



Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina
Dr. Tony W. Cartledge, Guest Preacher

JUNE 7, 2015
FOUNDERS DAY

The Listener
I Samuel 3:1-10; Mark 4:1-9

Thank you for the opportunity to celebrate with you today on this 60th anniversary of Lakeside's distinctive ministry in this community. From the beginning, you have been a different kind of Baptist, proclaiming an inclusive message of acceptance and grace for all people, and I congratulate you for it. But today is not just about looking back. We also want to look forward and consider all that God might have in store for this church in days to come. That exercise will involve listening carefully for God's call, as well as obeying it when we hear.

As we begin to ponder these things through a very familiar text, I invite you to exercise your imaginations with me so we might appreciate its message in a new way ...

Callers and Listeners

John Glenn's journey – When Flora Mason answered the first doorbell on Hallowe'en night in 1972, she didn't have to guess who was inside the astronaut suit on her front stoop. John Glenn Jernigan always dressed as an astronaut. His outfit had begun as a simple pair of white coveralls, but silver paint on his boots and gloves, several rolls of aluminized duct tape, and a full-face motorcycle helmet took him several steps beyond those junior astronauts who got their costumes from K-Mart.

John Glenn carried a silver briefcase just like the real astronauts do on their way to the launch pad. Flora watched as he opened the briefcase and held it out, lifted his visor with a gloved finger, and said "Trick or Treat: 5 ... 4 ... 3 ... 2 ..." Flora always surrendered one of her trademark popcorn balls before the countdown reached zero. She didn't want him blasting off in her yard.

The boy had been born in the spring of 1962, just weeks after the original John Glenn had been hurled into space atop a special Mercury-Atlas rocket to become the first American in orbit. After a lengthy labor almost as harrowing as John Glenn's fiery return from space, the boy's exhausted mother gave in to her husband's insistence that they name the baby after the new American hero. She had no way of knowing that both names would stick.

Both Mercury and Gemini were history before John Glenn learned to read, but he looked at picture books about them and sat in his daddy's lap to watch every televised launch, landing, and space walk. From the time he was old enough to use

scissors, he clipped and pasted newspaper articles and color pictures from magazines into a scrapbook. He watched Neil Armstrong step onto the moon's surface in 1969 and never doubted that he would be an astronaut, too.

You wouldn't be surprised to learn that John Glenn took every math and science course his high school offered, and he managed to earn a pilot's license before he was old enough to drive. He studied engineering in college, went straight into the Air Force, and impressed enough of his jet-jockey superiors at flight school to be tapped as a test pilot. People back home smiled a few years later when the newspaper reported that NASA had chosen John Glenn for the astronaut corps, and in due time they watched him riding a towering pillar of fire into space.

John Glenn could have piloted the Space Shuttle if he'd wanted to, but he chose to train broadly for long-term assignments on the International Space Station so he could spend more time in orbit. John Glenn just couldn't get enough of it: the feeling of zero-G, the heart-stopping beauty of the earth spinning majestically below, even the routine chores required to stay alive in a frigid vacuum were a daily thrill for John Glenn Jernigan, for he was born to be an astronaut.

But ... even astronauts are first born on earth, and they can't stay in space forever. When John Glenn's first stint in space came to an end, it brought a small surprise: his ride home would be in a Russian Soyuz capsule that had delivered two fresh crew members and several hundred pounds of needed supplies.

John Glenn would rather have flown home in the proud shuttle, of course, but he was a good soldier and did not complain when he was assigned to the Soyuz. The Russian system is largely automated, so astronauts have little to do on the way home but endure the ride, which is often rocky. The Soyuz is fairly low-tech and usually reliable, but not always, and John Glenn knew something was wrong as soon as the capsule hit the stratosphere. The propulsion module had fired on schedule to slow them for reentry, but some of the explosive bolts designed to detach it from the descent module failed to fire, and it didn't break loose until they hit the atmosphere. The autopilot then threw the Soyuz into a much steeper trajectory than planned, and that not only exposed the men inside to severe G-forces, but burned off the capsule's antenna. The spacecraft smelled of smoke and began to shake so severely that John Glenn fully expected to be walking on air at any moment. When the radio went silent, he prayed.

