



# Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina  
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MARCH 5, 2017  
THE FIRST SUNDAY IN LENT  
*LISTENING ALONGSIDE: ECHOING CHRIST*

Listen for the Knock  
Matthew 4:1-11; Revelation 3:14-22

John Cage was an experimental composer, one who studied and explored sound and its relationships in various contexts and experiences. As I mentioned on Ash Wednesday, Cage composed a piece titled “4'33” (“Four Minutes and Thirty-three Seconds”) which consisted of a pianist sitting at the keyboard for that amount of time without making a sound. Cage further explored the experience of silence when he visited Harvard University’s anechoic chamber in 1951. An anechoic chamber is described as “a room designed in such a way that the walls, ceiling and floor absorb all sounds made in the room, rather than reflecting them as echoes. Such a chamber is also externally sound-proofed.”<sup>1</sup> Naturally, Cage anticipated the complete absence of sound when he stepped into the chamber but he was surprised to discover two distinct sounds, one high and the other one low. When he asked the engineer on hand about it, it was explained that the high sound was his functioning nervous system while the low sound was the circulation of his blood. Cage concluded from the experience that as long as we live, there is no place where sound does not exist. There will always be something to hear.<sup>2</sup>

During Lent we are going to be listening for God in all the ways that God communicates with us. As I have mentioned before, in an article about the purpose of the Lenten season, Taylor Burton-Edwards explains that originally Lent was a time for preparing new believers for baptism, thus it was a time of learning or catechesis. The term catechesis is derived from two Greek words which together mean something like “listening alongside.” Our word “echo” also comes from this word. For us, these weeks prior to Easter are a time to attune our ears and hearts to God and to “listen alongside” one another in order to better learn how to “echo” Christ in our lives.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Wikipedia, “4'33”,” retrieved from “<https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=4'33&oldid=768080363>”; accessed February 28, 2017.

<sup>2</sup>Wikipedia, Additional citation included: “A few notes about silence and John Cage”. CBC.ca. November 24, 2004. Archived from the original on February 12, 2006.

<sup>3</sup>Taylor Burton-Edwards, “Planning Lent and Easter for Worship and Discipleship (Year B),” *Discipleship Ministries*, The United Methodist Church, 2013.

We have already heard Matthew's account of Jesus' wilderness experience which followed his baptism. It sounds immediate. Jesus is baptized by John and God offers his affirmation by saying, "This is my beloved Son with whom I am well pleased" (Matthew 3:17b), a statement we heard last week when Jesus and three of his disciples were on the mountain and he was transfigured (Matthew 17:5). And then we are led to think that, with water still dripping from his robe, Jesus walked off into the wilderness, taking his first steps as the Messiah. There is a lot to hear in the back and forth between Jesus and the Tempter which took place in the wilderness, but for us, I think there is something else we need to listen for. From John's vision recorded in the book of Revelation we hear these words:

"And to the angel of the church in La-odicéa write: The words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the origin of God's creation: "I know your works; you are neither cold nor hot. I wish that you were either cold or hot. So, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I am about to spit you out of my mouth. For you say, 'I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing.' You do not realize that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked. Therefore I counsel you to buy from me gold refined by fire so that you may be rich; and white robes to clothe you and to keep the shame of your nakedness from being seen; and salve to anoint your eyes so that you may see. I reprove and discipline those whom I love. Be earnest, therefore, and repent. Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me. To the one who conquers I will give a place with me on my throne, just as I myself conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne. Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches." Revelation 3:14-22

This is the last of the letters to the seven churches in Asia Minor that John envisions, each one addressing a different community of Christians and their particular spiritual needs. This church was in La-odicéa, a wealthy city near Colossae. Because of their good fortune economically, culturally, and personally, they were quite self-confident and felt rather self-sufficient. For that reason, their faith was, as John put it, "neither cold nor hot." It was lukewarm, which served no good purpose to anyone, especially the La-odicéans. This letter was not intended for condemnation, however. Instead, it was addressed to the believers as invitation. "I stand at the door and knock," the risen Christ says, "if any one hears my voice and opens the door,

I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me.” It is an invitation to the Messianic banquet, to dine with Christ in the age to come.

Some of you will remember a painting from the mid-twentieth century by Warner Sallman titled “Christ at Heart’s Door.” It pictures a first-century looking Jesus standing at the door of a cottage which, with the light emanating from Christ, forms the shape of a heart. It is dark within, but Christ knocks, hoping the inhabitant will answer. One important feature to note in the picture is that the door has no latch or knob on the outside. This detail reminds us that the heart has to be opened from the inside in order to receive Christ.

In order to walk with Jesus toward Easter, like him, we must take our first step on the journey. Jesus has identified with his people through the rite of baptism. He has prepared himself for his ministry in the wilderness and asserted his determination and strength against the temptation of evil. Now he is ready to begin his journey which will take him through Galilee to Jerusalem, into the challenging days of Holy Week, and on to the cross and the garden of resurrection. As he did two thousand years ago when he invited Simon and Andrew, James and John, and all of the others to follow him, he invites us as well. “I stand at the door and knock,” he says as he waits to see if we will open the door.

The first thing we must do on our Lenten journey is to listen for the knock. We listen for the invitation of Christ to join him. I daresay that knock comes in a variety of ways. As a child that knock was the faithfulness of my parents to demonstrate for me and my brothers that faith in God is important and a way of life. It was the forbearance of Sunday School teachers and missions leaders who tirelessly tried to expose a young boy to the teachings of Jesus. It was the urging of my grandmother to take scripture to heart, to learn and memorize and ingest it as a holy meal.

