

We are God's People: A "Heard" Mentality

Preached at

Lendrum Mennonite Brethren Church

Edmonton, Alberta

on September 13, 2015

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Texts: Exodus 6:1-13; I Peter 2:9-10

Why come to church? What kind of good news will you find here? What kind of a community are we? This fall our pastoral staff will be tackling these questions in a series of sermons exploring our identity as Christians. We'll be using a variety of stories from the Old Testament to explore that theme. I am beginning the series today with the basic statement that we are God's people.

We jump into the story of Exodus mid-stride. Exodus (the second book in the Old Testament) is all about the many descendants of Jacob who live in Egypt. They have become a multitude and they work for the Pharaoh. In fact they are slaves of the Pharaoh and they are in misery. The text tells us, "The Israelites groaned under their slavery, and cried out." They are suffering, and they are crying.

Notice here that it does not say, "God's people cried out in prayer to God, 'Remember your promises O Lord to our ancestor Jacob!'" There is absolutely nothing like that. There is no appeal to God at all. These people are just suffering, they are just crying out.

Now for those of you who have grown up hearing bible stories you might find this strange. Because when you read the Bible, it all follows briskly, story after story, and it seems seamless. In Genesis, the first book in the Bible, we see Adam and Eve being created, the call of Abraham and the promise that he would father a multitude; Abraham's son Isaac and grandson Jacob, and all his children. God doing this and God doing that. Genesis is chock-a-block with stories of God's intervention in their lives.

So how do we get here to Exodus 6, where the descendants of these people don't even think about praying? Well...it's not hard to imagine actually. Jacob or Joseph may have been well acquainted with God, but they may not have passed this on to their children. Many people here know, you can raise children to be faithful to God, but that does not mean that they will continue in that path, or teach it to **their** children. And so here we have the descendants suffering under slavery, and crying out, but they don't even think to cry out to God to hear them.

This is when God intervenes. God isn't somewhere else not noticing what is going on, waiting for someone to bring this to God's attention. God isn't waiting for Israel to say a prayer inviting God into their life. No...God is listening the whole time. God notices, and God sends help.

Moses sees a burning bush, he hears a voice telling him basically, "This mission, should you choose to accept it, is to proclaim freedom...." Moses is not an enthusiastic recruit. He would really rather not, thank you. But God is persistent and Moses goes to Egypt, and meets with Pharaoh.

After the meeting, Moses is disheartened. His worst fears are coming true. Pharaoh is not listening to him, and in fact the people are being forced to work harder than ever.

And now we are at today's scripture passage. We hear this amazing communication from God basically saying, "You haven't seen anything yet. "Now you shall see what I will do to Pharaoh...I am the Lord." In fact three times in this little speech we hear God saying, "I am the Lord," "I am the Lord," "I am the Lord"...don't you forget it. The story tells us God says, "I will take you as my people, and I will be your God."

These brick makers, these trodden down people, these bottom of the heap people...they don't have to do anything to deserve God's ear. God is there listening to them.

Now does this story remind you of any other bible story from Genesis? God listening to someone at the bottom of the heap, groaning in despair? It reminds me of the story of Hagar, which is just a few pages back in the book of Genesis. Hagar too was a slave. In a strange ironic foreshadowing, she was an Egyptian slave, far from home, only she was captive in the household of Abraham. In fact Hagar's name might even be derived from an ancient verb that means to migrate or emigrate. At one point she was in the wilderness with her son at death's door. She walks away from her son, saying, "Do not let me look on the death of my son." She lifts up her voice and wept. She isn't praying to anyone, she just cries.

God hears the cries of Hagar and Ishmael in Genesis! Just like God hears the cries of the Israelites in Exodus. In and out of Egypt, God is hearing the cries of the suffering.

Next week Kevin will be talking about what God does next, how God delivers in story after story in scripture. But today I want to stay with the fact that God hears. What do people do once they know they are heard? How do people live into the reality of being heard?

What does that mean...how do people live into the reality of being heard? After listening to the speech that God gives, Moses goes and tells the people everything God told him. God has heard their cries. Moses tells them the "I am the Lord" business, about how Pharaoh hasn't seen anything yet, how they are going to be a people chosen by God. And their response? In verse 9 it reads, "Moses told this to the Israelites; but they would not listen to Moses, because of their broken spirit and their cruel slavery."

These people can't comprehend, yet, that God is listening to them. That they are a heard people. They just don't believe it. Incidentally, that's just what happened to Hagar too. That incident in the wilderness with Hagar? That was the second time

Hagar was perishing in the wilderness. Years before, she had run away into the wilderness and was met by an angel who said God saw her suffering. Even though she had that powerful experience, when she is in the wilderness again, she isn't calling on God, she isn't praying to God, she is simply suffering. And God again hears her crying. It's hard to come to an awareness that you are a heard people.

But somewhere along the way, slowly, oh so slowly, the people realize that they are heard. You can read this book and find out how that happens. They realize God hears them. They come to an identity of themselves as a heard (h-e-a-r-d) people. Which is a good play on words because the Israelites were nomadic and took care of herds. And David used the image of God as a shepherd, "We are the sheep of your pasture"...we are your herd. But I want to emphasize the "h-e-a-r-d" people image.

Being a heard people. I think that's a wonderful image of the whole arc of scripture, human beings coming to realize that God hears them. We find ourselves alone, broken, oppressed, bent over, trodden down, crying out...God hears. Jesus was sent not because God was waiting for someone to say a certain prayer, or for a people to achieve a certain level of holiness. The son of God came because God heard us, God hears us, and God will hear us.

