



Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina
Jody C. Wright, Senior Minister

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THE THIRD SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Do You Hear What I Hear? Genesis 21:8-21; Psalm 86

Last week I sent Jim a copy of the order of worship so that he would know the anthems and hymns which had been selected for today. He immediately replied, “I see you are going to sing a Christmas hymn for your sermon.” I assure you that I am not going to sing. The text for today’s sermon actually brought the title to mind, but Jim’s comment reminded me of an unforgettable rendition of that beloved hymn, “Do You Hear What I Hear?”

It was Christmas Eve at the Warrenton Baptist Church over twenty years ago. Walter Gardner, the tenor soloist for the choir, was slated to sing. Walter has a beautiful voice and, to this day, everyone loves to hear him. His solos are a beloved Christmas tradition in that congregation. He began singing,

“Said the night wind to the little lamb,
do you see what I see,
way up in the sky, little lamb?”

The sanctuary was silent except for Walter’s beautiful voice and the music of the organ as it dipped and soared to transport us to that starlit pasture where the birth of Jesus was first heralded. We were all swept up in the moment, and apparently Walter got swept up, too, because instead of singing about “A star, a star, dancing in the night . . .,” Walter sang, “A child, a child shivers in the night . . . with a tail as big as a kite.”

Do you hear what I hear, indeed! Walter realized that he had jumbled the verses and somehow quickly made his way back to the correct stanzas and left us with “the Child, the Child, sleeping in the night, He will bring us goodness and light, He will bring us goodness and light.”¹ The rest of us, however, were shaking the pews, thinking unholy thoughts about a Jesus kite flying high in the sky.

¹Noël Regney, “Do You Hear What I Hear?”, music by Gloria Shayne Baker (October 1962).

“Do you hear what I hear?” can be a call to listen for sounds that herald a significant event like the birth of a baby born to be our Savior. It can be a warning to listen out for danger. Or, it can be a reminder to listen carefully in the world to be certain that we are hearing the same things.

Words and speech are important in the biblical story, but so is listening. As the story begins, the man and the woman hear the footsteps of God walking in the garden in the cool of the day and, for the first, but not last, time, try to hide from God (Genesis 3). Shepherding his father-in-law’s flocks in the desert, Moses saw a burning bush and heard the voice of God who said, “I have heard the cry of my people who are oppressed and I will deliver them” (Exodus 3). Centuries before that, a drama unfolded as the first family of the Hebrew people, Abraham and Sarah, heard God call them to go into a land they did not know. We know the story well. God promised a new land, a better life, and a child in order to establish a nation of people who followed the One God. They listened and they waited. Long years passed and no son was born to them. In frustration and desperation, Sarah “gave” her handmaid to Abraham so that she might conceive on her behalf, a practice that was common at the time. Hagar did conceive and bore a son who was named “Ishmael,” meaning, “God hears” (Genesis 16).

Life went on for years—thirteen more years—before Sarah finally became pregnant and gave birth to the son of promise—Isaac. Isaac’s name means “laughter” because both Abraham and Sarah laughed at the absurdity of two elderly people bringing a child into the world and because Sarah laughed with joy when her baby was born. What happened next was no laughing matter, however. Listen:

The child grew, and was weaned; and Abraham made a great feast on the day that Isaac was weaned.

But Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, playing with her son Isaac. So she said to Abraham, "Cast out this slave woman with her son; for the son of this slave woman shall not inherit along with my son Isaac." The matter was very distressing to Abraham on account of his son. But God said to Abraham, "Do not be distressed because of the boy and because of your slave woman; whatever Sarah says to you, do as she tells you, for it is through Isaac that offspring shall be named for you. As for the son of the slave woman, I will make a nation of him also, because he is your offspring."

So Abraham rose early in the morning, and took bread and a skin of water, and gave it to Hagar, putting it on her shoulder, along with the child, and sent her away. And she departed, and wandered about in the wilderness of Beer-sheba. When the water in the skin was gone, she cast the child under one of the bushes. Then she went and sat down opposite him a good way off, about the distance of a bowshot; for she said, "Do not let me look on the death of the child." And as she sat opposite him, she lifted up her voice and wept. And God heard the voice of the boy; and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven, and said to her, "What troubles you, Hagar? Do not be afraid; for God has heard the voice of the boy where he is. Come, lift up the boy and hold him fast with your hand, for I will make a great nation of him."

Then God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water. She went, and filled the skin with water, and gave the boy a drink. God was with the boy, and he grew up; he lived in the wilderness, and became an expert with the bow. He lived in the wilderness of Paran; and his mother got a wife for him from the land of Egypt.

