

LISTENING
Genesis 25: 19-34; Matthew 13: 1-9, 18-23
Fifteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time • July 12, 2020
by Pat Berger

"Listen!" Jesus said to his disciples. That may be the most important word in this reading, according to one writer, and: how good are you at listening? Likely, most of us think that we're pretty good at listening -- well, except on the days that we aren't. One of the commentators this week suggested that we ask those who are listening on this day a couple of questions about listening to God's Word. One of them was: when have you felt that, as much as you try to listen to and abide in God's Word, there is just too much around you that makes more sense? I wonder if that might have been what Rebekah thought when she heard God's response to her question.

We aren't told exactly what she asked God; what we are told is that after years of being barren, she was now pregnant, with twins yet, and it seemed as if there were some sort of wrestling match going on inside of her (the Hebrew word translated "struggle" literally means "crashing" -- some of us may have had moments in pregnancies when we could relate . . .). "Why do I live?" she asked anyone who would listen, and then went to ". . . inquire of the LORD." So she probably inquired something about this interesting pregnancy, and God may have said, "Listen!" and then told her, as we heard in the reading, "Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples born of you shall be divided; the one shall be stronger than the other, the elder shall serve the younger." Well, THAT's perfectly clear! I imagine her responding, "Excuse me?"

God's Word was meant more to be heard -- to be listened to -- than read, though, and more to be experienced even than heard. And in succeeding chapters, we will learn much of what Rebekah experienced with these two young men who were born to her. We are given a couple of quick peeks today. First, the two young ones were born with the younger one gripping the heel of the older; and, Rebekah favored Jacob and Isaac's favorite was Esau. And then, we catch a glimpse of Jacob and Esau presumably as young adults. Esau was a skillful hunter who seemed not to intuit when his brother would take advantage, and Jacob was quiet and a schemer. At the moment that we get to overhear, Esau was hungry for food, Jacob was hungry for power -- and both of them had their needs met. We are left to wonder: how ever would God work with these two, to bring the divine covenant promises to fruition? We will hear and experience more of that question, and of these two brothers, in the next several weeks as we hear more of their stories. And we might wonder at the same time, how does God work with each of us, to continue to bring divine covenant promises to fruition?

Jesus may have been wondering some of that same thing when he went out to speak with the crowds in our reading for today. We may or may not have noticed, but those who put together the lectionary for us just omitted chapter 12 of the gospel according to Matthew. Last Sunday, our scripture reading was from the 11th chapter; today we are in chapter 13. I don't know enough about how lectionary framers decided what to include and what to leave out of this three-year schedule of readings; clearly, they had to make some decisions. The only difficulty here is that the stories in chapter 12 would seem to be background material for chapter 13. We get the answer without knowing what the question is. So first we will do a quick walk through what we have missed, so that the answer makes some sense.

At the beginning of chapter 12, the disciples were walking through a field on the Sabbath, and they were hungry, so they picked some grain to eat. A group of Pharisees saw this, and wasted no time bringing to Jesus' attention that his disciples had broken the law: no working allowed on the Sabbath; picking grain is work. Next, there was a man with a withered hand at the entrance to the synagogue as Jesus went in; the Pharisees asked if it were against the law to heal on the Sabbath, hoping to trip Jesus up again. After some conversation back and forth, Jesus said that he thought it was okay to do good things on the Sabbath, and he healed the man's hand. We have all heard that proper Sabbath observance was hugely important to the Jews at that time, and was subject to much discussion. Here, Jesus wasn't rejecting Jewish legalism as much as he was voicing his opinion in the debate. Sabbath was meant to be gift, not burden.

These Pharisees didn't exactly agree with him, and declared him to be working with the devil. At this point, Jesus decided it was time to leave town. Commentator Richard Jensen wrote of this chapter, "Why do people not believe? What is going on here? How can God's Son meet such a fate? Is there any explanation for the fate we have arrived at by the end of Matthew 12? The answer is, Yes. The explanation begins with simple words: 'Listen! A sower went out to sow.'" And now, we are ready for chapter 13.

There were so many people gathered that Jesus went out and sat in a boat to talk with them. Imagine this scene: there were "such great crowds" we are told, and Jesus was out a bit in a boat, and then he said, "Listen!" There was no public address system on that beach, and yet: listen! I hope that many of them were able to hear, and that they were able to hear themselves in this parable. The word "listen" is in the present tense, and listening is vital to discipleship, so I am hoping that we heard also. Could you hear yourself at each point in this parable?

We can probably figure that Jesus is the sower, and in most of the reading it works for the seeds to be the Word of God. So the sower went out to sow, and some of his seeds fell on the path, and the birds ate them -- think of days when that is the

way it is for God's Word in your life. Or how about the seeds that fell on the rocky ground -- not much space for roots, and so they didn't last long; think of the days when that best describes God's Word in you. And the days when those words fall among thorns and the thorns win. And then, thanks be to God, there are the days when the seeds fall on good soil and bring forth grain -- sometimes much more grain than we would be able to imagine. Although our reading says that sometimes the harvest brings forth a yield of even a hundredfold, a harvest of four- to 10-times was more common; the numbers recorded in Matthew, then, would certainly require disciples who listened very well, and a hearty response from God!

God's Word does have different impacts on us on different days and in different circumstances. The days that are completely lovely outside -- whatever that means for you -- and you have time to go for a walk, physically spaced and wearing a mask, and to enjoy all that is out there that God has created: likely your response to God's Word will be different on that day than it will be on a day when a physician says something you would rather not hear, or a family member disappoints, or when it is announced that the virus has changed again, or it is just one of those days like in the book *Alexander's Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day*. Any of us could hear any of God's Words on either of those days and react very differently to them than if we had heard the same words on the others of those days. So: listen again. And again. Commentator Karoline Lewis wrote, "It's not about how much fruit [God's Word] produces. It's about the way in which God's Word has taken hold in you. This is not a competition about who hears God's Word better. It's about what the hearing creates in you." And, we might add, what that hearing, as a result, creates in those who are around us.

It isn't about us, thanks be to God. It is about God and what God can do with whatever kind of soil it is that we are on a given day, thanks be to God. The first thing that Jesus said to the people in our reading today was, Listen! And when we do that, God can bring growth for the Kingdom, no matter what kind of soil each of the faithful people is on any given day, thanks be to God. Listen!

Let us pray.