Not hearing in the sense of "what is that pesky noise?" but the hearing of a mother or father who listens for their child's voice, and especially their child's cry, a parent whose ears are always perpetually tuned to their loved one's cry.

For every tiny baby, knowing that they are heard by someone who loves them, and who will take care of them, is one of the most basic stepping stones in human development. Can I trust the world? Will the world care for me?

As adults, I think that's the way we are with God too. Does God hear us? Is there a God to hear us? And if there is, can we trust God to hear us always? Will God always care for us? We ask these questions in our wilderness moments.

Being part of a church, means joining together with a movement of people who for centuries have had that "heard" mentality. People banding together believing that God hears them.

Do we believe that perfectly all the time? Definitely not! It's something we are living into. I know for myself I've gone through periods of intense doubt, where I wondered whether God was hearing me, in fact wondering if God was there at all. Religious certainly disappearing into a black hole.

It was hard to go to church when I wasn't sure God was hearing me, or if God was even there. The Bible seemed lifeless as cement. I mouthed words that carried no hope for me. I felt exiled in the land of the faithful. It went on a long time like that. Those thoughts still descend on me at times.

What did I do about that? I don't think I did anything. Somehow an awareness of God's loving presence dawns again. I believe in revelation, although I haven't seen an angel. But I keep living into that awareness, that emerging awareness of God's presence there, like an enormous ear bent close to my lips. And this happens as I stand in community, with people who are also heard. We look at each other, linked by our "heard" mentality, linked by our hearing God.

I see the congregation as an auditory community, people living with the knowledge that we are heard by God. God cares what happens to us.

And being heard is not an exclusive thing. It's not a club where, "We have God's ear!" God listens only to us because we're God's people. It is nothing like that. Think of Hagar, she wasn't the chosen line of Abraham. She was a migrant, a slave, an outsider. Yet God heard her cries.

God hears the cries of every displaced person, every isolated person, the cry of every soul in anguish. Every person is made by God, loved by God; God listens to everyone. What makes **us** God's people is only that we **realize** that God is listening. We band together in the name of that listening God. God as the Great Listener.

This past week on September 10th it was *Suicide Prevention Day*, a day devoted to ending the silence about suicide. There are many reasons why people lose their lives to suicide, but certainly one of the major reasons is that people feel isolated, they feel unheard by people, by God, by the universe. They are displaced from the land of the living. Tragically they feel this way even when they are surrounded by people who love them.

I think that's why some current campaigns about mental illness are striking such a strong cord. The Bell Canada campaign, "Let's Talk" can be seen on billboards and television advertisements. The slogan means, "If you say something, we will hear, our presence here is inviting you to speak." Or the campaign aimed at gay and lesbian youth that says, "It gets better". So many young people who struggle with gender issues take their own lives. So celebrities who have gone through that are speaking and saying, "It gets better." "Let's talk", "It gets better". Telling every suffering person, "We hear you! We want to hear you!"

My daughter is working for a Suicide Prevention program in Kitchener, and this past week she helped plan an event outside their City Hall to raise awareness about suicide. Family members and friends who had lost a loved one to suicide were all invited to come and get a little box. At a certain time, they all opened the boxes, and out of each box a monarch butterfly emerged. My daughter told me that they ordered the butterflies and they kept them in the fridge until just a few minutes before they hand them out. So when you open the box, the butterfly doesn't just startle away, it is warming up, waking up. They had a string quartette playing the Beatles song, "Here Comes the Sun" as these beautiful little creatures took flight, flapping their wings up and over the upturned faces of the crowd. They fluttered and hovered and disappeared into the neighbourhood.

It's a butterfly effect...the tiny flap of butterfly's wings changing the atmosphere far away. Who knows how talking about suicide, "Let's Talk," "It gets better," can make a difference. Simply by people beginning to live into the fact that they are heard.

In the same way I think we go about our business in the church. In a million small ways, being a force for hearing. The kingdom of God infiltrating neighbourhoods, infiltrating a broken and hurting world, saying, "We hear you. God hears you."

Or I think about the front page article in the Globe and Mail this week, which outlined the collaboration of Mennonites and Muslims in Edmonton, working to welcome refugees from Syria. For years some of you have worked at forging relationships with Muslims, or you've supported the work of Donna Entz. Little meetings, little gestures, they don't seem like much. As gentle as a butterfly's wings. For years it goes on, and then suddenly, a need arises and this beautiful things takes off and floats out in the world. How will what is happening in Edmonton inspire other communities in Canada? Here comes the sun, in dark times indeed.

Those are just two examples of how we can be, like God, tuned to the cries of hurting people. Of course, we have to start this at home. We start with this gathered community, this congregation. We hold and cherish the hurting in our own community, people who are sick or grieving or whatever... We cultivate an aural culture, not oral in the sense of speaking, but aural a-u-r-a-l, as in listening culture.

What do we do with what we hear? What happens next? Well, that's Kevin's job to talk about next week. Liberation, deliverance. Yes. Amen. God acts. God hearing our cries, sending Jesus to us, Emmanuel, God with us. And so God can hear our every thought, for God took on flesh and dwelt among us. Jesus assuring us that we are not alone; God cares for us, God is listening.

And so you have come to church today. Some of you are newcomers; maybe some of you are regular attenders, but you wonder, why do I do this, what are we all about here? I invite you to join with us each Sunday or as often as you can, whatever is workable for you, once or twice a month, or every Sunday. Worshipping together, becoming a caring community, we band together. You are invited to join with us to live into the marvelous reality of being a community that is heard by God. We are glad you're here.