At long last, the drogue chute deployed, and then the main parachute. The shaking stopped, and John Glenn watched numbers on the altimeter as he waited for the cluster of small rockets to fire and bring them to a soft landing on the flat plains of Kazakhstan. But, the ballistic entry left them so far off course that the rockets never had a chance to fire, and when the drifting capsule slammed sideways into the sheer face of a rocky mountainside several hundred miles short of its target, everything went black.

Niyooosha's radio – In a large goat-hair tent pitched in a broad valley of northern Afghanistan, a boy named Niyooosha sat on the ground before a jumble of ham radio equipment. Niyooosha was proud because his grandfather Rashidi had given him the task of monitoring the scanner and radio that kept him in touch with other tribal leaders in the area between Baghlan and Mazar-e Sharif. Day after day, Niyooosha put on the bulky headphones and sat before the radio, and he listened.

The sheik had chosen Niyooosha not only because the boy was obedient, but because he could speak and understand English better than anyone in the camp. Niyooosha studied English because he dreamed of leaving Afghanistan and coming to America. In the meantime, Sheik Rashidi prized Niyooosha's skills because he could also listen out for communications between the U.S. military forces that operated in the area. Niyooosha was mystified by the soldiers' jargon and constant use of code words, but at least he knew when they were up to something. Sometimes they came by and brought gifts, hoping that Sheik Rashidi would cooperate with them.

Niyooosha considered his job so important that he rarely left the tent. He even slept on a thick rug by the radio table, still wearing the headphones with their coiled telephone-style cord stretched to the limit. So it was that one evening after sunset, Niyooosha lay sleeping with a G.I.'s old Spiderman comic book over his face when a sharp crackle from the scanner jarred him awake. *"May day!"* he heard. *"May day. Soyuz 5-9-3 down. 36 degrees, 15 minutes, 36 seconds North; 69 degrees, 46 minutes, 37 seconds East. Altitude 4,300 meters, west-facing slope. Pilot unresponsive. Batteries failing. May day."*

The signal broke off for a moment, as if the speaker was very tired, then picked up again. *"May day. May day. Soyuz 5-9-3 down. 36 degrees, 15 minutes, 36 seconds North ..."*

Niyooosha listened intently and copied the message onto a tablet, then threw off the headphones and rushed outside to where Sheik Rashidi and several other men were sipping tea beneath a large open canopy. *"Yala, yala!"* he yelled, full knowing that was no way to speak to his elders – "Hurry! Hurry!" Then he ran back to the tent and turned on the speaker so the others could hear.

When grandfather Rashidi came lumbering inside, the mysterious voice was repeating the same message. *"Mayday. Soyuz 5-9-3 down ..."*

"It sounds like a walkie-talkie," Niyooosha said. "Do you know this person 'Soyuz'?"

"No," said the sheik in his slow and rumbling way. "I don't know Soyuz. The name sounds Russian, but the voice is American. Call the Yankee soldiers and give

them the message. Tell them they will need a helicopter, and they should hurry if they want to get there before the Taliban. Then tell them we need a new generator.”

Less than an hour later, as medics suspended on safety harnesses began to disentangle the injured astronauts from the wreckage of their capsule, John Glenn knew that he was very grateful. What he did not know is that he owed his life to a boy in a tent, a boy who listened, a boy whose name, in fact, means “listener.”

Samuel’s visitor – On another night, in another time, in another part of the world, another boy lay on a pallet inside a tent made of goat hair, and he slept. An assortment of lamps flickered on a wooden table beside him, their supply of pressed olive oil running low. Shadows danced on the drooping roof of the large tent and across the gilded wings of the cherubim who stood atop the Ark of the Covenant. In the coruscating light, one might swear they were moving.