Genesis 21:8-21

Do you hear what I hear? This story is all about hearing. Did Abraham and Sarah listen carefully to God's promise to give them a son? Of so, why did they involve Hagar in God's plan? Once Ishmael was born, did they hear the blessings God bestowed on him? Even though he would not inherit the promise given to Abraham, God nonetheless gave him his own blessing of a great nation of people. Still, Abraham and Sarah sent Hagar and Ishmael off to die in the desert.

On the day her own son was weaned, did Sarah actually hear what was going on between the two brothers? Once again, Hagar and her son were sent into the desert to fend for themselves and once again God heard their cries and rescued them.

Our understanding of this story hinges on how we hear one word—*tsachaq*, which generally means "to laugh." We are told that at the festival celebrating the weaning of Isaac, the child of laughter, his mother Sarah observed her baby and his older brother Ishmael. Some translations tell us that Ishmael was mocking or laughing at his baby brother which greatly upset Sarah so that she had Abraham send the boy away. Other translations, however, suggest that Ishmael was playing with, or laughing with, his little

brother. In that case, it would be difficult to understand why she would get upset enough to send him into the desert.

Was Ishmael, at this time fourteen years old, an adult by later Hebrew standards, merely teasing his baby brother or was he acting like an insecure adolescent, no longer the center of attention and determined not to let this little intruder take his place? Was he taunting and mocking his baby brother or simply playing with him?

This form of the verb to laugh is unusual and complicated, so we may never know what actually happened. We all know that laughter can easily slide into a variety of emotions from joy and silliness and adulation to envy, mockery, and derision. Do you hear what I hear?

Sarah apparently heard the laughter of mockery and felt her baby was being insulted. She sent Ishmael and Hagar away, presumably to die. God, on the other hand, might have heard the laughter of two children playing, a sound which Sarah had perhaps forgotten. God did not forget his promise to Ishmael to make of him a great nation as well. Ishmael became skilled with the bow and fathered twelve tribes, as did his nephew Jacob. We know, of course, that Isaac's descendants became the Hebrew people and Ishmael's descendants became the Arab people. Many people have listened to this story and concluded that Jews and Arabs are destined to be eternal enemies. Yet, when their father Abraham died, Isaac and Ishmael together buried him at Mach-pe'lah beside Sarah. Ishmael's nephew Esau married one of his daughters. The biblical story keeps strong ties between Isaac and Ishmael.

"Do you hear what I hear?", God asks. The Bible is full of gritty stories that deal with the darker side of life. God's people do not always make the right choices, but God continues to speak, to call us into a promised land, to woo us to do what is right. When we hear this story of Abraham and Sarah and Hagar, we tend to sympathize with Sarah who wanted nothing more than to have a son to be the child of promise. But what about Hagar? In delicate terms, she was Sarah's handmaid. In reality, she was a slave. I doubt she jumped at the privilege of giving birth to her master's child. She was forced to play into Sarah's insecurity and frustration. And when she did exactly as she was told to do and did give birth to Abraham's first born son, she and the child were run out of the camp, not once, but twice.

Do you hear what I hear? God heard the cries of the child and his mother. God heard the whimpers of the oppressed and abused. God heard his children cry. And God took care of them. God provided.

Hardly a week goes by that we do not hear about a bombing or attack somewhere in the world: Manchester or London or Paris or Brussels. And when we hear the news, we cringe. I have noticed, however, that when I hear that there has been an attack in Afghanistan or Iraq or Syria or Turkey that I sometimes hardly wince. Am I not hearing the same tragic news? Why do I not hear what the people of those war-weary places hear?

I read an article last week that described how Kenneth Feinberg, Chair of the September 11 Victim Compensation Fund, decided how much money the families of the 9/11 victims would receive. He used a formula that gave weight to age, dependents, life insurance, and income and earning potential. The Fund essentially assigned a value to each and every life that was lost. That value ranged from “as little as \$250,000 for blue-collar workers [to] as much as \$7.1 million for executives.” He struggled with this method of measuring the value of individual lives. Seven years later, he was asked to complete the same kind of task for the families of the persons who were killed in the 2007 massacre at Virginia Tech. This time he went with his heart and the estate of each student and faculty member who died was given the same amount of compensation.²

Jesus once said to his disciples,
Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will
fall to the ground apart from your Father. And even the hairs of
your head are all counted. So do not be afraid; you are of more
value than many sparrows. Matthew 10:29-31

In Jesus' day, sparrows were often the only meat poor people could afford. They were cheap and abundant food for the folks who could not pay for anything better. In God's eyes, however, nothing that happened to a sparrow went unnoticed. How much more, Jesus pointed out, does God care about what happens to you.

