

# Listening to a Still Speaking God

## Revelation 3:20-22

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*Delivered at the Wisconsin Conference Annual Meeting, Green Lake, WI, June 8, 2024*

Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in 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.

Grace and peace to you! I bring you greetings from Eden Theological Seminary in St. Louis, where graduation was just a few weeks ago and we are now in our summer term. We at Eden continue to prepare passionate, well-educated leaders for congregations like yours, and we'd love to talk with you about which members of your congregation are being called to lead congregations in the future. I'm honored to be asked to explore this passage of scripture with you this morning, and I hope that you will be able to hear whatever the Spirit is whispering to you, for your life and for your community.

Have you read about the new dolphin communication technology? It's so cool, and I am totally not making this up. It's called "CHAT," C-H-A-T, which stands for Cetacean Hearing Augmentation Technology. (A cetacean, if you're wondering, is a marine mammal like a dolphin or a whale.) A team of scientists led by Denise Herzing has developed a device that you can strap to your wrist that will both listen to and produce dolphin sounds. Using hundreds of recordings gathered over the course of 35 years, they are using artificial intelligence to build a large language model that will allow this device to both hear and produce dolphin communication signals. It's a little bit like the phone translation apps that will

speak Italian or Mandarin or Serbo-Croatian—except that you’d be using it underwater, which is often a little hard on phones, and you’d be talking to a different species. It may be stretch to say that dolphins have a language in the sense that we think of a language (Dr. Herzig prefers the term “communication signals”), but with this technology we humans are learning some amazing things about how dolphins learn communication signals from their parents, how they can learn new communication signals and add to their repertoire, and how they may be communicating far more than we knew. With the help of artificial intelligence some waterproof hardware and a whole lot of research and effort, these scientists are learning how to listen to dolphins in new ways.

What about listening to galaxies? Have you heard about that? Astronomical data sonification takes digital information gathered by telescopes and converts it into pitch, volume, and types of musical instruments. You can go on Youtube and listen to the ghostly, mystical sounds of star clusters thousands of light years away. Sound can’t travel through empty space, obviously, so we’re not hearing distant stars exactly, but data sonification allows people to listen for patterns in a data set, as well as making the data accessible to people with visual disabilities. Scientists and musicians have worked together to develop this new way of listening to the stars.

It's pretty amazing how much effort and creativity people are putting into finding new ways to listen. Makes me wonder if we in the church might be able to find new ways of listening as well, with some effort and creativity of our own. Not just listening better, but finding new ways to listen.

We in the United Church of Christ are fond of claiming that God is still speaking: that revelation, or the word of God, is still unfolding, still evolving. We are a faith tradition that tries to be more open than defensive when it comes to new kinds of knowledge. We're not as afraid of new scientific discoveries as some faith traditions, for example. And we've tried to learn from the voices among us that have been historically marginalized and silenced. At our best moments we have worked to be less rigid, more flexible as new, emerging theologies have offered fresh ways of understanding Jesus and the astonishing, liberating grace of God.

But this theological stance brings with it some sticky questions about what it means to actually engage in listening to the God who continues to speak in an ongoing way. It's not always clear whose perspective is the new thing God is speaking, and it's often even less clear how we can adapt to new ways of listening and responding in each new era. Any of us who are actively engaged in the day-to-day life of local congregations can tell you that the call of the still speaking God to justice and compassion is fantastic until it runs up against our desire to sing the same old sexist, racist, gender binary, militaristic, colonizing hymn lyrics as always, especially at Christmas. Suddenly it's not quite as clear cut, is it?

We want to keep growing, to stay on the journey with a still speaking God, but it's so tempting to stay in one place after we've arrived at a new, exhilarating way of understanding the gospel. We're like Peter on top of the mount of transfiguration, saying to Jesus, "It's so great that we're here! If you want, we can just set up camp here on this mountain top. We'll set up a tent for you, and one for Moses, and one for Elijah, and it will be all mountaintop experience all the

time!” But then a voice comes from the clouds. Do you remember what it says? “This is my Son! The Beloved! *Listen to him!*” Listen. You thought you were paying attention, you thought you already *were* listening. But Jesus is not staying on the mountaintop. He is headed back down into the suffering world, he is “setting his face toward Jerusalem,” as Luke’s gospel says, to go confront the authorities in the streets. “We’re not staying. I know you’re excited, but stop for a moment, and listen differently.”

