

Head of Christiana Presbyterian Church October 20, 2013
1100 West Church Road Newark, DE. 19802

“Hearing Voices” Sermon by Bob Undercuffler

Psalm 34

Luke 18:1–8

Do you ever wonder ... Is anyone listening?

And does anyone care?

The psalm we read with Bill Witt affirms,

“The eyes of the Lord are on the righteous,
 and God’s ears are open to their cry.
 When the righteous cry for help,
 the Lord hears, and rescues them from all their
 troubles.”

But Isn’t there a voice deep within you that questions,
 ”Honestly, from what trouble has the Lord rescued me?
 But then, perhaps we are not righteous enough. And that’s
 a little scary to think about.

God hears and rescues, we affirm, but that’s not what happens
 when men and women are killed on our streets and children are
 caught in the cross fire.

God hears and rescues ... but that’s not what happens
 for 375 people who face a long, cold, bitter winter having
 lost their jobs with the closing of the steel mill in Claymont.

God hears and rescues – but what about the
 war casualties in Syria and Afghanistan and
 thousands more desperate refugees

God Hears and Rescues? There are, at least, two troublesome
 spiritual problems here:

First, why is there so much suffering? More specifically, why are
 there so many “innocent victims”?

And **second**, where is God hiding while all this suffering unfolds?

I believe that most all of us breathe those questions. And many faithful, caring and thinking people of many persuasions and beliefs have attempted answers.

The way of Jesus, however, does not attempt a rational answer. Nor does the Bible have a chapter that “explains” these difficult concepts.

Rather, the Bible tells a story about God’s relationship with one family of people, Israel. A story that we believe represents God’s relationship with all humanity. With you and with me.

The heart of the story is about Israel in slavery in Egypt. In God’s call to Moses, God said, “I recognize the misery of my people; I have heard their cry; I know their sufferings and have come down to deliver them” (Exodus 3:7–8).

That is the heart of what ancient Israel knew about God: God hears the cry of the suffering ... of those who long for justice and freedom, and God acts to defend, to liberate, and to heal.

Jesus told this same story about the **God who HEARS**. Jesus tells this in the form of a parable. A parable gives a flash of insight into the workings of God with God’s people.

This parable has two characters: a widow and a judge. The judge is a local magistrate, the one who settles all the disputes that plague people living in community with one another—disputes about marriage and family and property and debt.

And the judge has grown cynical in his years of hearing and ruling on tough cases – and he’s hard-hearted, callous, for, the parable says “he did not fear God and he had no regard for the people.” He is a judge but disregards the heart of the Law of Moses, which is summarized as love God and love neighbor.

The plaintiff is a widow who is persistent to the point of being obnoxious as she seeks justice from the judge. The justice she believes she is owed.

The men and women who surround Jesus hear more in this parable than do we. First of all, women never came to court on their own. If they did appear in court, they were always represented by some male relative. The fact that it is the widow herself who keeps pushing her case means that she is utterly alone, destitute and dependent on her own wits and she is completely fearless.

Second, in Israel, as in every patriarchal society, certain classes of people were especially vulnerable: the orphans, the sojourners,(that is, those who moved around a lot) and the widows.

So the law of Moses is very specific about their protection. For example, Deuteronomy 24:17–18: “You shall not deprive a resident alien or an orphan of justice; you shall not take a widow’s garment as security on a loan. **Remember that you were a slave in Egypt and the Lord your God rescued you from there; therefore I command you to do this.**”

Those verses in Deuteronomy continue with the command to leave some of the grain in the field, leave some olives on the trees, some grapes on the vine—left for the alien, the orphan, and the widow to harvest for themselves. The reason for the law is what is remarkable and motivating: **remember you were slaves and God heard your cry and redeemed you. God set you free. So live ... make your decisions ... out of gratitude to God.**

For a long time, the judge resists the widow’s demands. He refuses to hear a thing she says.

But finally, he relents. “It’s true I don’t fear God and I don’t care about other people. But this widow gives me so much trouble that I will give her justice!. “I need her out of here and off my back!”