A voice broke the silence. “Samuel! Samuel!”

The boy snapped to attention. Without stopping to look around, he ran into an adjoining room where an aged priest named Eli was deep in slumber. “Here I am,” the boy said, “for you called me.”

The old priest was nearly deaf, so Samuel had to shake him to wake him. Eli did not appear to be pleased. “Go back to bed,” he said. “I didn’t call you.”

Samuel was always obedient so he returned to bed, but he was certain the voice he had heard was more than a dream. He watched the spooky shadows for a while, and drifted back into slumber.

How long was it before he heard the voice again? Samuel didn’t know, but the lamps were still burning. “Samuel! Samuel!” called the voice. There was no one else to be seen, so Samuel again crawled out of his covers and went to Eli’s bedside. “Here I am,” he said. “You called me?”

Once again he had to shake the old man. Eli was puzzled, but patient. “My son, I didn’t call you,” he said. “Go back to bed.”

Samuel went back to his blankets, but he didn’t go back to sleep. He was still watching the shadows dance across the cherubim when he heard the voice again. “Samuel! Samuel!” Again it sounded like Eli. Who else could it be? So Samuel threw back the blanket one more time, and walked into Eli’s room, but more carefully.

“Here I am,” he said, “for you called me.”

Eli had not been back to sleep, either. He knew for certain that he had not called out in his sleep. He also knew that Samuel was a steady boy who was not

prone to hallucinations. He had been wondering, ever since the second time Samuel had come in, if it could be possible that the Lord was calling the boy.

The Lord never talked to Eli, and it was said in Shiloh that “the word of the Lord was rare” in those days. *Maybe*, Eli thought – sadly – maybe God still speaks, but only certain people can hear. *Maybe* God still speaks, but nobody has been listening.

When Samuel returned the third time, Eli was certain that God was indeed calling the boy. Who else could it be? So, he told Samuel what he was thinking. “Lie down again,” Eli said, “and if he calls again, just say ‘Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.’”

There was no way that Samuel was going back to sleep now, of course, and he didn’t have to wait long. And, as he listened intently to the guttering and sputtering of the lamps, the voice returned. “Samuel! Samuel!”

The boy was nervous and he forgot to say “Lord,” but he quickly piped up “Speak, for your servant is listening.”

And that was the important part. Samuel was listening, and he continued to listen, and because he listened, the word of the Lord returned to Shiloh, and Samuel grew to become so trusted that people came to him in order to hear from God, and they left saying “Not one of his words ever falls to the ground” (1 Sam. 3:19).

And so it was, the text tells us, that “all Israel from Dan to Beer-sheba knew that Samuel was a trustworthy prophet of the LORD. The LORD continued to appear at Shiloh, for the LORD revealed himself to Samuel at Shiloh by the word of the LORD” (1 Sam. 3:20-21).

Samuel was a boy who listened.

Why listening matters

It’s hard to overestimate the importance of listening. When Moses stood before the people of Israel and spoke that famous passage we know as the “Shema,” it begins with the word that means “listen”: *‘Shema yitsrael: Yahweh Elohenu, Yahweh ehad’*-- “Listen, O Israel: Yahweh is our God, Yahweh is one. And you shall love Yahweh your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might” (Deut. 6:4-5). And Moses went on to say “Keep these words I am commanding you this day in your heart” (Deut. 6:6). In Hebrew, the word for “obey” is the same as the word for “listen.” To hear is to obey.

Moses knew that people cannot obey God’s commands until they *hear* God’s commands, until they *listen*.

This idea of listening is important in the New Testament as well as the old. Have you ever noticed how often Jesus said “*Anyone who has ears to hear, let him hear!*” (Luke 8:8, etc.).

But that verse does not just give people permission to hear: it *commands* them to hear. I like the translation in the NET Bible: “*Anyone who has ears to hear had better listen!*”

We find that command following the parable of the sower (Matt. 13:1-9, 43; Mark 4:1-9; Luke 8:4-8). After Jesus spoke of how important it is to give root and room to the seed of the gospel, he said “anyone who has ears to hear had better listen!”

