember the rock from which we were hewn and cling to that rock for the security, eternal security, that it offers. When we do, God will know that we are listening!