

## An Advent of Listening

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A friend remarked the other day that 90% of the American population couldn't hear anything someone said to them.

It was an unscientific and unsubstantiated observation. To be sure, it had little to do with the physical loss of hearing – in the U.S. the best estimates are that ten million people qualify as “hard of hearing” and a million as “functionally deaf,” a far cry from the percentage my friend projected. With a count of 308, 060, 454 residents in the country as of this date (December 1, 2009), that would mean some 277, 254, 409 of us who say “huh?” a lot should visit an audiologist soon.

No, my friend's reference was to people who had something in their ears most of the time, thus making it nearly impossible to get their attention by means of a sound we produce – and, instead, requiring on our part a kind of Sarah Palin hand-waving or a tap on the shoulder to achieve a chance at verbal communication.

That 90% figure may still be too high, but not if we include people who have willfully decided to “tune out” of what is happening in the world.

How, that is, could you actually be listening if you heard that 45,000 human beings in the United States will lose their lives this year for reasons related to the lack of health insurance and not be telephoning and e-mailing and visiting your congressperson repeatedly to demand fundamental health insurance reform to cover everyone, not four years from now but as soon as next year?

How could you actually be listening if you heard that salaries and bonuses for those employed in the financial, banking, and investment industry will be higher this year – after being resurrected with an infusion of billions of dollars in taxpayer money – than in earlier peak years, while the unemployment rate for the rest of the population is steadily rising above 10% (the highest since April, 1983), while the rate of property foreclosures increases at a rate of 5% per quarter (23% increase over the third quarter of 2008), and while the rate of poverty climbs dramatically (from 12.5% to 13.2% in 2008, and further increases recorded in 2009) and shows no signs of a reversal even if the economy improves, and not be demanding a comprehensive restructuring of the nation's economic system?

How could you actually be listening if you heard that the U.S. rate of incarceration is “six times greater than Canada's, eight times greater than France's, and twelve times greater than Japan's,” and that “blacks are incarcerated at a rate eight times higher than whites – a disparity that dwarfs other racial disparities.” (*New York Review of Books*, 11/19/09, p. 41) and not be calling for a thoroughgoing reformation not just of our criminal justice

system (which has become strikingly more punitive than rehabilitative), not just a thoroughgoing rethinking of our drug policies (which has raised the rate of incarceration by 80% in the decade between the mid-1980s and mid-1990s, with the large predominance of African Americans serving more time than whites for non-violent violations), but also a thoroughgoing transformation of our racist policies?

Ninety percent not listening? That's probably setting the bar too low.

So it's probably fortunate that John the Baptist didn't appear in the early decades of the twenty-first century. He would have had to deal with much different audiences for his preaching than the ones he confronted in the early first century of the Common Era.

Those first century folks clearly had their ears open. They listened, whether they liked the sermon they heard or not.

From all around the cities and towns and surrounding countryside, they came out to the wilderness around the Jordan River to hear what this preacher had to say about the possibility of repentance and forgiveness in preparation for a time of salvation.

Even those John wished would just as well have stayed at home or at work or at play – the “brood of vipers” – came and listened. The politically and religiously privileged, along with the pious and self-righteous, came and listened. So did those who thought their destinies were secure because of their favored ancestry.

They all received the same message: that by God's grace and mercy they were not locked into their role or condition or standing but could, in the voluntary act of baptism, signal their readiness and commitment to pursue a different path toward the salvation that was to come.

My goodness, even Jesus came to be baptized!

What then, they asked, were they to do with this gracious and merciful possibility that God had given them to repent and be forgiven?

John's answer to the question of “what then shall we do?” was simple and direct: whatever your role or condition or standing, give up whatever you possess in excess and give it to those who don't have any. If it is clothes – say, two coats – give up the one you don't really need to the one who is coatless. If it's food, do the same. The instruction is uniform, whether for a tax collector or business type, a soldier or a social worker, a leader or a follower: by God's grace and mercy you can repent from your self-preoccupation and self-concern, your self-protectiveness and your self-righteousness, and be forgiven from all that, now liberated to love and care for those who don't have what you have.

But, of course, none of this would be operative for those who aren't listening. And that makes it especially difficult for a lot of us in our society in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

It might be that the God of grace and mercy provides us another distinctive opportunity for our own century, even before we have the chance to embrace repentance and forgiveness. It may be the favor of taking whatever it is that blocks our hearing and giving us again the gift of listening.

It would first be an Advent of Listening – listening to the God of grace and mercy who speaks to us through those who are dying and needlessly suffering for lack of health insurance, through those who are losing homes and jobs and security, through those who are incarcerated because of a racist and uncaring system of criminal injustice.

Maybe then we could actually hear, a little later on, the angels singing.