

Christ Presbyterian Church
Edina, Minnesota
December 24, 2012
John Crosby
The Voices of Christmas: JESUS
Mark 4:23

Followers of Christ found over the years that they couldn't just go running through the year and then all of a sudden hit Christmas and then go back to life as if nothing had changed. They found they needed to prepare to get ready to hear the Christmas story fresh or it was just a day. So they created what is called Advent, several weeks during which you prepare for the coming of the Christ. This Advent, as Deb [Pastor Deb Kielsmeier] talked about, we've been featuring the voices of Christmas: voices that lead up to this day—voices that compete with all the other voices going on. The voices of Santa Claus, and White Christmas, and Macy's, and, this year, Hobbit. Voices that get louder and louder and louder. In the midst of that, we talked about the voices of the prophets who said, "Hold on. The time will come." And Mary. We listened to her voice. She said, "The world is turning upside down. The rich are getting what they deserve. The poor finally rejoice, 'God has remembered us.'"

Last week we heard a different voice. We listened to what Herod said. His voice was filled with lies. It was the face of evil. It said, "There is really only room for one King around here, and it will be me, Herod." Then came the Slaughter of the Innocents, back then and now. Tonight we will talk about the angels, yet another voice. They speak and say, "Peace on earth." Did you hear that? I think I did with my head. I'm not sure if I heard it with my brain or my heart because we've been hearing the same story all of our lives, really for 2,000 years, so it's hard to hear it as if for the first time, and we have a hard enough time hearing anyway.

My wife Laura and I spent Thanksgiving with our family in Chicago. I have a brother-in-law, Dave, a world-class brother-in-law, a great, great guy. Our families went to a film the day after Thanksgiving. We thought we would do real sophisticated, high-culture and went to see the Bond film. On the way out, I turned to Dave, I got him a little away from his parents, and I said, "Dave, Grammy and Grampy's beds are terrible. I want to surprise them by getting them some new mattresses, okay? Can I come over to your house and borrow your car?" Dave turns to me and says, "Sure, no problem. Their TV really is small. You can come over and watch TV with us." I said, "No, no, man, no. It's a secret. I just need your car." He says, "Yeah, come as you are." I realized that we were having trouble communicating and that part of that is that David is going deaf.

How do you communicate with somebody who really can't hear? Well, we have come up with some ingenious ideas. I think one that is used primarily by parents, by teachers, too, and occasionally by pastors, is that you just crank up the volume. We just yell at those darn kids, and sooner or later.... (*Slide shown.*) They don't listen anyway, do they? That is not how you get people to hear. Sometimes they really just have a problem hearing. There is something inside the miracle that we call the human ear that has gone wrong. You give them this and all of a sudden, they can hear. (*Slide shown.*) They can hear you until they decide to turn it off, and

pretend like they can't hear. Or the problem is not that they can't hear. It is that there is so much noise, they don't know what to listen to, and so they get help like this. (*Slide shown.*) Now I can't hear anything, but you're looking at me like I'm pretty weird, and I'm going to take these things off before somebody takes a picture. Sometimes when the problem is that we can't hear, we have to learn a whole new language. (*Slide shown.*) Cindy [Cindy Sherman signing] is teaching people a whole new language so that even without ears, they can understand. That reminds me that often people whose ears are working fine often don't hear well at all. Thanks Cindy.

At Christmas we hear all these voices, and they babble together. Whether we use a megaphone or a hearing aid or a headphone, we need to hear the voice that matters most. Folks, at Christmas, if you don't hear from the newborn King, then it's just a Hallmark card and you go home to just start paying bills. But if you can actually hear the King, you hear Him in His mother's tongue (that's where we get that phrase, mother tongue). He learned His mother's language when He came to earth. He told us something might change. So let's listen to the voice of the Christmas King, who grows up in a flash. Mark says this happens:

4 Again Jesus began to teach by the lake. The crowd that gathered around him was so large that he got into a boat and sat in it out on the lake, while all the people were along the shore at the water's edge. ² He taught them many things by parables, and in his teaching said: ³ "Listen! A farmer went out to sow his seed. ⁴ As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. ⁵ Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. ⁶ But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. ⁷ Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants, so that they did not bear grain. ⁸ Still other seed fell on good soil. It came up, grew and produced a crop, some multiplying thirty, some sixty, some a hundred times." ⁹ Then Jesus said, "Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear." ¹⁰ When he was alone, the Twelve and the others around him asked him about the parables.

