

“Expect the Unexpected”
John 7:37-52

There was once a preacher who went arrived at a little town for revival meeting, to run from Sunday night through Wednesday. The first night brought one of his best sermons, a powerful sermon on the power of God to heal. It was a Pentecostal congregation, and at the close of the service he invited all who desired to stand and state their need and he would pray for their healing then and there. A woman came forward with severe migraines, an elderly woman came forward with back pain. Finally, a middle aged man named Sam stood up carefully and said, “Pastor I need you to pray for my hearing.” The pastor brought Sam forward, put his fingers in Sam’s ears, and prayed with all his might. He then asked Sam, “How’s your hearing now?” Sam answered, “I don’t know – it’s not until Tuesday.”

Sometimes we hear only what we want to hear, and don’t hear what we don’t want to hear. This is very simply the normal way of negotiating life: we develop ideas, theories, expectations that help us to interpret what we encounter, and respond. Some of us take this to the extreme, and we call them “know-it-all’s” – people who have an answer for everything, who are surprised by nothing, who have it all figured out in advance. Have you ever met someone like that? You could say, “I read on the news there has been a major earthquake in California this morning.” They would respond, “Yeah, that happens sometimes. Last time there was an earthquake in California, maybe twenty years or so, I remember when that one happened, I was living Illinois . . .” They’ve got it all figured out, so figured out, they are closed to the what’s happening now.

The story this morning speaks to this very situation, both in our life with God and with each other. This story is a challenge to anyone who would say they have God figured out, or they know exactly what Jesus would do in any situation, or they know what exactly what the Bible says in any given conversation. It is a challenge to anyone who has everyone else figured out, who knows the right answers in advance, or feels like no one else has as much information or wisdom and they do.

The story begins with Jesus, who has been causing some conflict between the average person and the religious leadership. He was challenging authority, their knowledge, their practices, and his miracles were creating a following. We call them disciples, both there were some who called them a mob. The critical incident happened just earlier in John, when Jesus healed a man at the Sheep Gate pool. The man had laid there for 38 years, and Jesus walked by and asked him, “Do you want to be made well?” The man answered yes, and Jesus said, “Then take up your mat and walk.” Soon, though, he ran into some others who said, “You know, you shouldn’t be carrying that mat on the Sabbath.” The man answered, “Well, the man who *healed* me said I should do it.” When they found out it was Jesus, John writes... “After that they began persecuting him...”

Which brings us to the story today, set the Feast of Tabernacles. *The Pharisees heard the crowd wondering if Jesus was the Messiah, and called the guards to go and arrest him.* Pharisees were religious lawyers, experts in religious practice; they knew their Scriptures inside and out; their faith was firm, fixed. They were threatened by Jesus because he did not interpret the scriptures the way they did; every time they challenged him, he had an answer that did not fit their box. And they believed he was misleading people; the crowds would believe this man, because they were ignorant, impressionable, gullible, unpredictable, even cursed. So the Pharisees decided to take action: they convinced the chief priests to send the temple guards to arrest Jesus and bring him in. So the Temple Guards went and found Jesus among the crowds. But before they could get to him they heard him teaching.

What they heard was unlike anything they had ever heard. The Feast of Tabernacles was a celebration of the harvest that happened each September or October, a celebration of God's provision in the past year and past generations. For seven days the priests would bring water from the Pool of Siloam in a golden pitcher, bring it to the temple and march around the altar. And they would sing and shout for joy. The climax of the whole event was on the seventh day, the last day of the Feast. Legend has it that if you had not seen the celebration on that day, you had not seen joy. There in the crowd stood the guards to arrest Jesus, and just as the priests brought the water from the Pool of Siloam, Jesus shouted above the noise of the crowd, "*Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, let the one who believes in me drink!*" When the crowd heard this they began to question, "Is this really the prophet?" Not just a prophet, *the* prophet? Perhaps the Messiah? Others thought not, because he was from Galilee and the Messiah was supposed to be from Bethlehem. They were divided, and some wanted to arrest Jesus – but no one laid a hand on him.

The guards returned to the Pharisees, and immediately the question came: why did you not arrest him? The guards were honest: "Never has anyone spoken like this!" But the Pharisees would not hear it, they had made up their minds, they knew what they thought. And they ripped into the guards: "Surely you've not been deceived too! Has anyone in authority, anyone with real knowledge, any of us believed in him? This crowd doesn't know what they're talking about!" The Pharisees were so sure they were right, so certain they interpreted the Bible correctly, so confident they knew more and better, they would listen to no one who spoke differently.

But there was one, one among them who was not so sure. Nicodemus...you remember, who came to Jesus to ask him questions that night? Nicodemus was a leader of the Pharisees, knowledgeable, respected; if they would listen to anyone, they would listen to him. So he began to offer a very careful defense: "Our law does not judge people without first giving them a hearing...?" Shouldn't we at least *listen* to him? Shouldn't we at least *hear*? But Nicodemus was dismissed too, with venom and prejudice. "You must be from that backwater Galilee too. Read the scriptures, you'll see that nobody who is anybody will ever come from Galilee!"

What is tragic to me in this story is how much the Pharisees missed because they were not open hear. The Son of God, the Messiah whom they were waiting for, the one who could truly quench their thirst was in their midst. And they missed it because they would not listen. This man, sent from God, to satisfy the deep longing in the human heart for wholeness, and peace; this man who offered a well-spring of living water that would be placed in all who believed in him, a well that bring forth water for the soul, now and for all eternity; this one who came to heal and to save was offering the invitation with his own voice and they missed it because they would not hear.

Now we are not Pharisees and our lives are different – but we too have hearing problems. I visited a person this week who has hearing problems, but I didn't know how bad it was until this visit when she was not wearing her hearing aids. I said hello in a loud voice, and she said, "I can't hear you." I got closer, and closer still; until I was shouting right beside her ear, and she said I can't hear you. Not many of us are that physically hard-of-hearing, but a great many more of us are that spiritually hard of hearing. God could come and shout in our ear and we would not hear it. Unless it fit what we already thought, unless it was in line with what we expected, we would not hear it; even if God stood in our ear and shouted.

We would do well to listen, as the guards listened, as Nicodemus listened. Because every now and then, there will be a voice out there, beyond us, beyond what we know and expect, a voice that we

need to hear. I don't mean that this voice is necessarily far away; it could be your spouse or child, it could be the person next to you at work, or next to you in the pew. But they are so far beyond your way of thinking and your perspective that they may as well be from Mars. Yes, this voice may well be the voice of someone who is speaking the truth. It could even be the voice of God, speaking through them. We would do well to listen, to reserve judgment, to make an open space to hear and understand.

A pastor recently started a position at a large church, and he arranged with the pastor nominating committee that his name and picture would not be released to the congregation in advance. So the big day came, and everyone was filing into the church anticipating meeting and hearing their new pastor. As they entered, there was a homeless man standing by the door; he had never been there before, but few gave it a second thought. When everyone had gone in, the homeless man came in and sat near the back. When it came time for the sermon, this homeless got up and walked to the front, took off his costume, and said, "Good morning. I'm your new pastor." No one had spoken to him, talked with him, or even invited him. He didn't fit their expectations, he didn't look like the one who was coming to bring them the word of God.

Sometimes we hear voices and encounter people that are beyond us, so different and so unexpected. The voice may be speaking the truth; the person may be sent from God. We would do well to listen, in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Patrick W. T. Johnson
February 23, 2014