Given all of the information that comes our way day by day, the media reports that are relentless in their delivery of bad news, I fear that I have come

²Liddy Barlow, “Living the Word: June 25, 12th Sunday in Ordinary Time,” *The Christian Century* (June 7, 2017): 20.

to the point where I hear what I want to hear and see what I want to see. If we look and listen carefully, however, we will realize that so many media outlets of every stripe have already made up their minds about the news they are reporting to us. Everyone already has it all figured out.

Then I read the Bible and I realize how seldom we humans get it right and how patient God is to give us another chance to do better. Was Ishmael making fun of his baby brother or was he playing with him, trying to make the little fellow laugh? Probably a little of both. Sarah heard it one way and sent the boy and his mother away to suffer at best and to die at worst. God heard it another way and provided water to quench their thirst and path to discover a new life. The Psalmist speaks for us when he says,

Incline your ear, O Lord, and answer me,
for I am poor and needy.
Preserve my life, for I am devoted to you;
save your servant who trusts in you.
You are my God; be gracious to me, O Lord,
for to you do I cry all day long.
Gladden the soul of your servant, for to you,
O Lord, I lift up my soul.
For you, O Lord, are good and forgiving,
abounding in steadfast love to all who call on you.
Give ear, O Lord, to my prayer; listen to my cry of supplication.
In the day of my trouble I call on you, for you will answer me.
There is none like you among the gods, O Lord,
nor are there any works like yours.
All the nations you have made shall come and bow down before
you, O Lord, and shall glorify your name.
For you are great and do wondrous things; you alone are God.
Psalm 86:1-10

Do you hear what I hear? Probably not, but that's okay. Thankfully God hears us. God hears us whether we are a Sarah looking out for our own interests or a Hagar looking out for the interests of someone else or an Abraham who willingly does whatever he is told without considering the consequences. God hears us whether we are an Isaac born into a life that is instantly gifted or we are an Ishmael who will struggle every day we live. God hears and God acts.

Do you hear what I hear? Maybe, maybe not. By the way, the two people who wrote the song of the same name, Noël Regney and Gloria Shayne Baker, were a husband and wife musical team who were asked to write a Christmas song. They wrote “Do You Hear What I Hear?” during the Cuban Missile Crisis as a plea for peace in the world.³

Do you hear what I hear? Maybe not, but if we talk together about what we each have heard and ask God for divine guidance, maybe, just maybe, we will recognize the value inherit in each of us. Maybe together we will come closer to the truth and ultimately do what is right. Maybe we will finally see all people as our sisters and brothers and treat one another as family. Maybe we will learn to listen more carefully . . . and perhaps have a good laugh or two along the way. Amen.

³“Do You Hear What I Hear?”, Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Do_You_Hear_What_I_Hear%3F; from Fox, Margalit (2008-03-11). "Gloria Shayne Baker, Composer and Lyricist, Dies at 84". *The New York Times*. Retrieved 2008-03-23.

June 25, 2017

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

Once again night has faded away, a new morning has opened up, and we are the grateful recipients of another day of life, O God. What a gift you have given to us! What a wonderful opportunity to experience your goodness in familiar and fresh ways! Thank you, for life!

We know that this gift, like all of the gifts you give to us, is offered out of love. The world around pulses with the love that generated it ages ago and sustains it even now. The people around us, friends we rarely see, and those whom we have never met were all fashioned in love, a love we experience but do not always acknowledge; a love that is ours but not always shared. We love you, O God, and thank you for every good gift that comes our way.

We are not so naive as to think that everyone experiences life as we do or that each of our days will go as you desire. There are challenges and heartaches, tragedies and trials that almost deny the love that you have infused into our lives. For that reason, we turn to you all the more to help us. Provide whatever we need for the day. Bring good medical care to all who are ill, offer mental health resources to all who struggle, provide comfort and assurance to each of us who is hurting and afraid. Bless those whose life is drawing to a close, those whose life is just beginning, and all of us in between.

We pray for food for all who are hungry and good schools for children who have an appetite for learning. We ask for wisdom for world leaders and a temperate spirit for those who make decisions on our behalf. We ask that you would help us to speak less and listen more, to open our eyes and hearts to what is happening around us, and to give of ourselves in order to make love evident in this glorious world you have created for us.

We love you, O God, and thank you for all that you do for us. Enable us to do something for you, we pray, in the name of Christ. Amen.