¹³ Then Jesus said to them, "Don't you understand this parable? How then will you understand any parable? ¹⁴ The farmer sows the word. ¹⁵ Some people are like seed along the path, where the word is sown. As soon as they hear it, Satan comes and takes away the word that was sown in them. ¹⁶ Others, like seed sown on rocky places, hear the word and at once receive it with joy. ¹⁷ But since they have no root, they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away. ¹⁸ Still others, like seed sown among thorns, hear the word; ¹⁹ but the worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth and the desires for other things come in and choke the word, making it unfruitful. ²⁰ Others, like seed sown on good soil, hear the word, accept it, and produce a crop—some thirty, some sixty, some a hundred times what was sown."

Then Jesus says,

²³ If anyone has ears to hear, let them hear."

The same thing he said a second ago. As a matter of fact, it says "if anyone has ears to hear" 15 different times in the Bible, ten times in the Gospels. It is there because we are hard of hearing. The Old Testament prophets say,

¹⁰ ...Their ears are closed so they cannot hear. (Jeremiah 6:10)

² They have eyes to see but do not see and ears to hear but do not hear, for they are a rebellious people. (Ezekiel 12:2)

Jesus says it three different ways, about you and me.

⁹ ...“Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear.” (Mark 4:9)

²³ If anyone has ears to hear, let them hear.” (Mark 4:23)

¹⁸ Do you have eyes but fail to see, and ears but fail to hear? (Mark 8:18)

We believe here at CPC that there is a God, that God somehow wants to speak to us, and we believe that God’s Word actually brings life. In this next month, in the new year, we are going to begin a series that will last all winter long called Words to Live By: the Essential Teachings of Jesus. If you want to know what Jesus really said, here it is in 10 weeks, but it really won’t make a difference if nobody hears, if we are still hard of hearing. So just for a couple of minutes this Christmas, I want to ask you what voices are you hearing? What do you listen to most? Jesus says, “Check the soil of your heart.”

I’d like to do this in a visual way together. Under each of the pews at one end or the other should be a basket. Inside the basket are pinecones. Would everybody just take a pinecone and pass the basket down. If there are not enough pinecones for those at the very ends of the aisle, the ushers will have extras at the doors at the end of the service. I’d love it if everybody would have a pinecone. Jesus talks about seeds here, seeds that fall, right? He probably was talking about mustard seeds or seeds of grain, but we would understand seeds better like this. When Sarah Norton moved here from Kansas, one of her new staff said, “Here, this is the Minnesota state flower.” This is a pinecone as big as a pineapple. It is a seed. It is designed to produce life, and I’d like you to hold a pinecone for the rest of the hour, and then I’ll tell you something to do with it at the very end. I believe that Jesus wants to plant seeds inside your life, inside your very heart. This Christmas, He also knows that a lot of bad things happen to what He plants. For instance, Jesus teaches,

³⁰ I and the Father are one.” (John 10:30)

⁹ ...Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. (John 14:9)

⁶ ...“I am the way and the truth and the life. (John 14:6)

Claiming to be God, Jesus sows a seed of belief but evil comes right along behind that. It says “Satan steals the seed of belief right off the path.” You and I live in a world where we send our kids and hundreds of thousands of dollars to places where, in this most sophisticated environment on the planet, our kids will be told that the idea of a personal God, a singular, personal God, who knows you and has a plan for your life and has a path for you to come to Him, is a myth that falls among the great religions of the world. It is like all the other paths to God. It is very unsophisticated to believe in one way, one truth, one life, one God.

