

Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

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The Resistance of a Hearing Heart

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Beloved by God, my siblings in Christ; grace to you and peace from God our Creator and our Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

We will begin this morning by naming the cultural waters we swim in. We live our lives in the belly of an Empire that demands we always have the right words. Whether it is in our workplaces, on our social media feeds, or in our social circles, there is an unrelenting expectation for the perfect pitch, the immediate “hot take,” and an articulate, polished presentation. We are conditioned to believe that our worth is inextricably linked to our output. We are expected to be constantly productive, endlessly resilient, and entirely self-sufficient.

It is a heavy, suffocating yoke. And if we are honest with ourselves, it leaves us weary in the deepest parts of our souls. We are tired of performing. We are tired of having to sound like we have it all figured out.

Today, we are going to look at two texts, 1 Kings 3 and Romans 8, that offer a profound antidote to this cultural exhaustion. Today, we are not looking at bold, loud declarations of faith. We are not looking at triumphant spiritual victories that fit neatly onto a bumper sticker. We are looking at a quiet, ancient request for wisdom. We are looking at the holy, messy reality of what happens when we are simply too exhausted to speak.

In a world that aggressively prizes loud, dominating voices and articulate efficiency, cultivating what the scriptures call a “hearing heart” (and allowing the Holy Spirit to intercede through our exhausted, wordless sighs) is not a sign of weakness. It is a radical act of spiritual resistance.

Let us turn first to 1 Kings 3. Solomon has just ascended to the throne. In a dream, the Creator of the universe comes to him and offers him a blank check. God says, “Ask what I should give you.”

If we pause and think about the “Imperial Default,” the way the empires of this world operate, we can easily imagine what a typical ruler would ask for in this moment. A newly minted king, handed the keys to the kingdom, would ask for unimaginable wealth. They would ask for a long, untouchable life. They would ask for absolute military might and the violent, permanent destruction of their enemies. In short, they would ask for “power-over.” They would ask for the kind of power that dominates, extracts, controls, and conquers.

But Solomon surprises us. He looks at the magnitude of the task before him, and he does not ask for weapons or gold. He asks for an “understanding mind.” If we look at the original Hebrew text, the phrase used here is *shomea leb*. Translated literally, it means a “hearing heart.” Solomon asks God for the capacity to listen.

Why is this so profoundly important? It brings us back to what it actually means to be righteous. I have said this to you before, but it bears repeating: righteousness is not about moral perfection or following a rigid set of rules. Righteousness means living as we were created to live. It means being exactly who we were created to be.

And we were **not** created to dominate one another. We were created for connection. We were created for community. A hearing heart is the absolute prerequisite for this kind of righteous living. Cultivating a hearing heart shifts our entire posture in the world from “power-over” to “power-with.” It is the spiritual muscle that enables us to genuinely listen to the cries of the marginalized, the silenced, and the groans of the earth itself.

From this pulpit, we have often talked about the prophetic necessity of speaking truth to power. And we must do that. But true, subversive, world-changing wisdom must always begin with the humility of listening. You cannot speak on behalf of the oppressed if you have not first quieted yourself long enough to hear them. A hearing heart is the only thing that allows us to truly stand in solidarity with those whom the world so easily discards.

But here is the hard truth about having a hearing heart; when you truly listen to the world, it can break you. This brings us to our second text in Romans 8. Even with a hearing heart (perhaps *especially* with a hearing heart) the sheer weight of this world’s brokenness is staggering. We are bearing witness to relentless, cyclical

violence. We are watching the unfolding devastation of a climate crisis. We are carrying the heavy, daily burden of surviving under a merciless system of capitalism.

When you have a hearing heart, you feel the grief of the world. And sometimes, it simply crushes you. Sometimes, we reach the end of our human capacity, and we are simply too exhausted to even know how to pray.

Sometimes that exhaustion is brought on by the crushing weight of systemic injustice, and sometimes it is simply the visceral, physical limit of our own bodies. I wonder if any of you have experienced that sort of bone-deep, word-defying exhaustion. One of my (weirdly) fondest memories of introducing my wife to the Boundary Waters involves such exhaustion. I beg your patience as I have likely shared this story before, but it fits so well.