Our translation hides the force of the judge’s words and so we miss the subtle humor of the story. The literal translation here is, The judge says, if I don’t put a stop to this, “she will keep on coming back and end up giving me a black eye!”

The judge isn't just going to be worn out; this widow is mad enough and persistent enough to land a punch to the face! You can imagine the headlines the next morning in the Jerusalem Times: "Bag Lady Assaults Judge!"

Listen, Jesus urges, listen to how this judge rules! And if this miserable excuse for a magistrate can do the right thing for a poor widow, **how much more** will the Creator of the universe, the Almighty, the truly just Judge do for those who cry out for justice and for mercy? **HOW MUCH MORE!**

This story, it seems to me, both **consols** and **challenges**. The consolation is found in the introduction to the parable: "Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart." Pray without giving up. Insistently. Persistently. Keep going, keep it up, and don't lose heart!

Remember what the psalm said ... well, actually, psalms sing:
 "I sought the Lord who answered me, and delivered me from all my fears. The Lord is near to the brokenhearted and saves the crushed in spirit."

Cherish these words on dark days.

Repeat them when you least believe them,

Sing them when you have lost – or are losing the love of your life.

Sing them as you walk through the valley of the shadow of death.

because the God who heard Israel's cry hears your cry as well. The song ... the reality continues to reverberate through generations.

And then this parable is also an exceptional **challenge**, because God is the one who hears and responds with exceptional mercy and grace, **so too, we who claim to be followers are obliged to do the same.**

Because God's ears are open to the cry of those who suffer, our ears are to be open as well.

The law of Israel provided what today we might call a "social safety net" for the poor, those wandering, widows and children, for one simple reason: **because God redeemed Israel from slavery.** The law of Israel that

protected the vulnerable was based on the character of God. God hears, and so must we. God responds with mercy and generosity.

AND THAT SETS THE PACE FOR OUR LIVING.

During the recent wrangle over the national budget and affordable health care one questioner asked a legislator, “What would you say to the person who has lost his job, lost her benefits ... the person who is working two jobs at minimum wage to put food on the table and pay the rent?”

That’s really the question, isn’t it? Will we, can we hear?

One part of our mission as a church is to **listen**—in the words of our Presbyterian Brief Statement of Faith, “is to hear the voices of peoples long silenced.” Because of who we know God to be, it is our job to be those who listen. And this is not always easy.

It’s really not easy to be attentive to those who suffer, whether that means attending to the chronically or terminally ill or counseling the homeless or teaching children who live with so many roadblocks to learning. Or simply to pray consistently for them all. It is not easy to listen, because sometimes the voices of those who suffer are strident and raucous and impolite.

We can almost sympathize with the judge, who simply wants to make the hectoring voice of the widow go away! **But listening is a spiritual discipline.**

Hearing the voices of the abandoned,
 those crowded out,
 those who have none to care for them
 is at the heart of the gospel,
 is at the heart of Christ’s own ministry,
 and at the heart of the ministry of those of us who are
 bound together . . . by the power of Holy Spirit.

I wonder what this church, what Head of Christiana Presbyterian Church, would be like if you and those who were ministers and members here **before you** were not hearing the voices and cries of neighbors in Newark and Elkton, and people tucked away in places between and far beyond.

What would you be if you had not reached-out and energetically sawed wood and hammered nails, and run water lines and welcomed homeless men and women and families at Meeting Ground?

What would you be as a church had you not been engaged with the founding and leading of Elkton Community Kitchen and Hope Dining room and Saint Andrews Place ... and the Empowerment Center ... not just providing and serving food but sitting-down and listening ... and learning and discovering what more God is calling us to be and to do?

So you are a blessed people. You hear the voice of God. You recognize God's leading in your life. You hear the voices of others ... voices of challenge. Voices of opportunity. And in gratitude, your habit is to say **YES**.

So let us stand and affirm our faith ... on the front cover of the bulletin. From The Brief Statement of Faith, of the Presbyterian Church, USA.

**In a broken and fearful world
the Spirit gives us courage
to pray without ceasing,
to witness among all peoples
to Christ as Lord and Savior,
to unmask the idolatries in church and culture,
to hear the voices long silenced,
and to work with others for justice,
freedom, and peace. Amen**