In the same way, the seed can fall on the path of belief and people don't so much believe in God, they look at the church and then they are in real trouble. Don't believe in the church. Don't believe in religion. It will mess you up every time. We will let you down. So I guess with this first seed, I need to ask, is that you? Do you struggle to believe? Not every last little bit. We all struggle with some things, but is it a struggle to believe the big parts? Does it feel like a fairytale that you want to believe but you cannot? There is struggle going on for your soul. Then Jesus goes on and teaches this,

³³ ...In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world." (John 16:33)

"I will be with you." He plants a seed that allows you to trust Him when trouble comes. But then trouble comes, and it pulls trust up by the roots. Trust fell among the rocks and had no roots and withered. When you and I see things like Sandy Hook, we are troubled. When people around us lose their jobs or their houses or their savings, when bad health reports come, when relationships are broken, do you feel like God has let you down? Is it hard to trust God this year? Is that the condition of the soil of your heart? Is trouble pulling up the roots of trust? Again, Jesus wants to plant a seed in your heart. He teaches this.

²⁸ ...Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow.... (Matthew 6:28)

God takes care of them. God will care for you. This is a seed of contentment or of joy, but as He warned, the worries of the world, the pace of the life that you live, chokes off all that fruit, the fruit of joy or contentment. It pushes you back into the fear that comes from the rat race. How about you? As you do a soil check of your heart, is there contentment there or is there fear? Or is it mixed together and you can't figure how to grow? Then Jesus plants one more seed. He says,

¹⁰ ...I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full. (John 10:10)

"I came that you might have life in all its fullness, life the way it's meant to be," and He plants a seed of life that is supposed to be different. In this seed, it is not like you get your act together. That will not happen. Trust me. I know you. I know me. It is not about getting our acts together. It is not about figuring it out. It is about receiving a seed of love from the God of love. The good news comes from the idea that joy is a gift from God that can never be taken away. I want the Christmas King Jesus to plant seeds of His Word in our hearts even tonight. Even tonight! God's Word heard is a seed. It is not something you can microwave. You cannot microwave faith. You cannot Google faith. It is planted in our hearts over time, and it grows.

It is like a pinecone. (*Slide shown.*) This is how a pinecone looks most of its life. It is on the tree or it falls to the ground, but it is closed up. It is not until it falls to the ground and dries out, sometimes it dries out aided by a fire (fire actually helps this process), that it opens up. My sense is that seeds work their best when we are opened up. I believe that we are all beloved, and we are all broken. I believe every one of us is a broken child, living in a broken world in a broken way. You cannot fix yourself. But I also believe that every one of us is beloved to the core, that God looks at you and laughs with delight like we do with a child. We are broken, and we are beloved. Which voice are you listening to this Christmas?

There is a 19th century American poet, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. Interesting life. Gets married young, lives a couple of years with this woman and then she dies as so many young women did in those days. He remarries, finds the love of his life, and they live together 20 years. They have several children. At the very beginning of the Civil War, his second wife also dies, terribly, in a fire, leaving him with children, some of whom right on the edge of adulthood. His eldest child, Charles, comes to him at the beginning of the Civil War and says, "Dad, all of my friends are going to fight. I want to fight for the freedom that you say is so important." But Longfellow has lost so much that he cannot let go of his boy and refuses to give him permission as long as he is under age. Finally young Charles runs away and joins the Union army and sends home a note to his father. Late in the fall of 1863, there is a battle, and Longfellow's son Charles is wounded, grievously hurt, "unto death," it says. They are sure he will die. With the rest of his family Longfellow celebrates Christmas, and on Christmas Day of 1863 he sits down to write a poem about what he is hearing in his head, and this is what he heard.

I heard the bells on Christmas Day
Their old familiar carols play,
And wild and sweet the words repeat
Of peace on earth, good will to men.

And in despair I bowed my head:
"There is no peace on earth," I said,
"For hate is strong and mocks the song
Of peace on earth, good will to men."

Many of us stop it there.

Then pealed the bells more loud and deep:
"God is not dead, nor doth he sleep;
The wrong shall fail, the right prevail,
With peace on earth, good will to men."

And he wrote on the page, "Bring my boy back."

Brothers and sisters, this Christmas Eve what voices will your ears hear? What seeds will you allow God to grow even in a Minnesota winter? I charge you to take these cones home and put them on your tree. Let them become Christmas ornaments, not from us but from a God who wants to talk to you. Ask God, "What are You trying to say?" What is happening with the seeds sown in your heart? Let the one who has ears to hear, hear.

The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.