“Time makes ancient good uncouth,” as the old hymn says. “They must upward still and onward, who would keep abreast of truth.” But when the ways of listening for God we’ve grown accustomed to don’t keep abreast with truth, our first impulse isn’t always to figure out new ways of listening. When the ways we’ve interpreted scripture, or the theological frameworks that shape our worship aren’t meeting the moment, we are just as likely to assume that God just isn’t saying much, rather than seeking out new ways of listening. We can start to feel like the elderly Eli in the temple at the time of the call of young Samuel. The story says, “The word of the HOLY ONE was rare in those days. Visions were not widespread.” Eli is tired. His adult sons are spoiled and greedy, taking more than their share of meat from the temple sacrifices, and they never listen to him, the text says that. They just keep staring at their phones. None of them, including Eli, are really hearing much from God.

But is it really the case that God was not speaking much those days? Or is it something else? Is it, perhaps, that a younger generation can hear something that Eli can’t, because he’s not ready for God to be saying, “Samuel! Samuel!” Samuel comes to Eli three times in the middle of the night, because Samuel thinks it’s Eli

who is calling him. Finally, on the third try, Eli figures out what's going on. Maybe he remembers what it's like to hear that call himself. So, he tells the boy to go back and lie down, and if he hears the voice again, he should say what? Do you remember? "Speak, Holy One, for your servant is *listening*." There it is again. The future is not Eli's, but it's his task to teach young Samuel how to listen differently, and perhaps Eli will learn to hear something that only seemed like silence before, in the process.

In our reading for today, John (not John the gospel writer, a different John) is stewing in exile on the Island of Patmos, off the coast of what is now Turkey, with plenty of time to write. Apparently, banishment to a remote island has left him with more time on his hands, and he wants to keep in touch with some of the congregations he's been supporting. He sends a letter that includes seven different messages (which he says he has received from the risen Christ in a vision) for each of seven churches in Asia Minor. And honestly, a lot of it is pretty harsh. The message to the Laodicians, in which the verses we heard appear, says they've gotten too rich and comfortable, and that they've become lukewarm in the process, neither hot nor cold, just kind of enjoying their prosperity and going with the flow. I'm not going to spend a lot of time on that, since it obviously has little to do with us, BUT.... But....each brief message ends with the same sentence: Let anyone who has an ear hear what the Spirit is saying to the churches." It's kind of a refrain that rounds out each message.

This refrain about listening to what the Spirit is saying gets repeated seven times. And of course there's a good chance that John adds these words at the end of each message just to give some weight and authority to what he's saying, since

the implication is that *these scolding messages* are what the Spirit is saying. But it's also a theological assertion, made by the risen Christ according to John's vision, that the Spirit *is saying things* currently, in the present tense. And that is really good news, because at the same time that John is saying, "Shape up!" He is also saying, "Don't give up. It's not over, because the Spirit is still speaking to the churches." These are tiny little congregations, scattered far from each other in cultures that generally assume these Jesus followers have lost their minds. Many of them have risked persecution from their neighbors and sometimes the government. (And Franz, just so you know, the bishop of Laodicia was martyred a few decades after this was written, under the emperor Marcus Aurelius.) Over and over, seven times, John is reminding these tiny, struggling churches—Smyrna, and Ephesus, and Laodicia, and maybe Appleton, and Cecil, and Three Rivers, and Waupun, to *Listen*. To keep listening, and maybe listen differently than they have been. Why? Because God is faithful, and steadfast, and therefore the Spirit will continue speaking.

- The Romans are breathing down your necks? It's not over. Hear what the Spirit *is saying* to the churches.
- Fascist, White supremacist, misogynistic, and xenophobic imitations of Christianity seem to be overshadowing authentic lives of struggling to follow in the way of Jesus? It's not over. Hear what the Spirit *is saying* to the churches.
- Some of our congregations think they need to close, because they can't afford a building, because they don't have any next generation, because it would be so much easier to just go to the big, shiny, only slightly

homophobic church down the street? It's not over. Hear what the Spirit *is saying* to the churches.

What does it actually mean to listen to what the Spirit is currently saying, or listen to the God who is still speaking? What does it look like in practice, to hear what the Spirit is saying to the churches, in this era we're in? In your life? In the practices of your congregation? And how might we listen in new ways?

- It might mean listening in new ways through congregational practices of collective, prayerful discernment.
- It might mean listening in new ways to the biblical interpretation of Palestinian Christians.
- It might mean listening in new ways to distant galaxies, or dolphins.
- And it might mean listening to what the Spirit is saying about new ways of being church. Because the Spirit *is saying something*, to the churches.

Thanks be to God.

If these words be true, then let all who agree say, "Amen."