

*Listening for God*  
*Luke 12:49-56*

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We have a difficult story for our Gospel reading today. It is not a favorite passage of mine any time of the year, but it is especially unwelcome on a summer Sunday in August. We're meant to be calm and peaceful in August soaking in the long, warm, glorious summer days and we are given this Gospel reading where Jesus announces that he has not come to bring peace to the world he has come to bring division. From now on, he says, households will be divided: father against son, son opposed to father, mother to daughter, daughter to mother, mother-in-law against daughter-in-law, daughter-in-law against mother-in-law. These are hard words! What could he possibly mean?

The scripture continues. Jesus tells the crowds that they have the ability to predict weather – a very mysterious thing in the 1<sup>st</sup> century. Remember, in the 1<sup>st</sup> century they didn't have weather.com or NOAA.gov to give out long range weather reports. Instead, they read the signs in the sky. When clouds were looming in the west they knew that rain was coming. When wind blew from the south they knew that it would be hot. Hypocrites! Jesus insisted. "You know how to interpret the face of the earth and the sky. How is it you do not know how to interpret these times?"

Like any piece of scripture, it is important to understand the context for this passage in the Gospel of Luke. Jesus is teaching his disciples and those following him. He is getting closer and closer to the end of his life and he has come to a moment when he wonders whether or not anyone has heard his message of God. Scripture tells us he has come to bring fire to the earth and he wishes he'd kindled it because at that moment he didn't see the flames. Scripture tells us he came to have a baptism - to baptize the world with the love of God - but he is under stress to complete this task. He feels like his truth, his wisdom, hasn't be heard. And, he knows that for those who follow him will be divided from their families and traditions. Those who chose his path, his way of seeing the world, will leave behind the hierarchy of the rigid purity laws, the rules and regulations of the temple and open their arms to a radical inclusivity, a radical knowing that God's love is for all people regardless of race, gender, nationality. As St. Paul wrote in his letter to the Galatians: "There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." This way of seeing and living in the world caused tension in the 1<sup>st</sup> century and it causes tension in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

I think the key to this text, however, are the last verses. Jesus notes that people can read the signs in the sky but cannot interpret the present time. People know how to understand the mysterious movement of weather, but they can't open their eyes to the mysterious movement of God. They can't see the truth that Jesus is trying to convey – that God is in all things. In God we live and breathe and have our being. We are not separate from God, rather God is in all things – even here in this church as we worship. As 21<sup>st</sup> century people of faith, we are invited to open our eyes to the mystical presence of God with us – we are invited to open our eyes, listen, and allow God's presence to mold us and teach us to live.

Some years ago a very wise woman told me that one way to learn to listen for God's mysterious presence is to study the mystics and learn from their way of being.

One of my favorite mystics is St. Francis. He is known for his communion with animals and his commitment to peace. His life is a remarkable example of Jesus' prediction in our Gospel reading.

In the 12<sup>th</sup> century, Francis was born into a wealthy family – his father was a silk merchant – and he lived a carefree life going off to war as a young man. While away, he received a vision to return to Assisi. Once home he went on a pilgrimage to Rome where he denounced his wealth and lived with the poor. He began to preach about God’s love and created a following that eventually turned into a religious order. His father was against Francis’ religious life and tried to convince him to change his mind. Instead, Francis went to the hills of Assisi and lived as hermit and became known as a man of peace and love - a man who communed with all creatures. St. Francis saw that God’s love permeated the world and if we are attentive to that love we, too, can live in oneness with the Holy.

While it is likely that we are not called to denounce the world and live as hermits, we can still be guided by great souls like St. Francis. It is clearer and clearer that this world needs people of faith who listen for God’s love and wisdom and are transformed by it. As 21<sup>st</sup> century people of faith we are invited to become every day mystics. We are called to immerse ourselves in the knowing that God is right here in our midst. We are invited to open our eyes to see this way of knowing and embrace it.

A friend once said to me – understanding that God surrounds us, enfolds us, encircles us, holds us, is like swimming. There is water everywhere and we are in it, moving about and entirely surrounded by it. This is how God is with us. God is here. It is our job to pay attention and cultivate our understanding of God’s presence with us.

The only way I know how to go about cultivating having eyes to see God, ears to hear God and a heart to know God, is to talk with God. Opening our hearts to The Holy requires paying attention and communication. If we are in a relationship with someone, if we are a friend with someone, and we never talk to that person or we never listen to that person, why would the person talk or listen to us? It is the same with God. We need to find time in our crazy lives for prayer and contemplation on a regular basis so that we can listen for the mystery that surrounds us. While I love beginning my day with a half hour of meditation, prayer can be anything. It can be time in the garden while you notice the changes from day to day. It can be long walks while you listen for a greater story than your own story. It can be caring for others with tenderness and joy or looking up at the heavens and wondering about the mystery of life – how did we end up here on this tiny little planet, in this tiny little state, in this church building in the middle of West Hartford? When we listen to mystery, wonder, awe we find ourselves resting in a sacred truth of God’s light and love. If we open our eyes, our ears, our hearts, we are not alone.

Jesus says we can read the signs of the mysterious weather patterns but we don’t read the signs of the wonder of God with us. This summer take the time to be still. Turn off the TV, the computer, the to do list, and listen for wonder – listen for awe – listen for sacred presence that you might be baptized with the power of Holy Love.

Amen.

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