Christina's first trip to the Boundary Waters was a typical mix of highs and lows. We enjoyed our first nights on Alpine Lake, taking time to swim, gather berries, and fish. Our next stop, however, was on Lake Ogishkemuncie (Ogish for short), which was a long and skinny lake that ran east-west. We spent a few hours reaching Ogish and then started looking for campsites. The first few were taken.

We were getting tired, we hadn't stopped for lunch because we were hoping to get to the campsite first. We aimed for the next campsite on an island in the middle of the lake. We're tired and hungry and the wind was picking up...a predominantly westerly wind...meaning we're going to be paddling into it.

We get to the hoped-for campsite only to see canoes and tents. At this point I see Christina's shoulders slump. We both know we have to keep going...and the next stretch is into the wind and across another mile of lake. We strike out across the western half of the lake and I see Christina's shoulders shaking. Then I hear the tears. My loving wife, who knows how important this place is to me, is silently crying in exhaustion.

We somehow manage to get across the lake to a cramped and miserable campsite, but to us it was luxurious, because it meant rest. But there were moments in that last mile when the exhaustion hit us both in that canoe. Moments when it felt like it just wasn't worth it to keep paddling into that wind. The body is spent and all you can do is cry and moan and try to keep burning muscles going.

This is an exhaustion known across the world. The exhaustion of a mother with children crossing some of the world's most difficult terrain to seek a place of refuge. The exhaustion of a trans sibling constantly having to justify their very existence. It is the exhaustion of someone who has been caring for a dying loved one. A tiredness that drains even speech...even emotion. A tiredness that can border on despair. Whatever the cause of the exhaustion, that weariness is powerful and it is real for much of humanity. It is a daily struggle for much of humanity.

It is here that we must learn to honor the wisdom of the body. We must reclaim the sacredness of our exhaustion. Empire treats human flesh as disposable. It treats our bodies as machines that exist only to produce, and it treats our fatigue as a moral failure. But God does not operate like Empire. God meets us right in our fatigue. The divine presence is an incarnational connection. God does not demand that we transcend our tired bodies; God inhabits them with us.

The Apostle Paul writes in Romans 8 that when we do not know how to pray as we ought, “that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words.” Do not rush past the beauty of that promise. Validating our non-verbal, exhausted groanings is a powerful act of resistance against a world that demands we always make sense. You do not have to have it all together. You do not have to perform your piety for God. You do not have to string together perfectly articulate, theologically sound prayers when your heart is breaking and your bones are tired.

When you are weary, when you are burdened by the broken systems of this world, your sheer exhaustion is holy. Your wordless sighs are caught, held, and translated by the Holy Spirit into prayers for collective liberation. This is the ultimate reality of Emmanuel, God-with-us. God is not waiting for you at the finish line of your healing; God is standing in the absolute center of your pain, groaning right alongside you.

To live into this reality requires what we call “mirror-work.” Mirror-work is a key component to walking the Way of Christ. It requires us to look honestly at our own reflections and ask the hard questions. Are we so caught up in the anxiety of trying to say the “right” things that we have forgotten how to listen? Are we so desperate to appear strong and capable that we are blocking the Spirit’s movement in our lives?

When we step back and look at the whole picture, we see that the Way of Christ is entirely counter-cultural. It does not demand that we be perfect. It does not require us to be polished. It explicitly rejects the idea that we must be limitlessly productive to earn our keep on this earth.

Instead, the Way of Christ invites us into a messy, beautiful, fulfilling (and at times, exhausting) community. It invites us into a space where we are deeply known and fiercely loved, exactly as we are, exhaustion and all.

When we actively cultivate a hearing heart, and when we courageously allow ourselves to rest in the Spirit's wordless intercession, we are actively rejecting the anxiety of Empire. We are participating in the co-creation of the Kin-dom of God on earth. We are building a Kin-dom where our exhaustion is not met with demands for more output, but with radical grace. A Kin-dom where we do not compete for dominance, but where we humbly carry each other's burdens in love.

Lay down the exhausting lie that your worth is tied to having all the answers. Lay down the heavy yoke that tells you you must be endlessly productive to be loved. Give yourself permission to be weary. Let your sighs be holy. Ask God for a hearing heart, and trust, with everything you have, that the Spirit of the Living God is interceding for you, right here, right now, in the glorious and exhausting mess of it all.

Go be human, be humanity, be righteous, be who God created you to be. Amen.