

September 16, 2018

Isaiah 50: 4-9a

Rev. Larry C. Brown - Powell United Methodist Church

“Awakened to Hear”

Most of us watched or heard the news reports this past week as Hurricane Florence took aim at the southeastern United States. In advance of a hurricane it's all about predicting. No one knew for sure the impact of the storm, but history tells of the way monster weather events like Florence leave massive destruction in their wake. This morning, even as the rain continues to fall, we know the reality. There's no more guesswork. Rain totals measured in feet, water levels that have flooded towns, and loss of property well up into the billions. The intensity of the hurricane wasn't quite what they predicted but tell that to the many who have been devastated by this disaster. Some of you have family and friends in the areas that have been hard hit. It's a helpless feeling to just watch and wait. We want to do more to help but often all we can do is pray; pray for their safety, pray for their resilience, pray for the strength to rebuild and to begin to put the pieces together again.

I know we prayed earlier in our service for those impacted by Hurricane Florence, and we don't usually stop to pray just as the sermon gets going, but I'd like to invite us to do that once more, to be in prayer. Let's come together in Christ's love and focus, again, on the people, the communities and the first responders who are facing the reality of what the hurricane has left behind. Let us pray: *Compassionate God, your love never fails us. Your grace never leaves us. In the way that you gather us into your presence this morning be with those who have lost so much because of the storm. Bring them the lasting calm of your gentle hand. Strengthen their resolve to face today. And when the reality of tomorrow seems nearly too much to bear, help them know by way of faith and the care of others that they are not alone. In Jesus Christ, our Lord, we pray. Amen.*

One television report I saw prior to the storm was an interview of a North Carolina man who was preparing his home for what was coming. He was positioning plywood and filling sandbags. He had been through seven hurricanes and just two years ago a storm had flooded the first floor of his home. There he was going through the whole thing again and the reporter asked him what he was feeling. He said it's hard to know what to feel. He said you just do what you have to do. He said, “All I can say is that every time a storm like this one hits it's a life altering event.” What he said has stayed with me, “a life altering event,” he said. Have you ever had one of those or know someone who has? These are the kinds of events that can change the direction of life. Events like these change our focus, our priorities, and our daily routines. A life altering event can be joyful, hopeful, and full of celebration. Positive life altering events are beautiful. But it's the life altering events that that are the most difficult to bear that do just what the term implies, they alter life. When we are hit by a difficult life altering event it can shake us to the core.

The message of the bible this morning points to the fact that the life altering events in the history of God's people shape their experience of God. We've turned our attention to a reading in the book of the prophet Isaiah and these words come at a time when the people were immersed in a destructive life altering event. This event in the experience of the Hebrew people is known as The Exile. Some of us love history and others of us not so much. No matter our personal interest, to fully appreciate what the bible says it's important to understand the impact of The Exile on God's people. It wasn't gale force winds that brought destruction but the powerful army of the Babylonians that blew into Israel and obliterated their way of life, ruining their holy city of Jerusalem. It wasn't storm clouds but the oppressive authority of their captors that reigned down on the Hebrews, ripping away the best and brightest among them and carrying them as prisoners to a foreign land. It was devastating. The earlier sections of Isaiah's book speak to the hardship of the people because of their enslavement by Babylonia. The latter part of Isaiah, including the section we read today, speaks to what happened as the people were finally released from prison to return to their destroyed land and begin the process of rebuilding. I often wonder what families and communities feel when they are allowed to return to their homes following a mandatory evacuation because of some pending disaster. Imagine what the Hebrews felt. Imagine what they saw as they walked into what was left of their homes and city. Where should they start? How could they begin to put the pieces together? Where would they find the strength to build, not only new buildings but new lives? We know from experience that moving through life altering events can paralyze us. We don't know what direction to go or what should happen next. The Hebrews felt like that and this is when the message of Isaiah spoke to them. The prophet's words gave them hope and it is a message that can do the same for us.

“Morning by morning,” says the prophet, “the Lord God wakens my ears to listen...” (Isa. 50:4) When we are facing a situation where tomorrow is uncertain the prophet says, “Morning by morning the Lord awakens my ears...” In the stories of Jesus there are places where he proclaims a life changing truth about God and then he says, “Let anyone with ears listen!” (Matt. 11:15) Jesus' mission brought the reality of God to the lives of people and that

reality begins when we hear the good news. Jesus is saying that our faith makes a difference in us today when we “Listen up!” What does Jesus want us to hear? The message he brings isn’t that God will be with us in some future time. Jesus doesn’t tell us to wait for some kind of perfect spiritual storm that will suddenly make God real to us. Jesus said it’s now. Today is the day. This is the moment when the reality of God breaks into our lives. Isaiah’s word to the ancient people is the right word for the people of Jesus. Morning by morning God speaks to us and the word God gives us is what we need for today. If you’ve ever tried memorizing bible verses here’s a good one to try. The verse is found in Psalm 46, verse one and it says that God is “an ever present help in time of need.” (ps.46:1) That’s worth remembering. God is an ever present help in time of need. Morning by morning God opens our ears to hear that God is a present help today. Is God with us when disaster strikes? Yes. Is God present to comfort and guide us when the way is hard? Yes. Is God with us in the dark and when we are in trouble and when we are alone? Yes. But the deeper word of good news is that God speaks to our lives morning by morning. Both the Prophet Isaiah and our Savior Jesus want us to know that listening for and discerning God’s guidance each day prepares us to remain strong no matter what comes. When we listen for God each day we will be prepared for the life altering events that can come any day. And so, are we tuned in morning by morning? Are we allowing God to awaken our ears at the start of every day so that whatever comes today, tomorrow or the tomorrow after that we are grounded in the hope and presence of God?

A familiar bible story comes to mind, the time young Samuel was called by God to become first a prophet and then to be king. In the story, young Samuel doesn’t hear God. Well, that’s not quite accurate. Samuel hears something but he doesn’t know it’s God’s voice. God keeps at it until Samuel finally hears and responds to God with these memorable words, “Speak, for your servant is listening.” (1 Samuel 3:10) Like Samuel, we hear something but it’s hard to discern if the voice comes from God. Quite frankly, there are many voices bombarding our hearing, including the voices of political commentators and the messages of social media, just to name a couple. Hardly a day goes by when we don’t spend significant time listening to all of that. Maybe it’s not life altering, these voices that speak to us, but slowly and consistently, day by day, they shape us. Don’t get me wrong. We want to be informed. But what the right or the left or the middle is saying to us, what the twitter post or the Facebook feed have to say to us, isn’t the message that ultimately prepares us to be faithful. “Morning by morning” God wakens our ears to listen. This is the word that prepares us for the day and helps us trust God presence in all matters of life.

This week before we turn on the television or start up our news feed or read the newspaper or reach for our phone repeat the words quietly to yourself, “your servant is listening.” This isn’t so much a prayer as it is a decision. God is awakening us, morning by morning, with a divine and loving presence that is ready to guide and to give strength. The assurance that God is with us today will keep us strong when the storms of life rage against us.