After the parable the lamp (Mark 4:21-23), which commanded his hearers to let the light of their faith shine before others rather than hiding it under a basket, Jesus said “anyone who has ears to hear had better listen!”

After the story of the salt that loses its savor (Luke 14:34-35), which warns against becoming so impure or watered down that we lose our influence, Jesus said “anyone who has ears to hear had better listen!”

And that’s just a start.

Are we listening?

So now we have to ask the question that’s been hanging around the edges of these stories for quite a while now: “Am I listening for a word from the Lord?” And maybe even, “What does it mean to listen?”

To listen is to be attentive – It should go without saying that, to truly listen, you have to pay attention to what someone else is saying. That’s a truth that is both obvious and ignored. It is true in our relationships with other people, but that’s another sermon for another day. It’s particularly true in our relationship with God.

I’m convinced that our prayer lives are more effective when we do less talking and more listening, when we spend less time telling God what we want and more time listening for what God wants.

In the many needs and opportunities that surround us, God is always speaking, but we aren’t always paying attention. We may think the word of the Lord is rare in these days, but it may just be that listeners are rare.

To listen is to be open – To really listen, you have to be paying attention, and you also have to be open. You have to be willing not only to hear with your ears but consider with your heart what is being said.

If we only hear what we want to hear, then we're not really listening. If we've set up parameters like "So long as it doesn't involve foreign missions or working in the inner city or singing praising choruses from a screen, I'm willing to listen," then we're not really listening.

To listen is to obey – Finally, let's go back and recall that biblical concept we've already talked about, that when God is involved, to truly hear is to obey.

If we are attentive enough and open enough to truly listen, we will hear. And if we truly hear, we will obey.

So, here's the question: *is there a word of the Lord that you're not hearing?* Is God calling you to be more obedient in some area of your life? Is God speaking to your heart about your family life, about your church life, about your financial life, about your social life, about your FaceBook life?

Is God nudging you as a church to take on some new challenge, even though it's a scary thought? Is God putting needs in front of you that you have yet to see, sending messages that you have yet to hear?

I believe there is a word from that Lord – and I also believe that *"Anyone who has ears to hear had better listen!"*

So may it be.

June 7, 2015

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

For sixty years, O God, people have gathered as a family of faith known as Lakeside, and you have listened compassionately to all of the prayers we have offered to you. We know that your ears are open to us wherever we are, but we are grateful for the privilege of opening our hearts to you as a people united in faith. Thank you for all of the care, guidance, correction, and blessing you have generously bestowed upon us over the years.

We are grateful for those enthusiastic souls who listened to the nudging of your Spirit to begin a new ministry in this community. We are grateful for each one who, through the years, has kept mind and heart open to the teaching of Christ and the whispers of the Spirit. We thank you for all who have faithfully served this congregation and for all who have been touched with the Gospel through our ministry.

We pray that we will continue to remain open to wherever you will lead us, O God. Our needs and the needs of our community and world are so great. Often, we feel too small to address such concerns, yet remind us that we do not act alone but in the power of your redemptive love. Guide us to the people and places where you need us. Give us the courage to serve and the strength to serve well. And empower us to act in love even as you have loved us.

As we have for all of these good years, we pray for dear ones who are ill, who are beset by challenges that loom larger than life itself, who are weak and weary and feel as if they cannot go on, who are confused and uncertain about which way to turn. We pray for all who grieve and feel the intense pain of loss. We pray for each one who feels empty inside and has not yet opened themselves to the grace of your love. And we pray for all who embrace joyful challenges and fresh opportunities that they may have the blessing of your Spirit upon them as well.

We speak from the depths of our souls and know that you listen, O God, now speak that we may hear. Open our ears that we might hear all of the good things you have to say. Open our hearts that we might respond to your calling. Open our lives that we might follow you in all that we do; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Jody C. Wright
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