

First Sunday after Trinity, Proper 6
Exodus 19:1-8, Romans 5:1-8, Matthew 9:35-10:8

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Once it was announced that we could meet, with up to five other people, so long as it was out in the open, I walked about a mile and met with some of my family in the middle of one of the two fields that separate our homes. We sat and talked face to face, in a way you can't do via skype or zoom or phone, and were so immersed in our adult conversation that we did not hear Samuel (aged 2) until he shouted out "can you hear me?" This was the first time I had heard him say a full sentence. In the months of isolation his speech had come on in leaps and bounds. He was trying to get a word in edgewise by repeating something his mother says whenever he is not paying attention. And suddenly we were all listening to him.

"Can you hear me?" are words that came to me as I read through our readings for today and reflected on some of the tragedies and events that have been happening in our world in recent weeks. It seemed to me there were many voices crying out to be heard - including the voice of God speaking into each situation. If we consider our readings with God's voice in mind, each time we can learn more of the character or nature of God, more of his will for us and we see that whenever God speaks there is always a call to respond and often a call to action.

The voice of God has never been silent: it was there from the beginning of creation - "then God said - let there be light" - and there was light. In his call to Moses God said "I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry ..., I know their sufferings" (Exodus 3:7) and this loving, redeeming God, sent Moses to be their liberator and to lead them to new life.

In our Old Testament reading the people had only just begun what was to become a very long and testing journey. Three new moons, roughly 3 months from leaving Egypt, they were camped in the wilderness. And God spoke again to Moses with a desire and a promise to make of them a priestly kingdom, a holy nation so long as they obeyed God and trusted him on this journey. He was and is a just and faithful God who longed for his people to know and him.

In the enthusiasm of their new release, the people promised to do all that God commanded. But we know it was not long before they were grumbling, and impatient voices asked how long must we endure this? where is our food for the journey? and sometimes they turned away and created their own gods.

But God remained faithful to them and still called to them. Many times, through the prophets his "can you hear me?" called them back to be the people he wanted them to be, that holy nation - until another voice cried in the wilderness to prepare the way for the Lord and God sent his only Son. At his Son's baptism, God's voice was heard again: "this is my beloved Son, listen to him" (Luke 9:35)- 'can you hear me now?'

God had seen the sufferings of his people again and sent his Son to release the captives, to restore, heal, and show them the way to new life. In our Gospel reading that Son, who had been going about teaching, preaching, and healing, saw the crowds and heard their voices crying out. And Jesus had compassion on them because he saw they were like sheep without a shepherd, not knowing which way to turn, vulnerable and in need of protection and care.

His was a compassion that saw not just their physical needs, but also heard their inner voices crying out for life-restoring healing and salvation. It was a compassion that also led to action. He lived and died for them, as Paul says, it was in our weakness, in our need, in our suffering, that God proved his love for us “while we were still sinners Christ died for us”.

Then calling his disciples Jesus sent them out to learn from him how to see and hear and to take action to bring healing and wholeness, to speak words of comfort and life-giving reconciliation. That is the call he makes to all who turn to him that others too might become part of this priestly kingdom, this holy nation. God continues to ask, ‘can you hear me?’ and in his love for all, teaches us to listen, to see and hear those whose voices are still crying out to be heard.

This is a call to mission, to bring others into this priestly kingdom, this holy nation. We each have to decide how we might do that, how to use the gifts we are given through the Spirit at work in us, to make God’s love and compassion known wherever there is pain and injustice, inequality and oppression - and where lives are lost because they too are like ‘sheep without a shepherd’ and do not yet know the way.

As individuals and as church, we may feel challenged in this time of our own suffering, our attention may be distracted with our own needs and desire to stay connected with each other, with our faith, with our God. But God is still asking ‘can you hear me?’ and we are still being called to seek to live in ways that serve his kingdom of justice and peace in this hurting and suffering world.

We may struggle to hear God’s voice in the tumult and noise of all that is happening around us - but we can be sure God is still speaking and it will be something about his love and compassion for us and his will for us to live out that love in our world. We can be sure God has seen and heard us because he is a faithful, redeeming, forgiving, and healing God, who will show us the way and will never leave us to face these things alone.

A prayer for mission:

Lord Jesus Christ, you stretched out your arms of love on the hard wood of the cross that everyone might come within the reach of your saving embrace: So clothe us in your Spirit that we, reaching forth our hands in love, may bring those who do not know you to the knowledge and love of you; for the honour of your Name. Amen.

Living God,
Draw us deeper into your love;
Jesus our Lord,
send us to care and serve;
Holy Spirit,
make us heralds of good news.
Stir us, strengthen us,
teach and inspire us
to live your love
with generosity and joy, imagination and courage;
for the sake of your world
and in the name of Jesus,
Amen.