As a teenager I heard the knock as I began to struggle with relationships, learning the hard lessons of forgiveness and justice and self-control. Jesus knocked as I learned that I could ask questions of the Bible and tradition and even of God. In college, the knock became louder and more frequent as I opened my ears and eyes to the world, met people who were very different from me, and began to think about my place in the world. Day after day, Jesus knocked on my heart as I pursued a career in ministry, as Deborah and I fell in love, married, and began a family. To this day the

knocking persists as I continue to learn what it means to live as a person of faith in the world.

Do you hear the knock? At times it is as clear as this sermon which tells you straightforward that God in Christ is standing at the door of your heart right now, knocking and asking you to open your heart and invite him in. At other times it is that subtle but unmistakable throbbing in your chest which you know to be God's Spirit at work in your life. Sometimes the knock comes when a friend listens and shows you compassion. Sometimes the knock sounds like a snare drum calling you to action as your life pivots on the injustice and cruelty you see in the world. Jesus knocks on the door of your heart when hatred and violence are perpetrated against others of his brothers and sisters. When your own life is overwhelmed by a flood of random or self-inflicted tragedies, Jesus pounds on the door of your heart, entreating you to open and allow him in. When you see the sun set or watch it rise the next morning, Jesus knocks. When a child smiles in your direction or sings a song or laughs at a daffodil reaching for the sun, Jesus knocks on the door of your heart.

You could add a thousand more instances of how and when Jesus has knocked and you have heard. What makes the difference between a heart-warming memory and a life-changing experience, however, is whether or not you answer. God in Christ can stand at the door of our hearts all day long and through the night, but if we ignore the knock as if it is the call of a telemarketer interrupting our supper, it means nothing to us. We simply drown out the noise by turning up the TV or occupying ourselves with other distractions.

Listen to the knock! That is why we are here, after all. At some point, we have heard God knock and have answered. Whether we invited him in for that promised feast of faith or kept him waiting at the door like an encyclopedia salesman, we have at least opened the door. If we have not invited Christ to enter our lives, however, he continues to ask.

We fool ourselves and do a disservice to the Christian faith when we assume that the season of Lent is a mandated period of somber, self-examination, a downer of religious duty. If you recall, Jesus told his followers that when they observed a fast, they were not to let others know it by walking around in sackcloth and ashes. Instead, they were to wash up, spruce up, and go about their business with a smile because their fasting was between them and God and nobody else's business. Lent is a gift to us as an

opportunity to give real thought to our faith, to explore its meaning and impact in our lives, and to realize the power of faith to change our world. Lent is a time of reflection and should include self-examination, but it is also an exciting time for us all to explore our faith together. We need to open that door.

Don Saliers, who taught theology and worship at Candler School of Theology for many years, reflected on that picture of Christ standing at the door, persistently knocking. He said, "I . . . came to see that holiness makes demands and asks questions, just as in Revelation 3:20, which inspired Sallman to paint the image. Holiness was not a one-night stand with God but a lifetime journey, leading in season and out of season; not a sentimental feeling but a process of coming to live with who Jesus is."<sup>4</sup>

Too much of popular religious activity today does treat God as a one-night stand, an entertaining companion who will make us feel good and liven up the party. Jesus enjoyed having a good time as much as anyone, but his commitment was to help us understand how to live faithfully day by day by day. Lent is the opportunity for us to listen and learn.

Listen! Jesus knocks. For some of us he knocks hoping that we will open the door of our heart for the first time and invite him in. Opening the door is the first step in the journey that is our faith. For others of us, Jesus knocks, hoping that we will open the door to fresh air which will fan the flame of our faith, causing us to burn brightly with the love of God. In some cases, God in Christ knocks hoping we will ask him in to develop a deeper, richer relationship with him. For some of us, Christ knocks with urgency, entreating us to open the door to an engagement of our faith with the injustice of the world. Jesus knocks. Listen.

We can try to ignore all of the sounds of the world which compete for our attention. We can try to ignore the sound of Christ knocking on the door of our heart. But even if we could find for ourselves an anechoic chamber where all outside noise is banished and all the words of Christ are silenced, we would still hear two things: our nervous system at work reacting to our environment and the pulse of our own heart which, if you listen, sounds very much like a steady knock on a door. Listen to the knock. It is God in Christ wanting to enter your heart and cause it to echo with his love and grace. Listen!

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<sup>4</sup>Don E. Saliers, "Open the Door," *Weavings: A Journal of the Christian Spiritual Life* (November/December/January 2016-17): 8.

March 5, 2017

## Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

We are so often seeking forgiveness, O God, and, fortunate for us, you are indeed “merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in lovingkindness.” But we do not want to take advantage of your kindness toward us. We do not want our contrition to seem insincere. We do not want to dwell in a wearying cycle of sin, confession, pardon, and more sin. Help us off of the treadmill of our self-centeredness, O God. Teach us how to walk the long road with you so that our sights are set, not on the next thrill, but on the journey that leads us to your eternal home.

We do not have enough breath to offer all of the praise and gratitude that we feel today, but we do know that our hearts well up with thanksgiving for your goodness toward us. Thank you, O God, for every gracious gift that comes our way.

We begin another Lenten journey and, like Jesus, turn our faces toward the cross and the garden which lies just beyond. Guide us on this journey, we pray. Open our ears that we might listen. Open our hearts that we might grow in likeness to your Son, our Savior. Open our lives that we might share this journey with one another.

You know better than we do the needs of our lives and our world, O God. You know better than we do what is best for us and our world. Help us to understand that you need us to accomplish your will in the world and call us to offer ourselves to your service and calling. Choose us, we pray, to take the Gospel near and far so that your kingdom becomes evident wherever we go and whatever we do.

We seek healing, wholeness, reconciliation, and peace, O God. Bring these gifts to us, we pray, and walk with us throughout these forty days until we celebrate once again the resurrection of our Christ and our own lives; through the One who lived that we might live forever. Amen.