

## “Screaming Into the Void”

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Proverbs 1.21-33

Mark 8.27-38

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Like every human being I have these dreams in which I feel unprepared for life or insecure in myself. Everyone has some form of the dream in which they show up for class and there's a test and they haven't studied! Or perhaps a dream in which you show up to a job and don't have your tools! Sometimes I dream that I'm completely ready for worship, but I forget my robe or my stole, which is sort of silly, because worship can happen without those items. The dream I find most fascinating is one I have had for about five years and have heard echoed by other clergy. It is a dream in which I stand behind a pulpit and begin speaking, and everyone stands up and starts talking and walking around. I talk louder, and the congregation grows louder. Sometimes I'm jumping up and down and waving my arms but no one is paying attention to me.

Apparently this is also biblical because it is nearly the same story in our reading from Proverbs today. I am not Wisdom or God or nearly as holy – but perhaps we can all relate in some way to the times we are shouting into the wind, not being heard, going unnoticed.

Last fall, as Hanover College began their classes again, there was a tentative hope as students and professors gathered again for in person classes, still masked. Vaccines weren't available yet so there was plenty of caution and skepticism about how long classes could stay in person. There was also a large amount of frustration and worry and stress because people were longing for normalcy. I dare say that is still the case to some extent.

The chaplain at Hanover College could wisely sense this tension and fear as students returned and wanted to create a space where they could feel all those feelings and express themselves. So, the chaplain created a worship service in which the students and faculty and staff could scream into the void. They gathered outside, masked and distanced, literally screamed for as long as they needed to. Yes, it was cathartic and allowed a release of energy and emotions. It was also holy and sacred – a way of expressing to the Holy One emotions and feelings that perhaps could not be put into words. It was sadness and grief and frustration all in one.

I imagine our protagonist Wisdom screaming into the void. She is trying to talk to people and they aren't listening. I imagine the common denominator in these screams to be a frustration. Perhaps frustration no one is listening, that nothing is changing, that so much is out of their control. Instead of being in a pulpit, though, Wisdom is out – in the public, in the streets. She is in the world. Most of our ministries are in the world – outside these four walls. We learn here, we grow here, and then we take God's wisdom out to the world.

Yet, Wisdom gives us a dose of the reality of doing God's work: we can have all the wisdom from God, but sometimes people just won't listen! We have this important news, this

life giving message, and people won't listen! Of course, there are times that we're those who are the simple ones, right? There are times we don't hear. A few weeks ago, I talked about the Hebrew word we translate as "simple" but it doesn't mean dumb or uneducated – it means that a person doesn't know, but is willing to learn. So, there is this woman on the streets, with people who previously were willing to learn, but they have stopped listening. They've stopped learning. This means there is no hope for the future.

Some have seen Wisdom's words as threatening, but they are more a call to recognize consequence. If this happens, then this will happen. A natural sequence of events. Wisdom tells the people that complacency will lead to destruction.

Now, I'm surprised that I have been here an entire month and haven't quoted the musical *Hamilton*, but today's scripture passage brought to mind a conversation with Alexander Hamilton and Aaron Burr. If you've seen the musical, or if you know American history, you might know that Hamilton and Burr had a strained relationship. Burr thought that Hamilton was too aggressive in his opinions, and Hamilton wanted Burr to take a side on an issue. I would even argue that Hamilton wouldn't have cared where Burr landed on the issue, so long as he did. In the song, "Aaron Burr, Sir" they sing, "the revolution's imminent, what do you stall for? If you stand for nothing, Burr, what'll you fall for?"

Burr was someone who waited in the background, never taking sides, but also never taking action about anything he was passionate about. Here, Wisdom is calling out: "Come on! Be active in the world! Listen to God's Word!" Yet, they ignored. People weren't enraged by injustice. They weren't moved to compassion by those who were suffering. They either were afraid of being divisive by taking action or were apathetic. Either way, nothing was accomplished.

If the church is going to change the world with God's love, we have to be clear about it, which also means being clear about ourselves and our own identity. At the church I recently served in Indiana they spent time doing a mission study to learn who they were, and how they could be a light in their community. They discovered that they were a More Light church, which means that they openly affirmed being welcome and inclusive of Lesbians, Gays, Bisexual and Transgender people. They knew that to be welcoming, they couldn't just be general, but to say that they welcomed LGBTQIA specifically. Some people in the community didn't agree with that affirmation. It felt like the church was screaming into a void – but there were others who heard their affirmation and felt welcomed, as they hadn't felt included in church before.

I believe that void is not devoid of people listening. Our words and actions are always planting seeds. Our words and actions are always reaching people, even if they don't respond. That person who has felt isolated from church, who didn't feel they belonged, will hear these words and feel welcome. They might identify with that specific group and learn they are loved. Younger generations, those who are and will be the church long after we are gone – they are listening. Those who find themselves spiritual but not religious will have someone to connect with and be able to start asking questions about faith.

While it seems at times that our words of welcome and community are being screamed into the void, they are being heard. My guess is, there is someone else in the void, also screaming, feeling lost and unheard, and wishing for something better – seeking authentic community, and they are looking for a group of people to support and love them. To stay complacent and quiet means never finding those other people whose gifts match the needs, or whose needs match the gifts.

We continue our Gospel reading this week in Mark. Jesus has been traveling quickly from one place to another. Last week we read about two healings Jesus did and now he is hearing different things in the community. He shifts the conversation a bit and is beginning to disclose the information about what will happen to him if he continues down this road of prophecy and healing. He asks the disciples what people are saying about him. They call him Elijah and John the Baptist and a prophet – essentially everything but the Messiah. Jesus is not the Messiah that they were expecting – he didn't tick off all the boxes and so many knew he had some sort of power but couldn't see who he was in relation to God.

Jesus asks the disciples who they think he is, and Peter tells him that they believe him to be the Messiah. Jesus, as he does so many times in the gospel of Mark, tells them to stay quiet about this. We're unsure if Jesus doesn't want word to spread because it will lead to his death, or perhaps Jesus didn't realize it himself, yet. We can also most certainly guarantee that the disciples didn't fully understand what this meant – which was that Jesus would die. Surely we continue to grasp at understanding this, as well.

Identity is important and also can change as we grow. Perhaps parts of your own identity have grown as you have matured, aged, and looked within yourself. While we don't shape our identities on how others think of us, sometimes our closest friends or family can help point to a very important part of who we are, without us seeing it ourselves. When we know who we are, we have more confidence to move ahead with God's calling, knowing we have the gifts.

Last year this church became a Matthew 25 congregation – which is a very important and meaningful decision that takes intention. I love that churches across the country are embracing this identity and that is one of the reasons I felt called to this congregation. To be a Matthew 25 congregation means we work toward three goals: to build congregational vitality, to dismantle structural racism, and to eradicate systemic poverty. These are three major issues in our world today, and individually they could consume our time, but we also know how entangled our systems are in the world. We cannot just eradicate poverty or just end systemic racism. We cannot just create fair housing or just create accessible healthcare – they are all tied together.

To say we are a Matthew 25 church gives us some identity – it says we are committed to being involved in justice issues within our community and to do so with our theological framework. It gives us an identity as a church invested in the community and wanting to see the people in this community thrive. It says this is a church that cares deeply, and in my short time here, I have already seen that and experienced that.

If being a Matthew 25 church still feels new and nebulous right now, that's ok. We will be starting a discussion group on what it means to be a Matthew 25 congregation in the next

month or so, and it will give us the opportunity to explore this more and dig deeper into the identity of the congregation. If you're interested, please let me know.

Knowing Jesus' identity, and knowing are identity, are intertwined. We are shaped by our faith and we are motivated by the values we hold true in faith. As we continue to live into our identity, may we lift up the distinctiveness of Christ, our Messiah and Savior, as well as live into the great calling on our lives. Amen.